

“Holding Onto Family: A Grandfather’s Musings”

UUCGV Sermon by
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Three months ago, Jan and I were with our older son, Ben, traveling through the snow-covered San Juan mountains. It was no ordinary trip. The snow was deep and the roads icy. Ben was reflective and pondering next steps after a divorce the year before and a new relationship now in his mid-forties.

Two months ago, we were with our youngest son, Aaron, and his wife traveling along the Animas River from Silverton to Durango. It was no ordinary trip. The river was high and surging. Aaron was reflective and grieving after just learning he had been laid off from Facebook.

Two weeks ago, our daughter, Amanda, arrived with her teen children to escape Texas heat and build another section of the bridge spanning our long-distance family and its emotional history. Amanda was reflective and planning at midlife how to move forward with her life for the next 50 years. Again, no ordinary trip.

In all three cases, love flowed like the river and gratitude as well. But like the river, the flows were unpredictable as they probably always had been. Stretches of calm and quiet, the flow slow and peaceful. Static beauty to contemplate. Around the bend, rocks and gradient; the flow fast and furious. Dramatic uncertainty to navigate. And far ahead, a falls- a river dropping off, only to resume again in a different way, all the way to the sea.

In all three cases, Jan and I were along for the ride, grateful to still be included, but somewhat terrified at the pace of the flows, the eddies and the rapids, and how best to navigate without being in control. Aware as only grandparents can be of the unpredictability of family life and the memories of navigating in the past when we were in charge.

But also forgetful as grandparents can be, that the river changes and does not remain the same. Something Mark Twain taught us in a life navigating the Mississippi. What worked before may not work again. One must read the river, feel the changes in the current that create their own perils within the flow. And watch out for the rocks just below the surface of that flow.

Seven years ago in 2016 at about this time of year, I shared some thoughts about parenting and families. How parenting was probably one of the toughest things any of us ever do. How family was a vehicle of transmission for life values and ways, shaping all of us generation after generation. How family could also be a crucible of transformation changing fathers into Dads, mothers into Moms and children into adults capable of being even better Dads and Moms. And thereby, family by family, building better communities.

I quoted an op-ed by David Brooks, a man I often disagree with, but who I still think had it right: *“We understand that a free society requires individuals who are capable of handling that freedom – people who can be counted on to play their social roles as caring parents, responsible workers and dependable neighbors...We know that this sort of character formation can’t be done just individually. It’s carried out in families, schools and communities. It depends on some common assumptions about what’s right and wrong, admired and not admired – **a common moral ecosystem**. So we care intensely about the health of that ecosystem and we argue about how to improve it.”*

So why am I back, talking about family, parenting and holding on? Well, first, as I told you, Jan and I are grandparents now and have learned a few things that might be useful to share. Second, as grandparents we have concerns about the rapids ahead; the deterioration of the “common moral ecosystem” binding our family and community. You are our community and we want to share them with you.

Part 1: Sharing some learnings about our journey of family

My 2016 sermon was triggered by memories of our own children who are now adults with partners and children of their own. More specifically, it was triggered by conversations with my daughter who was and is a wife, mom with 4 kids and a career, initially as a *doula* or birth parent guide, and then as a counselor for the women she had guided through birth as their postpartum relationships and families evolved. Her focus was on helping those new mothers navigate wife/husband relations and mother/father roles in parenting.

She told me then and tells me now that for ***all*** of the women in her groups, the fathers are distant and not really engaged in the lives of their children, something that had become a major issue in the families. As the discussions continued, it became more and more apparent that rather than choosing not to be engaged, the fathers ***did not know how to*** engage with their children. Then ensued a discussion between my daughter and myself about what fathers and mothers bring to parenting, specifically what Jan and I brought to the task of raising our three children.

It was a difficult, at times painful, journey into not only my past as a father/husband, but that of my father and his father. The sad reality is that it took me a long time, far too long a time, to get beyond being a father—something that all men can do and be—and start to become a dad, something that far fewer of us can do and be.

Given the massive challenges we face as families and communities, I believe that for us to shore up the “moral ecosystem” in the ways outlined by Brooks, the family system must change. And I believe that a crucial part driving that change must be the transformation of fathers into dads.

As I said then and repeat now, I am feeling my way here, aware of my failings and not completely sure of where I am going. After all, many of you listening to or reading these words may be far more experienced and wiser in parenting than I. But, perhaps, the observations I offer will be useful as

navigational markers or cairns on a trail familiar to many and new to some of you. I called the trail then “finding dad”. Here are the first 3 cairns or markers on that trail:

The first marker is surviving the transformation of wives into moms. The girl I fell in love with, went through the Vietnam War with, shared everything with, suddenly changed into someone else who had been through something I really didn’t understand and was now attached to a tiny new being who, with each breath, sucked up all the affection and attention previously lavished on me. More, that tiny being was not only shockingly loud, but adept at turning our ordered, predictable lives into sheer chaos 24 hours a day.

But she needed me and I needed her as both of us began this wild ride which would last not for 18 years, but for a lifetime. Something else no-one tells you. And besides, the little lady in my arms was cuddly and cute despite the dirty diapers and disruption of my universe. I began to accept the fact that there were three of us now, not counting the dog. But it took a sharp kick in the pants to get me to the next marker.

After way too long, I began to discover the incredible creature and teacher she was turning out to be. Then her brother arrived, 4 years later and we immediately clicked. His easygoing ways and impish grins gave way to boychoir singing and acting that had me in tears. I was hooked; head over heels in love and on the road to becoming a Dad for the first time.

The second marker is surviving the blows of the outside world. Three years after moving our family from Berkeley to Houston after years of study, my career as a history professor came to an abrupt end. End of a job. End of a career. End of a dream. Stranded in a city and culture alien to us, excommunicated from what I had loved, I lost it, and in my despair damaged and nearly lost my family as well.

Those who have gone through times like that—as so many of our friends and neighbors have these days—will understand. Gone was the Dad my young children had come to love, replaced by a haggard stranger with pain in his soul and a far-away look in his eyes. For years, he went through the motions of parenting, but he was far distant, investing all his energies into reinventing himself into something marketable job by job, while his wife, on her meager salary, held the family together. “Dad” had died.

The third marker is resurrection. As fate would have it, our third child was born in the dark time with a robust, demanding personality which drove his father, already lost, to his wit’s end. Years of arguing went by until one day, perhaps in desperation, I began to listen again. To his stories, to his questions, to his fascination with history.

This led to story-telling sessions every night—one to two hours long or longer if he begged which he always did—about Knight Aaron engaged in a Medieval journey through village after village populated by characters—good and bad and mixed—that I suggested and he fleshed out in astounding detail. And other, similar journeys, night after night for over two years. Through the stories and the journeys, I

came to know the incredibly passionate and creative person he was for the first time. Somewhere in that process, I rose from the dead and became a Dad again.”

These episodes took place in the last 3 decades of the 20th century, culminating just as the commercial version of the Internet, released in 1993, was transforming the world in ways difficult to imagine, followed by the introduction of the I-phone a few years later, in 2007. By that time, our family had expanded to include spouses with different backgrounds and approaches to the family we had sought to build, and then young grandchildren growing up within these.

Now grandparents, Jan and I found ourselves confronted by not only new roles and realities, but our own yearnings to escape the big city and culture that had never really felt like home to us. In 2013, rather than staying close to our children and grandchildren, we chose to move away to a small rural town in Western Colorado. There was pain and heartache in that move that strained our family ties.

But there was also love and joy as one after the other of our 3 adult children visited and realized the value of what we had found. Whereupon together we began to build a different construct of family attuned to the long-distance reality we were living. We planned multiple visits to Texas in the Spring and Fall by one or both of us and reciprocal visits to GJ by each adult child family.

In 2015, we added a series of special 4-day Fall visits to GJ by our three adult children alone –*the Triad*. The purpose was to not only deal with estate matters, but to try to hold our core family together over the long distance now separating us. But doing this has been tricky. We have learned a lot. Here are a few more cairns or markers on the trail:

The fourth marker is learning that legacy wounds are real, deep and slow to heal. It was not the first time they told us, all three, that there were issues growing up, some very deep, that left scars on each of them, different scars in different ways. Not intentional and not all the time, but enough to wound while being loved. Enough to feel distant while being held close. For them, it was hard to describe without the words, but easy to hear, watch and feel, distant; not really close. And not know how to fix it or fix their parents, especially their Dad, so busy saving or serving others and leaving them behind.

But now they had words and voices to describe their fears –and joys as well—growing up. And hearing them together, each in her/his own way at that first Triad gathering on Anthracite Creek, Jan and I began to understand more completely our own life journeys. We began to see how our decisions as parents had been shaped by our own parents, and their parents, with the best of intentions, perhaps, but wounding us as well in ways we had not fully understood until now. And then again, at every Triad meeting thereafter, how those wounds had shaped their values and decisions as they grew up.

So there were tears and sadness as the stories poured out. But forgiveness and joy as well as we hugged over the campfire or around the table, glad we were together and now understood how challenging the journey had been for all of us. But also aware that the stories were incomplete with parts untold and other parts still unfolding. And now knowing all of this, loved each other even deeper.

The fifth marker is understanding that spouses bring their own legacy wounds which complicate the healing. At the second or third Triad meeting, the focus broadened to include stories of marriages; two existing for 14 years, one to come in the coming year. These were stories of love turning to friction as partners matured far beyond the promises made in their wedding vows. Different backgrounds and family experiences had formed them. These had built self-reliance, but not given the tools to build families or raise children well. These too were wounds passed down from earlier generations, unwittingly for sure, and largely unknown.

These legacy wounds and those of our adult children intermingled, complicating resolution of both. This only became known by the Triad as stories about living with one spouse triggered similar stories about living with another spouse and the patterns of friction and experiences shared.

Then came the breakthroughs and learning and sharing of solutions for healing at meeting after meeting. And we all grew closer in our sadness about the wounds and our joy at finding each other on the same journey to wholeness.

The sixth marker is that knowing, really knowing, our grandchildren can accelerate healing of both if we try. We have found that ***doing*** things together with our grandchildren instead of simply ***being*** together on visits opens the way to knowing each one, ***if*** we listen carefully. For there is much they want to tell us, both trivial and deep –if we understand the difference. Sometimes it happens in conversations, accidental not planned, where they tell us what they’re thinking, and if we listen carefully, our reply can spur deeper thinking that often surprises us in its sophistication.

All four hear and watch their parents –what they say or don’t say, but mostly what they do or don’t do. And in this pattern of doing and listening to each grandchild, we begin to see the framework our daughter is building to guide their growing up into smart, independent, compassionate people capable of loving themselves as well as others. And if we look more closely at the building blocks of that framework, we see that the mortar that holds it together is mixed with the learning from her legacy wounds.

For us, knowing each one of them in this way is a story of overcoming as well as growth. And it is a story of family healing that lights our way.

Part 2: Sharing some concerns about the “common moral ecosystem” binding family and community

As we approach the end of this story, the good news is that our approach seems to have worked so far. It has carried us through career changes, job loss, marital frictions, divorce and illness. And I think we have grown closer and stronger as a family than we ever thought possible.

The bad news is that we are but a microcosm in a vast, complex human system hurtling through time and space faster and faster, simultaneously bringing us closer to each other technically and economically, but pulling us apart morally and spiritually.

So how do we cope with this? How do we parents and grandparents preserve and protect our family microcosm in the midst of this? Or can we? Perhaps, simply learning and raising our children to love themselves and those around them is the best we can do. But I think we can do more. By first asking a question.

Are these not the questions our conservative neighbors have been asking for awhile now? **Family values?** Don't all of us share a deep concern about these values regardless of partisanship? Yes, I know our definitions differ. But in these uncertain times when all of us are at risk, is this not a place to build on rather than fight over? Isn't it time we focus on these values and each other deeper as Moms and Dads, Grandmothers and Grandfathers, all concerned about the same thing: our children? What could happen if we listen closer and begin to understand their fears, and they ours?

Brooks specified 4 ways the larger culture itself can help shore up the "common moral ecosystem" that protects our families and communities:

- *We need to be more communal in an age that's overly individualistic;*
- *We need to be more morally minded in an age that's overly utilitarian;*
- *We need to be more spiritually literate in an age that's overly materialistic;*
- *We need to be more emotionally intelligent in an age that is overly cognitive."*

All were themes that he would explore autobiographically 3 years later in his book **The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life** (2019).

But these were thoughts prior to the Pandemic of 2020, the Insurrection of 2021, the forest fires, draught and migrations of 2022 and the intensifying impact of climate change everywhere. In another book, also published in 2019, Brian Watson deepens Brook's analysis and presents a darker vision of the challenges we face. It is titled **Headed Into the Abyss. The Story of Our Time and the Future We'll Face.**

In it, Watson tries to help us "connect the dots" in the reality around us that can so easily overwhelm. It is an attempt to help all of us understand the rapids that lie ahead and avoid the falls beyond. If we can. Perhaps we can explore both Brooks and Watson another time and discover how and where our congregation and its 7 principles fit in. For your families and ours. For the Grand Valley we call home.

I want to close this morning with words from my daughter, Amanda, who is far more knowledgeable than Jan or I about navigating our family along this stretch of the river.

I think the joys of parenthood came later for Dad. He was not a large part of my growing up memories, as he traveled often and did not engage in a lot of the scaffolding my Mom was putting up. He was easily irritated by us and seemed more alive on trips with others than he was at home with us. I knew very little about him for a long time.

Besides the challenges of children and parenting, though, I think it was fundamentally hard for him to let go and flow even though he very much wants to. He's aware of the transcendence and fullness of that "in theory"—which is why he reads voraciously and tells a damn good story—bungee jumping into the flow where he's always assured a safe passage back to the predictable. I am all about flow and rapid

growth and outside of the lines. So, when there was a problem for me growing up, he was not the one I turned to. Life was too heavy then. We, as children, were too close to vulnerability and too desperate for our own attention.

But time went by and we all grew up and life calmed down and things started to change, dramatically. He became a lot more present and we became a lot less needy. And I know (or think I know) much more about him as a result.

Today, there is nothing he wouldn't do to help out. He can be there now...where he couldn't be then. He's built his own scaffolding for us in the last twenty years—different from Mom's—which is cool. There are limits on our relationship, which will always require some maneuvering around, but time goes by and we all get older and more knowledgeable about the complexities of living this life with others. We know that everyone is caught in a web of their own making and is silently (sometimes not so silently) trying to weave their way out.

We are more alike than we are different and I'd like to believe, at the risk of sounding arrogant, that I am often unhooking us both from the bungee cord of theory and into the wilds of flow as I live my life—navigating emotion, surrounding myself with people who see the real me, leading grassroots movements, incorporating my creativity into my parenting and living by my convictions—all of his best and most feared hidden qualities.