

*Sermon for Fathers Day June 18th, 2017, Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda  
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman*

In 1906, in Spokane Washington, a woman was listening to a Mothers Day sermon. But it felt incomplete to her; she had been one of six children raised by their widowed father. And so she resolved to honour fathers, also. In time, the third Sunday of June became Fathers Day around the world. Let us be mindful of all fathers this day—the fathers we have, the fathers we wished we'd had, and the fathers we found along the way. Good parenting takes a village....

What do we look for, from our fathers? For a general sense of this, I turned to some literature from the UU Men's Network, in particular a book by Neil Chethik. Chethik's conclusion is that we look to our fathers for protection, affection, and affirmation.

We look to our fathers for protection. The world can be a scary place. Parents, especially fathers, are huge, strong, and tall in comparison to a tiny child, like the giants and great kings of legend and fairy tale. Dads keep us safe. Dads teach us useful skills, like how to cross the road. Dads take us into the world. Dads empower us.

My father taught me how to swim, how to ride a bicycle, how to drive, how to row, and how to sail. My father taught me first aid, and how to chop fire wood. (It has occurred to me that those two lessons might have been related.) My father taught me how to read.

We look to our fathers for affection. And in our culture, this can be a challenge. We have been shaped by a culture that sometimes models manliness in terms of a stoic repression of emotion, excepting perhaps anger. Perhaps we need to recognize affection and loving kindness, when they hold us with open arms, gently, close, but not too close, not over-controlling, restrained but not too distant, not unavailable or uninvolved, not shut down. Perhaps we need to recognize a father's affection when it comes to us in the sharing of time, in the sharing of space, in being present, just being there, in the sharing of activities, in the playful loving touch of sport, in attention, through shared stories, in humour, wordplay, and interplay.

Perhaps you have some personal memory of how a father shared time and space, presence and story. Once, when we had first moved into a new house, near a beach, my father took me with him to cut driftwood on the shore, for firewood. I'm sure my seven year old self was a great help to him, on the other end of the six foot cross cut saw. We had a very pleasant afternoon together; I've never forgotten that time with him. And he wrote us poems, that year, for Valentine's Day.

We look to our fathers for affirmation, for an ongoing relationship in doing and thinking and feeling, in talk and silence, in stories remembered and dreams foreseen.

We look to our fathers for acceptance and approval, for mentoring and companionship, for a sense that we are of value, of worth and dignity. We look to our fathers for confidence, and for love.

That is what Neil Chethik and those whom he interviewed had to say: what they wanted from their fathers was protection, affection, and affirmation.

With that in mind, I looked around for an example of fathering from popular culture. I wanted to find an illustration of fatherhood in some work of fiction whose broad acceptance and acclamation suggested that the work spoke to our hopes and yearnings.

I looked at J.R. Tolkein's classic: "Lord of the Rings", both the movies and the books.

Tolkein began to write "Lord of the Rings" as a diversion for his son, a soldier posted overseas during the Second World War. Tolkein's epic abounds in fathers. The wizard, Gandalf, is a sort of spiritual father. The elflord, Elrond, is a master of skills and knowledge; and he is a literal father and father-in-law to characters in the story. Others characters also play parental roles, in particular to the hobbits—those child-sized heroes.

Two such paternal characters are kings amongst humans in the story, kings who can be read as modelling positive and negative parental roles. One is Théoden. One is Denethor. Mirror names. Théoden/Denethor. Tolkein was a philologist, a lover of words. The more I ponder it, the more I am certain that Tolkein deliberately shaped those names from the same consonants, as mirror-images.

Now, there is a phrase you will find in the book that you will not find in the movies. And this is not to be wondered at: 3 volumes, 1300 pages, at least sixty hours to read aloud, all reduced to a mere ten hours of film.—they had to leave something on the cutting room floor!

What caught my attention in the book, in volume three, is a phrase among the last farewells to Théoden. The hobbit Merry, who had accompanied Théoden, says: "He was as a father to me, for a little while". This sentiment is repeated on the next page, by another character, Théoden's niece, that Théoden "was ever a father" to her.

Earlier in the story, Théoden has awoken from a cold enchantment to resume his role of father and king, bringing hope and purpose. As he does so, his mirror, Denethor, the steward of Gondor, is slipping into madness and despair.

How does Tolkein portray these two father models? We see them, in part, through the eyes of the small hobbits. One serves Théoden, in joy and love. The other serves Denethor, in growing dread and fear.

Now at the time when the story introduces these two characters, both Théoden and Denethor have just received news of the loss of prized sons to death in battle. The re-awakened Théoden

grieves for his son, but with restraint. Théoden makes room for others—he consults and works with others, he expresses affection and care towards others.

Denethor, however, grieves his elder son obsessively; he neglects and insults his younger son. Indeed, Denethor coldly sends his living son towards a pointless death. Only when it almost too late, does he remembers to love his younger son, also.

Theoden lets go, and makes new connections. Denethor hangs on, and rejects alternatives. Théoden is companionable; he takes counsel, he feasts in company, in a great hall, brightly lit, warm with gleaming wood. Théoden is generous; he shares all he has. But Denethor tends to be secretive, arbitrary, and solitary; he dines alone, while others stand and watch. Denethor's hall is cold dark stone. Denethor is selfish, demanding, and grasping. Where Théoden has honour, Denethor has merely pride. Théoden hopes to be worthy amongst his ancestors; by his choices he is living into a living tradition, building a future, self-less. Denethor is falling back into a cold, dead past, rejecting both present and future, self-centred, and self-obsessed.

Théoden accepts his own ending, and the succession of generations, and spends himself willingly. Denethor sees in his own end the end of all things, and cares not for others. Where Théoden is hopeful, purposeful, joyful, even in the face of appalling odds and imminent death, Denethor is consumed by despair, and will not lift a hand to do what can be done. Where Theoden is respectful towards others, Denethor is merely arrogant.

Thus Tolkein portrays two fathers, one lost in the past, one reaching towards the future, one beloved, one merely pitied and feared.

The positive model of protection, affection, and affirmation is Théoden King—restrained, welcoming, open-hearted, open-handed, companionable, generous, joyous (even in sorrow), honourable, self-less, courageous, accepting, respectful, hopeful.

And faithful, and just, and long of memory—a man who honours his promises.

Now, one does not need to ride an epic horse across the plains of Rohan, in order to model a generous, affirming, hopeful decency. We model affirmation each day, without a thought, as best we can, never knowing who is watching, never knowing who is learning, from us, what it means to be a decent human being. We are all models to ourselves, to each other, to our successors, each and every day. We will never know the one moment when our word or deed turned the scales for the children who watch our every move and learn from us how to be a human being.

What does it take to be a dad?

Theologian Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the Ministry for twenty-five years (1989-2014), described respectful behaviour such as that attributed to the character of

Théoden, as reverence and a form of love that “involves full-fledged devotion enacted in deeds of care and responsibility [with] knowledge, study, and attention”.

What does it take to be a dad?

UU minister Mark Belletini addressed to a meeting of the UU Men’s Network, saying: “my life teaches me that the most manly words in our ample culture are: morality, particularity [as opposed to stereotyping], culture, humility, honesty, pleasure, rage, grief, listening, disclosure and love.”

What do we want, what do we need from our fathers? Protection, affection, affirmation. We want their blessing. We need to hear that they love us, and take pride in us.

Perhaps our fathers also need to hear that we love them, and take pride in them, that we know they did the best they could with what they had, just as we do the best we can with what we have. Perhaps our fathers need our blessing as much as we need theirs.

Let us take thought this day of fathers everywhere, in the fullness of their humanity. Let us hold our fathers in our hearts, and all who have been as a father to us.

Happy Fathers Day.

Rev. Fran Dearman

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## Bibliography

Literature from the UU men’s network speaks to this topic.

Neil Chethik, “Fatherloss: How sons of all ages come to terms with the deaths of their dads.” [By looking at the loss, Chetik argues, we can see what’s there, what’s hoped for, what’s missed. Chethik talks about those things a child might want to say to a father before losing him, those things a father might want to say to their child, before saying good bye. Chethik’s conclusion is that we look to our fathers for protection, affection, and affirmation.]

Words of the Rev. Rebecca Parker, as published in June 2006 edition of the UU world magazine, the one with the dandelions on the cover.

Words of the Rev. Mark Belletini, were found in a publication of the UU Men’s Network; Rev. Belletini is responding to an address to the UU men’s Network, delivered at General Assembly in 1995.