

## **Fathers as Mentors**

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Fatherhood is one of many important influences in the nurturing, respecting, caring and mentoring of children.

A little bit about myself and my journey as a father.

Mimi and I had dated though high school. After two years at separate colleges she transferred to mine.

We wanted to live together, so we got married in 1966 when we both turned 21, paid for our senior year together, graduated and started a family. We seemed to naturally settle into parenthood and adulthood. Our kids and us continued to grow up together.

Our first daughter was conceived in the summer of love, 1967, and born in 1968. Our second daughter was born 22 months later.

What was it in my background that it just made sense to do that? It was intuitive but I couldn't articulate it. In the past month leading up to this sermon I think I found out.

You have to go back to 1864 near the end of the Civil War. We have a letter my great grandfather wrote to his wife. I recall reading it as an adult, amazed because I thought that, "I could have written that." I felt a kinship with him. He said that staying in camp and writing to his wife would be the greater lasting pleasure than going out to the inn for drinks. He also mentioned that when he got home perhaps little Jimmy will be walking. I knew little Jimmy. He was my maternal grandfather. He died at 98 when I was in high school. He and my grandmother raised 10 children to adulthood, including my mother. In 1924 at the age of 60 they moved their family from Path Valley across the mountain to be near Shippensburg Normal School so that their kids could go to college. I grew up with school teacher aunts and uncles.

My father's father, who died before I was born, and his wife raised four boys. They were farmers. My grandfather made sure that each of his children would have a separate farm. My father sold his farm and said to me later that he did not want his wife to be a farmer's wife after watching his mother work so hard raising four boys. My father was 34 when I was born almost 72 years ago. He was a quiet man who did not lecture me and let me have choices in my life. It was clear my parents cared about me. He supported me in my own choices in life including col-

lege and flying. He died 3 years ago at 103. I asked my father several years ago if he missed his father. He answered, "Yes!, I think about him all the time."

I ask myself, with that background how could I have any other expectation than to be a father myself?

So now it makes sense that I would have a conversation with a total stranger, next to me, on the airplane about child raising when I was in my twenties. We were talking about being parents. I said, "If I can get my children to understand that I love them, that's the most important thing." Yes, he said, "But even more than that they have to know you respect them as well".

"Wow, good point", I said.

As I think about that now, that was very insightful. It applies to all relationships.

I was not the perfect father. I'd love to go back and correct my errors.

I remind myself, however, that a baseball player strikes out more than half the time. If you can hit one out of three times at bat you're a national hero. IMO, if fathers can hit one out of five they are doing well. In my observation, most mothers have much higher averages.

So I won't talk about all my known mistakes. I won't talk about how just a look of disappointment would occasionally send one of my daughters crying to their room.

I will mention two examples of when I was there for them.

One time a daughter said to me very defiantly, "It's not fair Dad!!!" For some reason, I got down on her level, looked her in her eyes and calmly said, "You're right, it's not fair. However you have to go to bed now." She accepted it and went to bed. I would remind her of that issue occasionally when dealing with life's unfairness. She reminded me of it recently being ready to use that with an employee of hers.

And you can't get better than this. Another time I bought my older daughter a dozen roses on her twelfth birthday. As the younger daughter approached 12 she walked into my home office and said out of the blue, "Are you going to buy me roses on my birthday?" I didn't say anything; my monthly calendar was in front of me. I looked at her while I put my finger on the date where there was the note, "Buy Melanie flowers". She hugged me and left smiling. That was a rare home run.

I was fortunate in my life that I could generally keep in balance the stresses of living with the stresses of fatherhood.

Recently, I mentioned to two friends that I was giving a Father's Day sermon. One woman told a story about her sister replying to her husband who was planning to tease their teenage daughter on her first date. Her sister said to her husband, "You say that to our daughter and it will be twenty years before she comes back into your life."

Another friend described the horrible relationship she had and continues to have with her father and step-mother, even though amazingly she still reaches out to them with lovingkindness.

It had me crying. How lucky I am to be able to look back on an almost idyllic childhood, knowing not all people can.

In 1919, at the age of 36, Franz Kafka wrote a letter to his father describes some of my friend's feelings.

*Dearest Father,*

*You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking. And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete..."*

It goes on for 103 pages. You may google it.

We are all too aware of men tragically abusing children. Why do they do that, one may ask? I don't know.

I do know I would have been a different person and father if I had experienced the horrors of war.

I do know I would be a different father if I spent some of my youth in jail. Did you know the US has the highest per capita incarceration rate of the world? Why are they mostly young men and potential fathers?

As adults we all have had the experience of childhood, of coming of age. I'd like to think that the coming of age experience never has to stop. Being there at the right time and place, with others is important. Respecting one's presence with love, oh wait a minute, that's one of our principles. "Unitarian Universalists affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person as a given of faith" I interpret that to include children and adults, saints and sinners alike.

It is all about helping others. For children it's all about mentoring with love and respect in whatever capacity possible. Fathers, mothers, neighbors, teachers.

IMO, every Sunday the most important mentoring message in our service is the children's message.

Parenting is not a zero sum game. You have to give more than you get. There is one surprising benefit of being a mentor. The mentor gets a feeling of being mentored by the act of their own mentoring. You hear the echo, if you will, of your own mentoring.

It's amazing how much I learned watching my children grow up. They taught me about myself. As I was coming of age (all the while dealing with my own issues), I could actually take the time to help my girls come of age. They helped me look at life through their eyes. Now I get to look through the eyes of three grandsons.

Sometimes even words themselves aren't important. A few years ago I shared a quiet afternoon with my father in his retirement home. He was 101, I was 67. It was in the afternoon and we were both a little sleepy. We took a nap, he in his recliner and I in an easy chair. We hardly spoke. As I walked with him to his dinner, he said, "Thanks for coming over, I enjoyed that." "Me too"

When I was a boy my father frequently wore a bow tie. He never taught me to tie one. I never asked. Recently, I asked a bow tie wearing friend of mine, who knew my father, to show me how to tie one. Halfway through the lesson I felt the presence of my father.

To my father, Harper Gribble Handshaw, I miss you.

Happy Father's Day, Pop.