

The Unitarian Church of Barnstable
Unitarian Universalists
Sunday, June 15, 2014 at 10:30 A.M.
“Lessons From Father”

To love life, to have a sense of duty—if there is a need and you can meet it, do it. To be loyal to family and friends, to be kind and compassionate to all people; to appreciate and maintain good humor, to be fair and respectful, to be optimistic and open minded; that it is important to look for joy even in the most devastating of situations, to keep your chin up. Wear a smile. To believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every living thing—long before the UU Principles were published, that sometimes broken bones heal much more easily than hateful words which can echo for a life time. Say what you mean and mean what you say...but think before you speak and circumvent a problem carefully before you take action. To practice, practice, and keep practicing... be it music, or sports, or public speaking. Be prepared—it will carry you closer to your goal. That none of us is perfect, that life is not always a bowl of cherries, to be quiet and cranky if need be, that home is our safe haven, to love a party. That’s what we hope we learned from our father—Jo Ann Kelly and Carol Norman.

Today is Father’s day, a day to lift up the fathers we had, the fathers we wished we had, the men who stepped in and fathered us, the fathers who gave birth to us and the father’s who adopted us, the fathers still living and the fathers now dead. As with mother’s day, fathers and fathering is a “complex, multi-faceted, diverse experience. (Becky Edmonston Lange)” Some of our fathers played an active role in our lives, other fathers were absent because of work or war or disinterest. Some fathers showed their love through affection and attention, other fathers didn’t know how to show their love and were distant, cold, or foreboding. Some fathers were abusive or neglectful, while others were unsure of themselves and their roles in our lives.

This year for Father's Day I wanted to do something different. I decided to ask members of the congregation about their fathers. So, I randomly sent emails to 50 members and asked them if they would share with me what they learned from their fathers. Some members I spoke with in person, some on the phone, most responded through email. This sermon is a culmination of 31 different memories of our fathers. Unfortunately I cannot share every story, every thought that was shared with me but I hope as I share what I learned with you that your fathers will rise to the fore and be with you in gentle spirit.

One of the greatest gifts a minister receives is to be invited into the lives of her parishioners. Through the stories you shared I learned about Mary Ellen McGowan's father who was an urban family doctor who had patients of all races and made house calls to 3rd story tenements. I learned about Judy Legrand's father who was a tall lanky dairy farmer, with an apple orchard that kept her and her siblings busy each fall. I learned about Susan Brinckerhoff's father who was a general practice Lawyer active in the community and in church. I learned about Crystal Gip's father who bought a 200 plus acre dairy farm when he was 18 and later acquired over 600 acre's of continuous farmland. I learned about Kitty Lorenz's father who was a research chemist who married his high school sweetheart.

I learned about fathers who worked long hours and father's who valued family over work. I learned about a father who raised his family when his wife died and a father who died when his child was yet a teenager. There were fathers who taught their girls to be handy and to be good at math and fathers who taught their boys to fish and to sail. There were fathers who had arranged marriages and fathers who married to give their wives' children a name. There were fathers who sacrificed their own interests for their families and fathers who unsuccessfully tried

to share their interests with their children. The value of education was almost a universal lesson from our fathers. Many of our fathers sacrificed so we and our siblings could go to college.

Two members spoke of their grandfathers as great influences in their lives, teaching them humility, perseverance, thrift, not being fussy and being responsible. Dick Legrand noted that his grandfather taught him that hard work brings rewards, including ice cream.

The image of what a father is has slowly and somewhat dramatically changed over the years. The distant, uninvolved provider is no longer the norm. Although some of you had such fathers many of you expressed the importance your fathers placed on family and extend family. While most spoke of their fathers as frugal and reserved, there were also fathers who shared hugs easily, who taught their sons that it was ok to cry, who spent time each night listening to their children's thoughts and ideas, who taught them how to be loving, consistent parents—these fathers were their children's cheerleaders and supported what their children wanted to do without pressure but with encouragement and love. These fathers were involved in PTA, Boy Scouts, coaching baseball, and helping to make their child's lives a bit easier. Todd James Herrmann recalls a time when his father and he went into Todd's junior high school. Todd was a new 7th grader and was struggling with opening his locker. His dad brought some oil into the school to make the dial spin a bit better and reminded Todd how to do the combination. "It worked great from then on," Todd says.

There were also fathers who sacrificed for more than educational opportunities. During World War II in France, Arlette Norclerc's father was forced to work for the Germans as he was told that if he did not, his wife and children would be taken away. Arlette wrote, "I can't imagine the courage it took for such a proud man to go against his principles. But we survived and today, I know that he twice gave me the gift of life."

And then there were the practical things our fathers taught us—how to swim, to ride a bike, to drive a car, to raise, kill and sell a chickens, to drive a tractor, to play chess and billiards, to dance, to sail and how to curse when things go amiss.

Some of our fathers were shy and others were social. Claudia Mahoney shared that her father loved having a crowd in. From her earliest memories, hers was a house where people gathered. Her father could find a cause to celebrate the simplest thing—a particularly fine pot roast at the supermarket, “so let’s have a crowd in”. Or the first steamers or corn of the summer, or her Mom’s first batch of fresh tomato sauce. What Claudia remembers most and said helped her through some pretty tough times, was “to surround yourself with people you love and to celebrate life every day, even when times are tough.”

A few members spoke of their fathers as orderly and organized. Roger Kessel remembers when he and his brother were little boys they would sit on the edge of the tub in a tiny, steamy bathroom watching their father shave—“how careful he was not to leave any space between each stroke of the blade,” Roger wrote. His father was also that way with money. He kept many envelopes in the top drawer of his dresser and on payday he would put something in each for special purposes such as Christmas, so he would have money to buy presents for Roger, his mother and his brother.

One of the things I loved about reading and hearing these stories was the UU values I could see being developed in many of you by your fathers—the love and care for the environment and animals, the idea that everyone has value and something to offer, the encouragement to read, to question, to have an active mind, to be tolerant, and to have compassion for needy people of all races. Arlette remembers one of her father’s principle, “I would rather be a fool than to commit an injustice.”

A number of your fathers were active in civic arenas particularly in politics. Nancy Risio's dad served as a city councilman for twenty years. Crystal Gips' father was actively involved in liberal political issues, which, she writes, never washed very well in upstate NY, but he ran for office and she worked hard on his political campaigns starting when she was 10. Louis Fournier shared that her father Charlie, whom many of us knew, communicated his firm belief that voting is a sacred duty. He spent a lifetime on the Republican City Committee and 20 years as a Board of Election Commissioner. At 100 years old he was still contacting the paper to educate or clarify some incorrect information. Susan Brinckerhoff's dad was also a life-long Republican and she remembers that there were a lot of conversations about politics at the dinner table. But "the values that he expressed and that he lived were not the values that the Republican party espouses today. The foundation of my liberal UU thoughts and ideals were really what was taught around the dinner table while I was growing up," she writes.

Christine Marzigliano had an especially close relationship with her father. They shared the same birthday and every year they celebrated their birthday with an end of the summer party. "When he died in 2004 it was like losing a twin..." she wrote. "People wonder why I'm so handy at fixing things, but it was because dad taught me... He taught me electrical wiring, bought me my set of American Flyer trains and we had a full set-up in the basement. My love of gardening comes from my Dad—he grew prized "Football" chrysanthemums in his garden. He taught me how to transplant flowers and shrubs and how to mulch the garden beds. Dad was a good listener and tried to lead us in the right direction." Susan Brinckerhoff's father also loved gardening and taught her how to plant those tomato plants she had started in her bedroom one year.

Some of our fathers taught us to follow our dreams, others taught us to work hard, some gave us the entrepreneurial spirit, others taught us to pursue a career that inspires us and gives us financial independence. Claudia Mahoney's father told her that the secret to his success was "just be nice to everyone—especially your enemies. Kill them with kindness. It will drive them crazy.

Not everything we learned from our father's was healthy or helpful. Some of our fathers had short and hot tempers, some of our fathers were cold and distant, some of our fathers were sexist, some of our fathers used humor as a weapon, some of our fathers were hypochondriacs, some of our fathers never said I love you, some of our fathers were autocratic. Some of us learned the fear of never having enough money, Some of us learned the fear of confrontation. Some times the lessons we learned were to do the opposite of our fathers—to have patience, to solve problems better than he did, that women can need a professional identity, to confront issues in an open, honest manner, to take risks, and to have fun.

There were so many good memories... of the father who loved Christmas and every year took all 5 of his children hunting through the farm woods for Christmas trees; Or the father who took his sons fishing to escape the noise and heat and grime of the city; of the father who loved hiking and backpacking, of the father who enjoyed playing the violin and going to the Symphony Orchestra. Memories of museum trips to Boston, of listening to the play-by-play of the red sox on the radio, of playing catch in the backyard, of rides with dad, of spending time with dad in the basement watching him do woodworking, of watching Dad stretch and meditate daily, of trips to Cape Cod in the summer.

Even in death our Fathers continue to teach us. Carolynne Beless' father died of a heart attack when she was ten. She wrote that indirectly she learned that a parent's love goes on forever even after they are gone. And Bettina Brown, whose father died three years ago wrote

that he taught her to let go. Jessica Newell wrote that it was her father's death that taught her the most valuable lesson, "not to wait for tomorrow to let those we love know we love them.

Unconditional love is the greatest gift most of us learned from our fathers. Love—the foundation of who we are. Corinne Lilie, whose mother died when she was nine, was raised by her father. He taught her that the greatest love is the love we have inside ourselves. "We need to love ourselves before we can love others," he said. On this father's day let us celebrate whatever measure of love we received that enables us to love in return and creates a desire to give love back to the next generation. Thank you for sharing.

***Hymn** No. 409 "Sleep My Child"

***Benediction**

Never stop sharing your stories of joy and pain
They are what make us human
And are the stuff of love.

Choral Benediction

***Postlude**