

For Life Goes Not Backwards:
A Developmental Father's Day Journey
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The United Church of Gainesville
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Kahlil Gibran, "On Children" from The Prophet

A woman said, speak to us of children.
And the prophet said:
Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And they are with you yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

(Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet)

For the Departure of a Stepson – from Rain for the Trees, W.S.

Merwin, 1988 reprinted in Life Prayers, p. 218.

You are going for a long time
And nobody knows what to expect

We are trying to learn
Not to accompany gifts with advice

Or to suppose that we can protect you
From being changed

By something that we do not know
But have always turned away from

Even by the sea that we love
With its breaking

And the dissolving days
And the shadows on the wall

Together we look at the young trees
We read the news we smell the morning

We cannot tell you what to take with you
In your light baggage

Genesis 1:27-28-31

And God created humankind in God's image,
In the image of God they were created,
Male and female God created them.
God blessed them and God said to them,
"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth..."
And God saw everything God made,
And indeed it was very good.

Romans 12:9-13 (from the Jerusalem Bible)

Do not let your love be a pretense, but sincerely prefer good to evil. Love each other as much as sisters and brothers should, and have a profound respect for each other. Work for the Lord with untiring effort and with great earnestness of spirit. If you have hope, this will make you cheerful. Do not give up if trials come; and keep on praying. If any of the people of God are in need share with them; and you should make hospitality your special care.

My parents loved me. There was never any question of that. Sometimes the problem seemed that they loved me with more weight than felt I could carry. They were proud that I went to college, but they were heartbroken every time I left home for school. After we were married, whenever a family visit ended, they couldn't help but get so very sad. My mother couldn't stay in the house. She had to go out and busy herself with shopping as soon as we left. My dad would write about how empty it was around the dinner table. It was love, I know. But sometimes it just left me feeling guilty about my life.

The other thing that was going on in those days in families in particular and also in society in general was something called the generation gap. The most popular TV show of the 1970's was not "Leave it to Beaver." It was "All in the Family" that satirized this fault line between the generations with the crotchety bigoted Archie Bunker claiming things like "God made us all one true religion which he named after his son Christian, or Christ for short." Inviting a Jew into his house Archie says, "Welcome to our home. As you's peoples say, 'Shaboom.'" Or speaking to the African American singer Sammy Davis Jr. who

inexplicably visited the Bunker home, Archie says, “No prejudice intended, but I always check with the bible on these things. If God had intended us to be together, he’d have put us together. But look what he done. He put all you coloreds in Africa, and he put the rest of us in the white countries.” Sammy Davis replies, “Well somebody must have told ‘em where we were, because somebody came and got us.”

These were funny but painful because they weren’t that awfully far from the statements on race and religion we heard rather regularly.

And in those early days of our marriage, Sandy and I virtually committed the words of Kahlil Gibran that we read earlier in the service to memory. We would repeat quotes from it to each other. “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself... You may strive to be like them but seek not to make them like you, for life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.”

We wanted to be free to move forward, in our lives. And there were two principles we promised to follow in our parenting. First, we would stay committed to and involved with each other so that we would not be so lost when our children left home that we could not function. That quote at the top of the bulletin, “The best thing a father can do for his children is love their mother,” is one I took to heart.

I’ve seen many people transfer their love, affection, and needs onto their children over their partner, and it did neither the partner nor the child any good.

Second, we promised we would respect our children’s journeys, not trying to make them be like us, recognizing that life goes forward not backwards.

I preached this message, rather militantly on Father’s day back at the First Congregational Church in Connecticut when I was about 27. I’m not even sure if our first child was born at the time. It clearly was an attempt to continue to break free and differentiate myself from my own parents, but I didn’t know it then.

And then of course we had our own children (or rather the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself). They began to grow, and they kept growing on us. We still believed in those words of Gibran. We still promised that maintaining our own love and affection for each other was the primary task of our marriage, not to the detriment of our children, but so that we would have love to give them.

Family therapists have taken a great principle of parenting from the airline industry. It’s the speech the flight attendants make before take off when they show you how to use the oxygen masks that allegedly will fall down from the compartment above you should the cabin depressurize. I say allegedly, because how do you know this will actually work? Sandy and I were once on a Lockheed L1011 when the seam over the front fuselage door split, the plane depressurized, and the pilot took the plane into a nose dive from 30,000’ until it leveled off skimming over the ocean. Those oxygen masks never dropped down from the ceiling. (I

had a plan. We were sitting next to the emergency exit. I figured I would pop open the door just before we hit the water and jump). None of this has anything to do with this sermon.

Getting back to the subject matter at hand, when the flight attendants make that speech, they always say, "If you're traveling with a small child, always put your mask on first and then help your child."

That is the first and most basic principle of parenting. Make sure you are getting your oxygen as a parent or as a couple, so you will be able to help your child. Whenever a couple with small children comes in for marriage counseling I ask them when was the last time they got away overnight without their children. If they can't remember, I tell them that's too long.

Sandy and I have always done pretty well with that. And besides nurturing our lives as a couple, we continued to remember that our job was to enable our children to become themselves, not copies of us. It started out well enough, but I do admit that this became more complicated as they grew. Sandy may have caught me whispering once or twice in their ears as they slept in their cribs, The Rev. Matthew Lawrence Reimer, the Rev. Christopher Joshua Reimer. But that stopped soon, and luckily it never took.

Three things happened as they grew older. First, I did want to implant some of my values in their lives. I tried to communicate the principles inherent in the passage I read from Romans 12: 9-13, "Do not let your love be a pretense, but sincerely prefer good to evil...If you have hope, this will make you cheerful. Do not give up if trials come..." I believe it is appropriate to give our children a framework of values. It's not suffocating them to give them a moral system to hang on to.

Second, I recognized more and more every day that they truly were their own beings. They taught me my limitations of how much I could influence them, and they expanded the possibilities of my life. They both took me much more into sports than I had been since I was eleven, and they had experiences on athletic fields I never had. By high school we were following them everywhere. They got us away from work.

Matt turned into something of a graphic artist, earning money in high school and college by making commercial signs for sports fields, while I can hardly sign my name legibly. He found his calling in a degree and profession in building construction. Chris went into the Air Force, spending year in Special Forces training, something my Mennonite pacifist background had to expand to affirm. Eventually he got a journalism degree and is now a media director for the PGA Tour. They are clearly their own people.

As they developed into these wonderful guys, I forgot not to love them so much. And, even though I promised I wouldn't let it happen this way, when they left home, they left a hole in the center of my life you could drive a truck through.

I remember writing words in my journal during Matt's senior year in high school, something to the effect of – This time before my son leaves is as if a kidnapper has left a message, that my child, whom I love no less now at 17 than I did the day he was born, will one summer day be taken from me, and I will see him, from now on, less and less.

What was that hole like when they left? I had forgotten what kind of music I liked, because theirs was always on the stereo. What kind of chips did I like to eat? I always bought what they liked.

And there were rocky times in our relationship with them. There was a period of self-absorption on their parts in their early years away from home that ranged from uncomfortable for us to terrifying. Perhaps some of our most difficult times of parenting, of simply not knowing what to do with, for, and in relation to our children came after they left home.

There were times back then that if someone had tried to quote Gibran's "The Prophet" to the effect that I should let my "bending in the archer's hand be for gladness" I would have told them exactly what they could bend.

But Sandy and I talked ourselves through the tough times. We went for counseling. We reminded ourselves of those early commitments, to love each other, and to celebrate the fact that our children were not our own, but life's longing for itself.

At one point our counselor told us we had to get our focus on something besides our struggling young adult child, so we sold our house and built a new one. I typically would not recommend building a house to anyone as a way to avoid other issues in their lives. But this project occupied a lot of our time and thoughts, and it was just what we all needed.

We were and are cheerleaders for our adult children. We do our best to support and encourage every new stage in their lives. And as they have grown, married, divorced, had children, re-married, and had more children, their lives and ours have been a journey of re-connection that I hardly imagined.

And now as grandparents, we are in one of the most wonderful of all parenting times. We went from having two grandchildren a year and a half ago, to having four, when Chris married Morgan. We love Morgan's two boys as we love Matt and Kathy's son and daughter. Then Chris and Morgan had a little girl together, and we now have five grandchildren to love.

We still make mistakes with our grown children and their wives. We trust that these wounds have, do, and will heal. I am lucky and blessed. But I can also say that I have reached out for luck and at times had to wrestle blessing into my life like Jacob wrestling with the angel. And I can see again my children and grandchildren are not my own, but the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.

I believe along with W.S. Merwin that as we launch our children, my role is to offer gifts without advice (even if I don't always succeed at

this). I can understand with Merwin as well that I cannot tell them what to take with them with their light baggage.

I can feel the beauty of having been created in the image of God, of having seen creation go forward for two generations, and I can sense God smiling again, saying, "It is very good."

That's my developmental journey, one stage that started with the challenge of Gibran's The Prophet knowing my children had to go forward, one stage that faltered in the middle, forgetting my vision for a while, and one stage that has now returned to remind me that I may give them my love but not my thoughts, for they have their own thoughts, / that I may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow.

Anthem "Their Souls Dwell In Tomorrow"

Prayer –

Pray for the generations behind you, the young people and children you know in this church.

See them, the ones younger than you, and think of how to bless them with your life, giving them promise, and hope, a smile and a word of encouragement.

Pray for the father figures who have blessed you, dads, step- dads, teachers, uncles, grandfathers, coaches, mentors, and good older male friends.

Forgive their failings where you can.

Bless them and the gifts they gave you.

Find a way to say thank you to them whether they are in heaven or on earth.

And pray for a blessing for yourself.

See yourself bathed in the love of the father part of God,

filling in the gaps where human father figures were, well, human.

And let all this blessing flow like a mountain stream

cascading through your life. Amen.