



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“This Is Not Your Father’s Oldsmobile”

© by the Reverend Don A. Randall

A sermon delivered on June 21, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

*I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments,
when they aren’t trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom.*

Umberto Eco, FOUCAULT’S PENDULUM

*That was when the world wasn’t so big and I could see everywhere. It was when my father
was a hero and not a human.* Markus Zusak, I AM THE MESSENGER

*Being a role model is the most powerful form of educating...too often fathers neglect it
because they get so caught u in making a living the y forget to make a life.*

John Wooden, A LIFETIME OF OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON AND OFF THE COURT

Sermon

Today is fathers’ day. In Jesus’ time, fathers had become important enough figures for them to be used widely as a metaphor of love and power. For example, as I mentioned in the call to worship, the Lord’s Prayer begins with Jesus portraying God as our father. The metaphor has since trickled down to us in terms of our forefathers, as in George Washington, the father of our country, or as father figures among teachers, coaches, and so forth.

Having a special day set aside to honor our fathers took some doing. The history of Fathers’ day can be broken down into emotional needs, political factors, and economic influences. Emotionally, many people thought fathers should have their special day as mothers did. A symbol of the emotional needs is seen in the actions of a woman named Sonora Smart Dodd. Her father, widowed and left with 7 children, did such an impressive job of raising them that she was driven to publically honor him and all fathers. Eventually, in 1910, she convinced the Washington state legislature to honor Fathers’ day.

That was the beginning of the political struggle. For in 1916, President Wilson staged a publicity stunt by raising the flag in Spokane by using a telegraph signal to send a message from

Washington, DC, to honor fathers. President Coolidge urged state governors to observe Fathers' Day in 1924. But it was not until 1972 that President Nixon, in order to gain votes in a tight reelection, perpetrated one of his lesser known tricks and signed a proclamation making Fathers' Day a Federal holiday.

Economically, retailers thought a special day for fathers was a real boon. When the idea of a joint parents' day was proposed, the merchants, already suffering in the great depression, squashed the idea. Currently, it is estimated that the financial boost to the economy is one billion dollars.

Some of you have asked me about Oldsmobiles in the title of my sermon. Pardon the pun, but it serves as a vehicle for other ideas. Oldsmobiles and fathers are an interesting combination that has come down to me over several generations. A fellow in Lansing, Michigan named R.E. Olds started making Oldsmobiles in the early 1900s; he eventually had a falling out with his partners and left the company. Since his name was already legally in use, he started another auto company he called REO, using his initials. My connection to REO is that my mother's grandfather, Casper, worked there cutting fabric for the seats. On the other side of the family, my dad's father, Clyde, was a dedicated owner of Oldsmobiles and, in my memory, would purchase a new Oldsmobile every two or three years. When I was a very young boy, I remember our first car was a hand-me-down from my dad's dad. It was a monster, a 1948, 98 Olds, 2 door sedan. We called it the blue "torpedo". When its transmission bit the dust, my parents bought another, but newer, used Olds; this time it was a more stylish Olds 88 model with 4 doors. A little remembered fact of this vintage car is that their transmissions used whale oil for lubrication fluid (how politically incorrect is that?), and the myth was the fluid never needed to be changed. So, as you might guess, this Olds soon needed a new transmission. Don't ask me why, but boys remember these things. Our replacement car was not an Olds, but was a brand new 1954 two tone Ford Fairlane. This was a break in the Oldsmobile line in our family that led to even worse. Just so you get a complete picture, I have to tell you we lived in a suburb of Detroit, and within 6 years rust had overtaken the Ford.

My dad worked at the time at the Kaiser Frazer Auto plant. These were the people that built the rugged Willis jeep that helped win the Second World War. They also made a fabulous looking Kaiser sedan which was on a par with a Mercury or an Oldsmobile. I was 16 and ready to take the wheel in a big way, and I did not care that be they Kaisers, Mercurys or Oldsmobiles, they were out of our budget! Horror of horrors, my parents came home with new red 4-door Rambler with 3 forward gears on the column. I began to forgive my dad the night that my girlfriend and I went to the drive-in theater and discovered that the Rambler's front bench seat would recline all the way back! And that's all I'm going to tell you about that. We drove Ramblers until I went off to college, at which time my parents bought the coolest Dynamic 88 Oldsmobile hardtop with a 4 barrel carburetor. All I can figure out is that they must have loved my younger brother more than me.

Fast forward to 1971 when Sally and I discovered we were going to have twins. See there is a big connection with father's day! We had just finished paying off the note on our 1968 BMW 1600. Sally did some calculating and determined that a double stroller, two car seats and two of

everything else, including babies, would never fit in the BMW. You guessed it; we needed an Oldsmobile! But my parents were right after all; we bought a car we could not afford.

The transition from still being a kid to being a father takes many forms. For me it was symbolized by cars. Somehow when my parents actually got a car and we stopped riding buses and street cars, my dad had achieved a new status in my eyes. When I had to give up my sports sedan and get a real car, I was on the way to becoming mature enough to really be frightened of adulthood. I was a father!

When the twins and their younger sister started doing algebra homework and asked for help, it came back to me that I had done the same with my dad. The parallel of failing to be able to help was uncanny. I could work the problems my daughters brought to me, but I did them the “wrong” way! Old math was not good enough for new math! Years earlier I had asked my dad for help on an algebra word problem; you know, the kind that has two trains traveling at x speed from two different directions over such and such distance, etc. Could my dad help? “Sure,” he said. He read the problem and pronounced the answer. I said, “I know the answer; it’s in the back of the book. But how did you get it?” His reply was, “you just read the question and there is the answer.” I learned two valuable lessons in that moment. First, I learned that my dad was really smart, and second, I learned that I could be frustrated and proud of him at the same time.

That double emotional relationship between children and their fathers follows us all of our lives. Of course it is not just fathers, it is mothers, too. But today is Father’s Day! We need to work out all that ambivalence of pride and anger, good and bad, all wrapped up in the same relationship. As a matter of fact we work on it all of our lives. We transfer those intense, below the surface feelings to other parental figures in situations that are obvious and in situations that are not so obvious. It should be no surprise that most of the situations involve issues with authority figures. Ed Friedman, a rabbi who was a famous family therapist, wrote a book titled, *Generation to Generation*, in which he identified the minister, priest or rabbi as the lightning rod for a lot of this growing up work that we do after we become adults. The clergy person is not allowed to be experienced as a completely unique person because he or she is an emotional stand in for mom or dad.

Of course the most obvious person to whom we transfer our continuing emotional growing pains is our spouse, if we have one. Close friends also often have parts of their relationship which are tense, because they trust each other enough to be themselves by trying out new boundaries. These issues often come out in patterns of social discourse, such as mother in law jokes or, my favorite, “nobody tells me anything”. Meaning of course that the women in the family make all the decisions, but, in reality, I was likely not interested or paying attention to what was going on. For my generation, these stereotypes used to follow gender lines. But something very amazing is happening as we live and observe, and I think we’ll eventually have to change all of our sexist language as well as our family humor.

While most families still have a traditional mother and father or just one parent in the home, an increasing number are openly enjoying two dads or two moms. I think the last number I saw of states that had legalized marriage equality was 37. The Supreme Court may this month make it a

national reality. And even if the court does not, it seems clear the tide has turned. Sixty Seven percent of all Americans favor same sex marriage and that percentage increases with younger cohorts. Even the Catholic country of Ireland has approved civil marriage for same sex couples, by popular vote no less! Mexico and other Latin American countries are surprisingly going in the same direction.

So fathers' day, and mothers' day, will remain important, but maybe we need to revisit the idea of parents' day. It seems to be really the day of the future. We could keep Wall St. happy with gifts for all parents. We could even buy gifts for ourselves; like I just bought myself a new watch and told Sally it was my birthday and fathers' day gift combined. Of course all any parent wants is to see happy fulfilled children everywhere. We want children that grow up to be better parents than we managed to be. And, always, it takes a village, or a Fellowship!

May it be so!