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## Honoring Our Fathers

Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, was born and raised in the city of Ur, in Sumeria, what is now Iraq. The book of Genesis tells us little about Abraham's childhood. But a later Midrash fills in the story of his abusive, traumatic childhood. Abraham's father was both an idolater and maker of idols. Abraham challenges his father's worship and manufacture of idols, and his father turns him over to the ruler for punishment – being thrown into a blazing furnace. Abraham escapes from his punishment, but he does not emerge unharmed; indeed his experience of childhood pain remains with him into his adulthood.

Out of his childhood experience, we see two sides to Abraham as a husband and father – one that is emotionally dead, violent, and cruel, and one that tries to leave behind the world of patriarchy and cruelty and to act out something new. When faced with famine, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, go to Egypt. In order to save his own life, Abraham convinces Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister, and he hands her over to Pharaoh. Later on, Sarah is unable to bear Abraham any children, so she convinces Abraham to take her slave-girl, Hagar, as his wife. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. Still later, Sarah finally does bear Abraham a son, Isaac. And then, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away. Although they are close to death in the desert, Hagar and Ishmael survive, and Ishmael becomes the founder of the Arab people. So Abraham's adult life consists of a series of betrayals of those close to him, just as he was betrayed by his father. Rabbi Michael Lerner calls this the "repetition compulsion" – that is, the tendency to treat others as we were treated as a child. Someone is abused in childhood is likely to treat others the same way, acting out the abuse on yet another generation.

In these stories of betrayal, Abraham follows the old path of pain and cruelty and is unable to find a new, compassionate way of being. But then, Abraham begins to transcend the oppression of the world he grew up in. When God is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, Abraham challenges God to exercise compassion, and he reminds God that God must be attentive to human suffering. For Abraham, the god for whom he left his childhood home must be a God of caring and compassion.

And then, Abraham is faced with God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The greatness of Abraham isn't that he was willing to obey God's command, no matter what, as many religious leaders would have it. His greatness lies in the fact that he doesn't go through with it. Finally, Abraham hears the true voice of God that says "don't do it." In this moment, Abraham is able to transcend the cruelty and patriarchy that prevail in the world around him. And he is able to envision a world of compassion and justice. So the Abraham of the Bible actually hears two voices – one voice tells him of a world of cruelty in which he gives away his wife, Sarah; in which he sends Hagar and Ishmael off to die in the desert, and in which he is about to sacrifice Isaac. But he also hears a voice that tells him the chain of pain can be broken, and that he can see other humans

as precious and worthy of compassion. So, the Hebrew Bible gives us two models of fatherhood - one that is cruel, unfeeling, and hierarchical; and one that is compassionate. And, of course, the world has held these two models in tension throughout human history.

Christian interpretations of the New Testament have similarly given us two competing models of fatherhood. Centuries after the time of Jesus, theologians began to see the crucifixion of Jesus as God's sacrifice of his son to atone for humanity's sin. For me, going back to childhood, this theology has never made any sense. How can it be that either God or humanity benefit from Jesus' suffering and death? If anything, this line of thinking seems very much like a throwback to the model of pain and oppression that Abraham began to overcome in the book of Genesis. As Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock point out in an article in the latest UU World, this story of atonement by sacrifice is nothing more than a story of divine child abuse.

But the New Testament, and especially the Gospels, also give us abundant examples of compassion and justice. Jesus welcomes the children in their innocence. He invites those who are scorned by the society of his time to share his table – women, lepers, tax collectors, slaves. No one it seems is beyond the range of Jesus' compassion. Indeed, Jesus tells his followers that the birds of the air and the lilies of the field are treated with compassion; they are protected. So, set against the model of a divine father who is willing to subject his son to pain and death, we have the model of fatherly compassion and caring – for all humans and for the animals and plants as well.

Well, today we celebrate father's day, and as we do, we are forced to recognize that these models -- of abusive fatherhood and loving fatherhood -- have been competing with each other throughout human history. Over and over, we hear stories of abusive fathers, of fathers who fail to protect and care for their children. And we experience a world in which pain and cruelty are inflicted on people who are different, on people whom we fear. And yet we continue to struggle to transcend this model of oppression and to articulate a model of fatherhood based on love and compassion.

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I was fortunate to have been raised by a father who believed in the model of caring and compassion. My father, Dwight Scott, always let my sister and me know how much he adored us. He probably spanked me a handful of times, but I think he always suffered far more pain over it than I did. My father had to commute into New York City every day for work, but the rest of his life pretty much centered around his family. I'm sure he would rather have been doing other things, but I could almost always talk him into playing catch with me. I also managed to persuade him that we should have a boat, even though he wasn't much interested in it, and I got to spend a good bit of my adolescence tooling around the waters of Long Island. My Dad was the emotional and sentimental one in the family – the one who cried when anyone was leaving, whether by train, or car, or airplane, and no matter how far away or for how long.

And as I began to approach the time for college, I could see two different styles of parenting, both within the model of compassion and caring. My mother was the one who exhibited a kind of fierceness, who pushed me to do things, who would do the finger-shaking when she thought it was necessary. So there was a model of sternness and fierceness that I also experienced, but that was no less loving. Looking back, I realize that I was seeking a different image of fatherhood in my choice of college and

then service in the Navy. I wanted to test myself in the masculine world. Even though I didn't much like competition, I wanted to see if I could compete in the male world. So I chose to go to an all-male University. And it was competitive all right!

And then I went into the Navy and I served on a ship in the Atlantic fleet for two years, and then in Vietnam. Women were not present much, if at all, in those environments. But in the Navy, I found the father-figure I had been looking for. I was barely 20 years old, and very, very green. Earl Russell, the operations officer on our ship, was my boss. He was about twice my age, and he had been an enlisted man before becoming an officer. He was very gruff and very strict, and at first I was scared to death of him. He insisted on doing things right. I was in charge of all the electronics on the ship, about which I knew virtually nothing. And Lt. Russell pushed me hard – he challenged me to do things that I didn't think I could do. Imagine for example, being the officer of the watch with control of the movements of a ship several hundred feet long, with 200 plus sailors and officers aboard, and maneuvering it in close quarters with an aircraft carrier some 100 feet away and towering over you. And, steaming along at high speed. One small mistake could result in a collision and possible loss of lives. I was terrified the first time I had to do this, but Earl Russell convinced me that I could do it, and I did. And I even became pretty good at it and at lots of other things I didn't think I could do. So what happened for me was that I gained a lot of confidence in my own abilities. I suddenly realized that I could compete, and I could do OK, in this exclusively male world.

Most of the other officers on the ship couldn't stand Lt. Russell – they thought he was way too demanding. And he really could be pretty ornery – he didn't brook any nonsense from anyone. But I came to see him as very much of a father figure – a good father, who pushed me, but who gave me confidence in myself. And we became good friends, once I had gotten the message that he was giving me. We corresponded for years after we left that ship – both of us served in Vietnam at different times, and we kept in touch. Well, recently, a number of officers from that era (1962-1963; 45 years ago!) have organized a reunion to take place in the fall on the east coast. I wasn't going to go, but after Earl Russell and I started to correspond again, I changed my mind. He's 84 now, living in the hills of Arkansas, and his wife Reta, has had a series of strokes. This is very possibly my last chance to meet up with the two of them, and I have decided that I am going to go if at all possible. Earl Russell was an important figure in my life. He gave me a different model of fathering – one that I needed – that was based on encouraging me to use my brains and my skills, to do things I was afraid to try, and to build my confidence.

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And then, of course, what goes around comes around, and I became a parent. I am privileged to have two wonderful daughters. Not that they didn't put us through it many times. Anyone who has raised teen-aged girls knows how much they can make you worry, especially when they decide to do some "acting out." And the process of breaking away can be really hard for both parents and children. But now these are two young women of whom I am extremely proud, and I have a little grandson. I always kind of regretted not having had a son, but I really look forward to trying to be a good male role model for little Jayden.

Fathers are always, of course, less than perfect. And, as we have seen from the biblical stories, right up to the present time, the dark side of fathering includes abuse, violence, patriarchy, and so forth. This is the side that embodies the “repetition compulsion” – the temptation to do things to other people that were done to us as a child. The dark side of fatherhood certainly exists, and we need to recognize it for what it is. We need to name it when it occurs, whether in individual homes or in national leaders acting their version of the repetition compulsion on the world stage. Seeing how the compulsion enables us to have some compassion for the father figure who is repeating it, but it should never serve as an excuse!

Part of our work as Unitarian Universalists, and one of our reasons for honoring our fathers, is to stand up for models of caring, compassionate fatherhood. So many fathers work hard to provide for their sons and daughters. They love them and care for them. Some of those fathers are stern even as they are loving. They encourage their children to learn, to grow, to develop, to build confidence in their abilities. And all these things are so often done out of a place of love for the child. And then there are fathers, like my Dad, and probably like me, who are sentimental and emotional about parenting, and who just let their kids know they love them. The main quality in a father, it seems to me, is the existence of that love at the core of the relationship. As the saying goes, “you can never give your children too much love.”

So, today, let’s hold all our fathers in our hearts. All fathers have faults, and all fathers have strengths.

- They have held us when we were sick,
- fed us when we were hungry,
- tucked us in at night and read us stories,
- They have taught us many things:
  - How to pound a nail
  - How to fix a flat tire
  - How to catch a baseball
  - How to ride a bike.

May we remember our fathers with fondness on this Father’s Day.

May we hold them in our hearts.

May we think of them with love.