

Complete Hero
A sermon by Intern Minister Elizabeth Marsh
Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville
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Happy Father's Day, to all the dads out there. I can't tell you how deeply happy I am to look out on this congregation and see so many kind and loving fathers. Father's Day, just like any holiday, can be one that causes a full spectrum of emotional responses.

We celebrate our dads who were attentive and inspirational; we mourn fathers who have died; and maybe we long for the fathers we never knew. And certainly we honor the people who have acted as father figures in our lives.

A friend of mine made an observation about this holiday that I thought was quite insightful. Earlier this week, this friend was shopping for a Father's Day card at a major retailer, and he "was sorely disappointed in the selection. 30% were about golf, 30% about beer, 15% about body parts or bodily functions, 10% about Nascar, 10% had cute kittens or puppies, and 5% were super religious.

"What does that say about American Dads?" he asked. "Or maybe it is a commentary on the card industry. Whatever it is," he said, "it is sad."

Other friends have pointed out to me the lamentable depiction of men on American television, that there aren't really many good father role models for their children to see. Homer Simpson comes to mind.

In *Iron John: A book about men*, Robert Bly writes, "The father in contemporary TV ads never knows what cold medicine to take. In situation comedies, 'The Cosby Show' notwithstanding, men are devious, bumbling, or easy to outwit." Bly obviously hopes for more.

On the other hand, in movies, men are often the action heroes, and whether they're the good guys or the bad guys, they use all kinds of violent weapons, whether it's a gun, space-age lasers, bombs or just their fists. And the fathers who make the headline news are the ones who harm their children.

It's hard to find good, solid, intelligent, loving dads the media. One of the reasons for this, though, is because the stories that our imaginations are most attracted to are the salacious kind: the news media, TV and movies, too, are really only interested in making money off us through commercials and ticket prices. They'll do whatever it takes to put the most colorful and controversial characters on screen and to keep our eyeball put for as long as possible.

And this is sad, because much of our imagination about what life is shaped by TV and movies. Our children are especially vulnerable to this. It's a cycle of push-and-pull, that real life informs what kind of stories told in the media, but the stories told there also shape our imaginations of what's real.

So while big and small screens show conflict and violence because that is what our brains are most excited by, they don't show the real lives of good dads because those stories, I'm sorry to say, are actually pretty boring. Compared to Iron Man, right? Good dads are responsible and caring; they show up at clarinet

recitals and soccer practice; they bring their kids to church, they vote—boring, everyday stuff. Who would want to make a movie about that?

Even though these fathers may not lead a Hollywood lifestyle, they want the best for their loved ones. They help us learn how to navigate the world.

Even those small, everyday actions of our fathers and father figures are quite heroic. They don't get nearly enough credit.

Our real life fathers show us what it's like to be human—and that being human means making mistakes on a daily basis. Making mistakes is easy, while admitting them is the hard part.

In his book *Lifecraft*, Forrest Church writes, "We admire other people's strengths, but when it comes right down to it, their weakness strikes a closer chord."

Each of us is very aware how prone to failure we are. We identify with others who show vulnerability because we "see the tears in their eyes" and recognize our own tears. We may not know that person's particular pain, but we do know what it's like to feel pain.

A hero is accessible—we identify with their weakness, which then makes it easier for us to want to emulate the strengths we appreciate about them. Let's think about Mother Theresa as an example of a hero. She's on such a tall pedestal that it's hard to identify with her. She was such an extraordinary, saintly figure. She seemed to have no weakness.

Then a few years ago, after her death, some of her personal letters were published in a book, and it was revealed that she experienced decades of doubt about God's existence. Maybe for us Unitarian Universalists, it's no big deal to doubt, but imagine, this holy woman who we all supposed had a direct line to the Holy.

She wrote to her longtime spiritual confidante, "Jesus has a very special love for you, but as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." What an intense loneliness this must have been for her.

Now that we know that this great religious hero kept such a painful secret, it allows us to access her humanity in a new way. Even with all the remarkable things she did, it seems that she's just a little more like us.

Someone might strive to emulate Mother Theresa as a model of religious charity, or sometimes we make our fathers or father figures into heroes who we hope to be like. But when we try to be like them, it can be like we're taking the easy route because we're just following in the path that they've already walked.

Sometimes it's harder to be ourselves—not to take the same footsteps as our hero, but to learn lessons from them, observe how they moved through life and take our own steps.

As a young man, the Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church considered following his grandfather and father into national politics. Why not? The political connections were already in place, he'd grown up in it, the path was clear.

But Reverend Church's father encouraged him to follow his heart into ministry, which he did, and Unitarian Universalism was blessed with Reverend Church's long and prolific ministry. In a similar way, we can observe the courage of our heroes, learn from their stumbles, yet do our best to use those gifts in our own brand new way.

Remember at the beginning, I told the story of my friend who couldn't find an appropriate Father's Day card? Some people we were talking with suggested he make his own card—their dads appreciate it more anyhow, they said. Other people shared that they usually tried to find a nice blank card and write their own message.

One person had a very unique experience: she had once done an internship at Hallmark. She told them her dad wasn't into any of the things of their cards, and created her own line of cards that would be meaningful for dads like hers. Now that's an example of using her gifts to create something new and beneficial to others. I think that person is my new hero.

The idea of making your own card really reflects the idea that our fathers, and our loved ones, are much more complex than any pre-designed card would be anyhow. Doesn't a homemade card show our fathers that we acknowledge the unique relationship we have with them?

Writing personal notes to our fathers can be a powerful way to communicate. If you could write a letter to your father, what would it say? Maybe it would thank him for all the financial support he's given you through the years—college tuition, help purchasing your first car, or the wonderful gift of the down payment on your first house.

Would you write a letter to him, acknowledging all the frustrations he went through on family road trips? Perhaps your letter would be long, telling him proudly about all your accomplishments and wishing he'd there to see you through them all.

Some letters might be angry, expressing outrage at his emotional distance; other letters might be formal and brief, simply thanking him for the lessons of self-reliance he imparted.

Our relationships with our fathers are as complicated as any other relationship. They are filled with good, bad, and everything in between; and our task is to reconcile the good with the bad and take away the lessons that we can.

Among those important lessons can be to remember that our fathers are human, and like anyone, hero or not they are prone to weakness. To recognize and even to honor the complicated nature of our fathers can open up the space for us to admit our own complicated human nature, too.

My own relationship with my dad is as complex as can be. I understand now that I'm an adult that his emotional distance is not his own; it belongs to his father and most likely to his father's father, too.

Sometimes I notice that I'm keeping myself distant from him, too. Instead of carrying this on into my generation, I do my best to break that cycle and stay

connected to him even when he pushes himself away.

Our relationship is compounded by the disease of alcoholism, and so one of the gifts I receive from my dad is the chance to learn how to stay in healthy relationship with him without being hooked into his behaviors. I do better at this on some days and worse at others, so does he.

In our relationships with our fathers, our mothers, with anyone—there is no such thing as perfect. There is only what we have in the moment and what we choose to do with it.

Our responsive reading today said, “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.” We are those children, and though we have come through our fathers, we do not belong to them. We belong to the longing of life.

Even the tremendous gifts of love that some of our dads gave to us, that love is ours to use, ours to give away again. The grief and anger some of us feel toward our fathers, those experiences also belong to us. We can give the anger to others; we can clutch onto our grief, or transform these things into something worth passing on. It's what we do with these lessons that matters.

May we find the strength to use the gifts we receive from our fathers to heal and not to harm. May we share the courage of our heroes and recognize ourselves in their tears, as we and our heroes strive to be ever more fully ourselves.