

## THE HEART OF A FATHER

“Father” is kind of a loaded word in church circles these days. I’ve noticed that my Evangelical Christian friends have begun to refer to “Father God,” as if to underline and emphasize God’s masculine image. Having been a feminist Christian for decades, I’m sure you understand how I, personally, have struggled with the traditional image of God the Father—some of you, I am sure, have shared that struggle—and how I have travelled a long road, meeting many images of the Divine along the way. And I can tell you—having walked that path, sometimes with two steps forward and many steps back—it is quite possible to not only move beyond the proverbial old white guy with the long beard, sitting on the throne of heaven—it is possible to move so far beyond that image as to be comfortable with the image of a Father God all over again!

Or at least, perhaps, including Him in a personal pantheon of manifestations of the One True God, because I think most of us consider and wrestle with our own images and concepts of God as we share a spiritual path.

My friend, Brother Toby of Starcross Community, mentioned this issue in his blog essay last week. He wrote:

*Sitting on a bench waiting for a Haiku to come, I became aware of the world around me. Behind me was a person who valued solitude harvesting lavender. Down the hill, a man who treasured nothing more than his young son, was silently stalking the first tomatoes.*

*Amidst all this, olive trees were quietly dancing in the wind, their silver and green leaves seeming to rejoice in life. I wondered if they would always be safe from the chainsaw I hear in the distance.*

*It’s dangerous to use the word “GOD” when your community of friends and readers are mostly on evolving spiritual paths. Some years ago I used to put it this way—“God?” But that wasn’t really helpful. The German-American existential theologian Paul Tillich defined the word as “the ground of being.”*

*Once I wrote that no one can believe in everybody’s God. Certainly I do not believe in the God presented by fundamentalists of any religious persuasion. I think “God” is something beyond our ability to express completely. My good friend, the AIDS activist and author Paul Monette, called himself an atheist “by default.” He felt the angry old man in the sky...to be a false god created by bigots for the convenience of bigots. Paul told an audience once:*

*“The older I get the more I have come to realize that my atheism is a political stance against the religious fundamentalists. I think my position was needed and authentic, but there is more.”*

Brother Toby continued: *That “more” we are always searching for is probably the best definition of “God” there is. I think atheism is often an unwillingness to accept the shallow understandings of the divine. It is the beginning of the quest for the sacred, not the end of it. Each of us occupies a different place on that spectrum. It is a constantly evolving process for most of us.”*

Of course, a Father God is not an image that sits well with everybody. What if someone has grown up with a terrible father? Or perhaps simply never had a decent masculine influence in

their life? Can they simply jettison this ancient and traditional image? Of course they can, and they should if they must; but it is not inevitable that they need to.

Perhaps it might be possible for those of us who aren't comfortable with the idea of a Father God to come to accept that image as a substitute for the guidance and nurture and protection we did not receive, and a father whose heart will never forsake us.

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Imagine and describe to yourself attributes of a good father. What do you come up with? Loving. Compassionate. Caring. Accepting. Forgiving. Playful. Wise. Trustworthy. Affectionate, Nurturing, Protective, Kind.

And then there are the cultural values and skills we admire in a father: Presenting a good example of manhood and parenthood. Being good provider. Working to be a good co-parent, one who is thoughtful and consistent. A gentle and thoughtful disciplinarian. A cheerleader. One who sees his children as the apples of his eye and always wants the very best for them.

So, again, what makes a man good father? I think at a very basic level it means to have the heart of a father. Something, perhaps, instinctual or inherent that can be educated and encouraged to become an enhanced quality. A good father is not a perfect father, just as there are no perfect mothers, friends, or grandparents. But a good father is a father who has heart for the work, a heart with room to grow.

Take Brother Toby, who I just mentioned. He is someone I would label a good father, even though he has no biological children. Way back in the 1980's, in the early years of the AIDS crisis, Toby and two of his friends, Julie and Marty, decided to create a monastic religious community dedicated to providing a loving home to babies born with the AIDS virus. At that time, with no medical treatment yet found, that diagnosis was a death sentence. Toby, Julie and Marty, devout Catholics, gave up their "normal" lives and took in a small number of these babies and gave them lots of care and affection with the goal of improving their little lives until they died.

That alone would show that Brother Toby had the heart of a father, but God had a little surprise in store for him. In the old bad days of the AIDS crisis, one of the things we didn't know is that a newborn can test positive and then for some reason later be free of the virus. This was the case for three of Toby's children. Instead of being a baby hospice, Starcross became a family, with children to raise—not quite their original agenda—but they have managed, and managed very well, with a lot of hard work, patience, love and ingenuity. One of their sons is a concert violinist, and their daughter is married and has a family of her own.

God's gift of the heart of a father has stood Toby very well over the years, because not all of their babies survived. Recently, Toby remembered little Rebekah on her birthday. She only lived five months. She did not have AIDS but was born to Russian parents who were in Chernobyl during the nuclear disaster, and her disabilities were extreme. Her mother and father were already caring for critically ill parents, and could not cope. Toby, Julie and Marty were willing to take her into their home and hearts. It was a challenge. She was so tiny and fragile. Could they manage? Yes, indeed. Rebekah became a beautiful, chubby baby, despite being blind and deaf and unable to hold up her head. Her parents visited often, the other Starcross children adored her, and a group of male novices visiting from a nearby abbey found holding her one of the most profound experiences in their lives. Rebekah's life, Toby says, was short but full of

meaning—not just for those who held her, raised her and loved her—but for little Rebekah, too. Her five months of life were full of meaning, love and tenderness, because through God’s gift, Toby was able to take her into his heart, his loving father’s heart.

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A very interesting book review ran last Sunday in the New York Times. Daniel Jones, the editor of the “Modern Love” column in the Times, reviewed the book *First Dads: Parenting and Politics From George Washington to Barack Obama* by Joshua Kendall. Looking at the fathering skills of our 43 presidents—all of whom had children, either biologically or by adoption—is enlightening.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt—not one of our more exemplary presidential fathers—once remarked that “One of the worst things in the world is being the child of a president. It is a terrible life they lead.” That’s probably true, but it appears that some of our presidents tried harder than others to mitigate the terrible-ness of the experience.

Kendall breaks down the field of presidential fathers into six categories. The Preoccupied; The Playful Pals; The Double-Dealing Dads; The Tiger Dads; the Grief-Stricken; and The Nurturers. The preoccupied dads were our most work-obsessed chief executives; their children tended to be insecure and neglected. George H. W. Bush and his wife once farmed their four boys out to friends for four months, leading Jeb to later ruefully joke, “At least we weren’t put in a kennel.”

Having not yet read the book, I can guess where a few others would sit: John F. Kennedy probably would’ve been a Pal, playing with Jon-Jon at Martha’s Vineyard; John Adams was certainly a Tiger Dad, raising John Quincy to follow in his footsteps, and probably Thomas Jefferson was what you’d call a double-dealer.

As for the grief-stricken presidents, there were a good number of them in the days when it was very common for women to die young and children to not make it to the age of five. James Monroe, Zachary Taylor, Franklin Pierce—and of course Abraham Lincoln, who grieved both personal loss and the sorrow of the Civil War.

But Kendall also allows us to have a peek into the lives of nurturing dads like Barak Obama, who has insisted on sitting down to dinner with his family every night; and also a bit of mischief-making, such as the time Jimmy Carter’s son, Chip, smoked a joint on the White House roof—or for that matter, where, years earlier, Teddy Roosevelt’s daughter Alice puffed away on ordinary, but very unladylike, cigarettes.

All in all, reviewer Daniel Jones reminds us that even “the leader of the Free World” can struggle to be a good parent. He says that *First Dads* “provides a valuable reminder that while an American president may have the clout to launch spaceships and end world wars, that doesn’t mean he can get his children to behave, be happy, or even return his calls.” Parenthood, Jones says, is a “great, humbling equalizer.” And boy, is that the truth.

So let us now sing the praises of famous men, and even not-famous men, as Sirach points out; those good fathers, grandfathers, uncles, family friends—and yes, even some mothers—who have tried to do their very best to humanly attempt the qualities that they, and we, might attribute to a good and fatherly God. And let us pray also for the fathers, famous and obscure, ordinary and maybe even absent, who for whatever reason are *not* good fathers. May God grant them the heart of a father, and may we pity and educate and encourage them whenever possible.

Amen.

Jones, Daniel, "Fathers of Our Country: An assessment of all 43 presidents, as dads." The New York Times, Sunday, June 12, 2016. Page 14 of the Book Section. Review of *First Dads: Parenting and Politics From George Washington to Barack Obama* (Grand Central Publishing, 2016).

McCarroll, Brother Tolbert, on line from [Starcross Monastic Community@mail.vresp.com](mailto:Starcross_Monastic_Community@mail.vresp.com), "Remembering Rebekah." Essay for May 13, 2016.  
"On Sale Now: God Seeds." Essay for June 03, 2016.