

Training Wheels: Considering Father's Day

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The Summer I was five years old, my daddy decided it was time for me to learn to ride my heavy old light blue and slightly rusty bike - without training wheels. I helped him take them off, and it's such a visceral memory, I can still feel the cool metal in my fingers as we worked to liberate my old bike ... and me. I can still feel the slant of the evening's late Summer sun baking our little Southwestern Oklahoma town and see the shadows of the bell-tower of the church next to our house falling over the sidewalk down which I would make my first two-wheeled launch. The church was next door because we lived in the parsonage attached to it – because my daddy was the minister of the Altus, Oklahoma church of Christ. I don't remember feeling scared. At least not in that panicky kind of way – that was generally reserved for my mom – who was often scared for me. Actually, I remember feeling pretty sure I could do it. Partly because 5-year-olds don't really understand gravity all that well – but mainly because my daddy said I could.

So came the time to take off. Which I did. And crashed. And did again. And crashed again. And did again. And crashed again. And on it went. Until ...

I felt the breeze on my face as I got up some speed. Wow, Daddy must be running really fast now! Then I felt the center begin to hold as my body found the balancing point, it was exhilarating – and it was terrifying - “Daddy! Daddy!!” I shouted with all my might, “Daddy, don't let go!”

“Daddy!” Daddy!?”

Hearing no answer I turned to look behind me and of course you know how the story ends. From then on I could ride all by myself, and as is true for many, my bike became

my ticket to all kinds of freedom and adventure – including my very first job as a paper-girl, delivering the Muskogee Daily Phoenix house to house.

Lest you think this sounds all a bit too Norman Rockwell, let me assure you this story is quite true. And ... it is equally true that my father was as flawed and complex as any human being making their way through this world. He did some things really right. And some things really wrong. He had to work hard at learning to be a father because his own father had not done such a good job of it himself. As the Reverend Elizabeth Tarbox said in our earlier reading, “It is easy to thank our perfect father ... but we have a harder time knowing what to say to our imperfect father.” It becomes even more complicated when yours is a profound blend of both.

That Summer evening I was 5 was not the first time I was to shout “Don’t let go!” only to discover I was already learning to do something on my own – sometimes by choice and sometimes by necessity. I’ve been on my own awhile now, leaving Oklahoma just after college. And now Dad’s been gone awhile – 17 years. He died 6 months after I came out – and without ever talking with me about it. “Daddy, Don’t Let Go” I found myself pleading again – this time in my song, written on the way to release him into whatever comes after life on this earth. But his father energy in my life carries on. And not only in the memory of him, but also in the masculine nurturing energy that shows up in my life in other people. That energy that is at once an anchor in the storm and the wind at your back. That insists that you do better, try harder, reach higher – and hopefully forgives you when you miss the mark. That energy that helps make us who we are one way or another. For I am who I am as much for rebelling against my father as for embracing him.

I loved my father the classical composer and musician. So I studied opera - and became a folk-rocker. I loved my father the bookish artist who never threw a ball in his life. And so I became a varsity athlete - who read incessantly on the team bus traveling to games. I loved my father the gospel preacher. And now I preach things he’d have considered heresy in his time.

Or maybe not so much. My whole childhood we moved every couple of years or so after Daddy preached something too liberal and would be asked to recant or resign.

Now, keep in mind he was “too liberal” within the very specific context of fundamentalist evangelical Christianity in the buckle of the Bible belt.

So one particular recant-or-resign moment Daddy suggested that God doesn't really care what folks wear to church. And we moved. Another big one was letting my brothers grow their hair long – remember this was the 70's. And we moved. But the huge heresy my Dad reached later in life was the possibility that Grace might actually extend to more people than originally thought. Maybe even to all people. Now mind you he was Christian through and through, he knew and loved the Bible and could quote whole chapters if needed. Still his own spiritual journey and a deeper study of the Bible he'd been taught was infallible led him to the possibility that the definition of salvation might be broader than expected and heaven might be a bit more populated than anticipated. Even more, he concluded that the contentious jots-and-tittles that so many church folk love to divide themselves over really don't amount to much in the grander scheme of spiritual life. And this time we moved all the way across the state.

I can't be sure, but I wonder if that is when the seed of the Universalism I hold dear to my heart was actually planted by my fundamentalist-evangelical-gospel-preaching father. My father, the concert pianist who labored for a denomination that did not allow pianos in worship because the New Testament never mentions pianos. And when I, the musician daughter of the musician preacher, pointed out one Sunday school that the New Testament never mentions electricity and microphones either but we use *them* in worship ...? Well we didn't have to move that time, but it was dicey.

Here's what I'm getting to. First, father energy is necessary to our growth and development as human and spiritual beings. Some people get it from a biological father or an adoptive father or a step-father, whether good or not so good. Some people get it

from the leadership and example of other men in their communities of family, religion, school or the neighborhood.

It doesn't matter so much where we get it but *that* we get it.

The Universe creates and requires both feminine and masculine energy to work properly – the Yin and the Yang discerned by wise ones many centuries ago. Oh and by the way, dads are not the only ones who can teach a kid how to ride a bike; that's just *my* story.

You don't have to have a wonderful father to find wonderful father energy in your life.

The world is full of it. In men and in women. We *all* are a balance of those two energies – energies that *both* need to be fed for us to grow in spirit, in body, in truth – as the Universe always seeks to find the balance point, in us and through us.

And second, a father – whether physical or spiritual and no matter how good – can only get you so far.

At some point the training wheels have to come off.

At some point we each have to try and crash and try and crash and cry and crash and holler “don't let go!” even as we feel the exhilarating winds of individual freedom and responsibility in our faces.

Though somewhere inside we always wonder if we really are big enough to do this on our own, do this on our own we must. Because parents – however good or not - are only training wheels.

And so today let us reconcile the perfect and the imperfect fathers in our lives. If there can be healing with those who didn't do so well, let it be so. If there can be praise for

those who did better, let it be so. Let us recognize that father energy is both biological and spiritual – and our spiritual fathers often have more to do with who we are than biological ones.

To the fathers here in this room: Remember your sons and daughters really don't belong to you. Someday some way they must learn to get their own lives up on two wheels. You can help. You can hinder. But ultimately they must find their own way. You have to let go – even as they may wail “don't let go.”

Children – and someplace within each of us there remains our child self. If your Dad was a more perfect one, celebrate. If he wasn't, maybe it's your turn to let go.

Either way, we head down the sidewalk on the ride of our lives. Learning from examples good and bad. Becoming ourselves by embracing parts of what we're given, while resisting other parts. By watching and weighing – shaped as much by bearing witness to the things we never want to be as those things we strive to emulate.

At some point we leave the training wheels by the side of the road, find the balance point within ourselves - and carry on.

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This is my last Sunday with you till we all gather again at Summer's end. Services will continue throughout the Summer, nonetheless, and I understand there are some beautiful services in store, by you and for you. Planning for next year is already underway, and I could not be more inspired and eager to grow deeper and stronger together in this most remarkable Unitarian Universalist faith – in this most promising place, the River of Grass.

See you in September – till then, let us keep our faces to the sun, find the balance point, and dare to ride like the wind toward the next horizon. May it be so.