

## **NOSE BUBBLES AND ALL THAT...**

A Sermon For Father's Day

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I'd like to use the next 25 minutes or so to talk about fathers...and parenting...for it is Father's Day, when our thoughts naturally gravitate to the men whom we call Dad, Pop, or Father.

Let me begin with the obvious. Every last one of us had, or still has, a father...and the quality, tone, depth and nature of that primordial parental relationship can and does profoundly affect how we feel about ourselves over our lifetimes, and in many cases how well we do in our lives, careers and relationships. As I began to prepare this sermon, and realized the enormity and complexity and emotional intensity of this topic, I decided to ask by e-mail and phone a more or less random sample of members and friends of the congregation for their thoughts and feelings on this universal and emotional topic. What amazed me was the uniform intensity of their interest; almost everybody wanted to talk to me about this topic, about their relationship with their own fathers, and how they have experienced fatherhood – either, in the case of the males who are fathers themselves, as a giver or, in the case of both men and women, a receiver of that parental relationship.

I suspect that as I talk to you this morning, almost everybody in this room will in some way or another emotionally wander off to that personal (and possibly intense) interior place where they are with their own fathers and with their own experience with fatherhood. I trust and, indeed, pray that for the majority of you in this room these wanderings will for the most part be nostalgic, wistful, loving and pleasant. But I also sadly know that for others of you – especially those of you who experienced abuse, violence, indifference, abandonment or neglect in your own relationship with your father – these reflective wanderings may be painful, difficult, angry or sad. It feels important for me to say out loud this Father's Day the obvious: many of us have ambivalent or, in some cases, downright negative feelings and memories about our own fathers. That said, it is my sincere hope that our time this morning reflecting together on fatherhood and the broader art of parenting will, in various ways, be helpful and healing to us all.

I myself this morning want to begin with the personal by talking about my own father, and then move on to what I hope will be the universal – talking about the mysterious skills of fathering and parenting. As I began to prepare this sermon, I realized – with no small measure of wistfulness and emotion – that this month marks the twenty-ninth anniversary of my own dear father's sudden death to a heart attack. Let me tell you little bit about my dad, Wendell W. Alexander.

He was, as they say, something of a character. Every day he went off to work (he sold steel for a regional steel distributor), wearing an elegant bow tie – this morning, in fact, I am wearing one of those high-quality ties which was bequeathed to me. Alex, as he was known, was a gentle and nurturing man who loved to have irreverent fun in life. For example, as far as I know, he is the only man in all of human history to have a jewelry box collection of nose bubbles.

Now what in God's name are nose bubbles?, you might well ask. Well, nose bubbles are little hand blown glass things (I am holding one of mine in my hand right now) which, when inserted in one side of the nose or the other, are meant to look like (there is no real polite way to say this!) a big bubble of runny nose goo. My father – in conspiracy with my Uncle Lloyd, the MIT engineer who actually made these things by hand blowing the glass – would bring them to formal dinners, cocktail parties and other human gatherings, and then, taking a handkerchief

like this one, fake a sneeze, and surreptitiously insert one, and say to the person next to him, “Oh, dear... these allergies are really getting to me.” Let me take a moment to show you what this actually looks like up close

Now...the victim of this childish prank of my father, of course, would always look in horrified shock and disbelief, and then my father would, of course, wait with nose bubble and all that for the person to figure out they had been had by this trickster. My father had nine or ten of these things, which were labeled in the jewelry box with little notes about when each was appropriate. He had one called the “double dipper,” with two drops of goop, which was described as perfect for the spring allergy season. He had another called the “Nor’easter,” which needed to be inserted into the nose slanting (of course) to the Southeast, and was best for yachting gatherings...and so on. Whenever I think of my father, I think of his nose bubbles...and all the other ways he had such irreverent fun in life.

Dad was a kind and friendly man who regularly used humor as a way to put people at ease, and validate their worth as persons. The night my eldest brother George brought his very self-conscious, 19-year-old fiancée Sandy to meet the entire family (we were four boys and parents), we were all seated around a very long and very elegantly set dining room table, silver candelabras and all. Much to her horror, the fiancée (who was full of fear that she wouldn’t make a good impression on my large and successful family) somehow managed, while trying to cut it, to plop her roast beef, covered with gooey gravy, right onto the fine white tablecloth.

An awkward silence fell over the table, and she was obviously about to cry when, without missing a beat, Dad plunged his fork firmly into the big slab of beef on his plate and said, “That’s OK, Sandy, we Alexanders always throw our meat around on formal occasions.” And with that he launched his beef, spewing gravy the whole way, down the long table toward my mother. As the beef splat on the table, we all howled with delight at my father’s sweet antic, and the evening went merrily on, with all the tension gone. Years later, at my father’s memorial service, Sandy – now a beloved family member and daughter-in-law – wept as she told this story about Dad’s gracious and lighthearted ways...and gave heartfelt voice to her deep appreciation for all the many ways over the years he had made her feel loved, valued, worthy and respected as a person.

And this is really all that I want to tell you about my father. Wendell Alexander (“My Old Man”) was a good father, gentle, kind and honorable, because what my sister-in-law Sandy received that “night of the flying beef” was precisely the self-affirming message each one of his four sons got loud and clear as we were growing up. Because of the way Dad routinely attended and related to us, we knew deep to our boy bones we were loved and valued, and seen as capable and worthy people of whom he was proud. To use Unitarian Universalist language...my father quietly, steadily – and often with teasing humor – affirmed my inherent worth and dignity as a person. Through his routine-and-often-unostentatious encouragement, interest and support, Dad blessed me with the self-confidence and the self-worth that has empowered me to live the kind of happy and productive life with which I have been blessed. And this, I think, is the essence, the heart and soul, of all good fathering...indeed of all good parenting, whether it comes from a mother or a father...it’s something more than just vaguely “loving” our kids. It’s the discipline – the spiritual and emotional discipline – to take the time and effort over years and years of attentive parenting to let them know we respect them, value them, and are proud of them as individuals.

If we “parent” attentively and right – a relational art which can be accomplished, I would point out, by parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, even mentors, teachers and friends of the

family – I believe it is almost assured that our kids will develop strong self-worth and self-esteem, invaluable possessions for adult living.

In his wonderful book, *FatherLoss: How Sons of All Ages Come to Terms With the Deaths of Their Dads*, Unitarian Universalist author Neil Chethik pretty much makes the same point. After interviewing nearly 400 men at various stages of life about what they most wanted from their dads, he concluded that the blessing which sons almost universally await to hear from their fathers – at every stage of life, either with spoken words or actions – is simply this: “Son, I am proud of you...I am proud of the choices you have made...I am proud of the life you’ve created.” At the very end of his book, Neil offers this advice to young dads about how to be a good father to their sons: “*Give your son your focus. Not to the exclusion of your spouse or daughter, but find a way to meet your son. Read with him, run with him, wrestle with him, find reasons to admire him, and every so often, no matter his age, offer him the gift that can only come from you: tell him how proud you are to be his dad.*” And then Neil quotes his own six-year-old son Evan, who offered this about what makes a good father. “*A good dad,*” six-year-old Evan said, *‘plays with you, he takes care of you, he reads you books’...[and then after pausing for a moment he added one more trait], ‘and he waves to you before he goes away.’*”

After reading *FatherLoss*, and thinking about my own father, and the many other dads that I have known, I have come up with a short list of things that seem to me to make up the essence of good fathering. But before I offer you my list, I need to address a really big question – namely, in today’s modern society, where gender roles and behavior for boys and girls, men and women are increasingly blending and merging in new, liberated, flexible patterns, are there any useful distinctions still to be drawn between “good fathering” and “good mothering”? Said differently, can every trait that we identify as making for a “good father” also be said to identify a “good mother”?

Let me give just one example. Here in Indian River County, you are as likely to see a dad refereeing or coaching or cheering at his daughter’s soccer game as his son’s – or, for that matter, you should not be surprised to see a single mom coaching or cheering on the sidelines for her son. Back in the 1940s and ‘50s when gender stereotypes and roles were much more clearly delineated – girls play at home with their mothers with dolls, boys get out on the playing fields with dad – it used to be that one way dads uniquely affirmed their boys was by participating with them in sports. But now sports in America are pretty much a gender inclusive activity with both moms and dads participating in both boys and girls leagues. And so it is with ballet lessons, mathematics clubs, or horseback riding – to name just a few things both boys and girls naturally do these days.

While there are still, to be sure, some things that distinguish “fathering” from “mothering” – let me again give just one example. Fathers certainly model for their sons (and mothers certainly model for their daughters) how to relate to the opposite sex – so while there are still, to be sure, some gender-bound dynamics and nuanced needs that distinguish “fathering” from “mothering,” I would nonetheless argue that, at their essential spiritual and emotional cores, “good fathering” and “good mothering” are more or less one and the same today...and are moving closer to one another with each passing generation. With that said (and we can talk more later about how the distinct roles of “fathering” and “mothering” with boys and girls) let me offer my short list on this Father’s Day of the traits I think lead to good “fathering.” But all you mothers out there, don’t tune out, because again I think that every one of these traits also could also define good “mothering,” which is to say “good parenting,” period.

All right, here is my short list.

First, good fathers offer their children affection.

Affection, I think, is different and more concrete than love, which is often defined so vaguely that it is almost rendered meaningless. Affection, on the other hand, is a gentle kind of attentive and respectful caring. First, of course, there is physical affection. Every child (of course) needs and craves physical affection and attention from their father. Now dads may respectively offer different forms of physical affection to their daughters than their sons. A dad might snuggle in bed reading a book to his daughter or kiss her good night every day, while with a son he might toss the boy in the air or carry him piggyback or wrestle with him on the floor. But the point is kids need to feel the physical touch and direct connection from their fathers. And there are other, non-physical ways a father can and should express affection. As Neil Chethik puts it, *“Ultimately, affection is less about physicality than about a father’s loving attention toward his son...Some fathers show affection by simply talking with, and listening to their sons, [or engaging in] intellectual interplay [like playing chess or doing a crossword puzzle together, or by] taking an active interest in a [child’s] education or other endeavors.”* So good fathers are always affectionate.

Secondly, good fathers also offer their children presence.

Good fathers are, of course, physically around (they spend real, significant, “face time” time with their kids) and (of perhaps even greater importance) are emotionally available. Neil Chethik reports from his interviews with hundreds of sons, *“Second only to the physically abusive father – and more on the tragedy of abusive fathers in a moment – second only to the physically abusive father in generating resentment...was the faraway father, the distant dad, the uninvolved or unavailable patriarch. Whether [such a] father meant it or not, the message to the son was clear: you don’t matter.”* So good fathers – you all know this intuitively – good fathers (and mothers for that matter) are patiently present with their children...they must take the time and truly engage their sons emotionally. It’s that pure and it’s that simple.

Thirdly, good fathers offer their children protection.

Good fathers look out for their vulnerable children. They keep an eye on things... and warn their children of dangers. They strap their kids into car seats...they teach them how to safely cross streets, ride a bicycle and drive a car...and, of course, should the need ever arise, a good father puts himself directly between his child and any physical danger. Again, Neil Chethik: *“Sons told me they wanted their fathers to be strong, but to use that strength as a buffer against danger, a shield against the bad guys, ghosts and other demons. One son spoke for many when he told me, ‘I wanted to be with my dad. I felt safe around him. I knew he would take care of me.’”*

As I think back on my childhood, one of the most precious aspects of it was that I always felt safe, and my dad’s attentive eye was a huge part of that. And there is one more crucial aspect to this protection good fathers offer, good fathers protect their children against their own physical strength. As Chethik puts it, *“Because we fathers tower over our sons, we must use our power judiciously...I heard numerous stories [in my interviews] of paternal violence [that led sons to have deep wounds and angers].”* Good fathers don’t hit...they don’t hit with fists...and they don’t hit with words...they don’t hit with indifference and neglect...good fathers are protectors...not assaulters and abusers.

Lastly, good fathers offer their children – and this is where, you will remember, I began this sermon – good fathers offer their children respect.

When I asked my colleague Jim Nelson (who serves our healthy church in Pasadena, California) what was the one thing his now “20-something” daughters wanted from him, their father, he said, *“Scott, both my girls want the same thing, they want my respect...they want to know that I believe in them, and see them as good and competent people...they want to see in my eyes how proud I am of them...and that I believe they are maturing and living up well.”* Again, let me say it...of course we all know that we must “love” our kids – hopefully in an unconditional and reliable way...and more on that in just a moment. But more than that vague moniker, we must let our kids know that we respect them, that we are proud of them, that we know they are good and competent and worthy people.

And lastly, I believe all sons and daughters need the unconditional love of their fathers.

Now, admittedly, this can be the most difficult of all the fundamentals of good parenting that I have lifted up today. To love a child unconditionally – I think – is the parental promise that even through incidents of disappointment, heartbreak, betrayal or folly, which certainly happen in families and other human relationships, you will never totally abandon or reject the loved one, no matter how deeply you have been hurt or disappointed. While as a parent you may feel you have to – for a time at least – withhold approval, support, contact or communication with a son or daughter who has lost the way, unconditional love means that you always preserve a core love and connection for and with them, and that, no matter how deep or intractable the problem, you will never entirely abandon or reject them as human beings.

Unconditional love can, at times, be an almost impossible order, especially when a child acts in ways that severely hurt or damage you or others. But over a lifetime, this, I believe, is what good parenting demands. All good fathers (and mothers, for that matter) “spiritually hang in there” with their kids, even when their lives seem to “go off the rail,” holding out hope that someday reconciliation and health and joy can return to the relationship. Over the course of my ministry, I have repeatedly seen fathers – even many who have become even bitterly estranged from their children – achieve a reconciliation. Even after years of disappointment and hurt, they come once again into healthy and joyful relationship with children who have gone through painful difficulties. Unconditional love can be a very hard path to follow, but life – for both parents and children – is too short for anything else.

So...there you have my personal short list of what, at its essence, good fathering (which is to also say what good mothering or good parenting) is all about. But there is a problem in all of this, of course, and that problem is that none of our parents were capable of doing all this perfectly. And of those of you who are yourselves today parents, or grandparents for that matter, the same thing can and must be said. None of us is capable of doing all this perfectly.

I imagine that more than a few of you this morning were remembering your own father...your own relationship with your own dad...and that more than a few of you also found those relationships in some way or another wanting...possibly in some cases painfully so. Many of you may be ambivalent in your feelings about your dad – or, even worse – downright angry. It is, of course, perfectly all right for you to have such feelings if you believe your parents substantially and unnecessarily failed or wounded you.

But there is nonetheless something else to say. Surely all of you have noticed in our society lately that parents get blamed for almost everything that goes wrong or bad in their offspring. It has gone so far that in some states – never mind in the court of public opinion – parents can be fined or otherwise punished by the criminal courts for the misdeeds of their children! I am not saying that holding parents accountable for severely damaged or destructive children is entirely

wrong, but I am saying that we are pretty tough on less-than-perfect parents, and that is often not entirely fair, reasonable or healthy. That said (that maybe we should give less-than-perfect parents a bit of a break), I am aware that many of you in this room right now did suffer severely at the hands of your parents...some suffered some degree of physical or emotional abuse ...some suffered some degree of neglect or indifference...some were abandoned or disregarded...and some were simply not respected, honored or valued as every child should be.

While I don't want to let really bad parents off the hook – indeed, this whole sermon is all about insistently reminding us how terribly important good and attentive and respectful parenting is – I would also remind those of you with varying degrees of resentment that no parent is perfect, and that most parents in one way or another do about the best they can. And I would also suggest to you that – in most cases...not all, but most cases – it is never too late, as Ann Landers and other well-meaning advice columnists regularly affirm, to begin repairing a parent/child relationship that has been torn asunder by old abuse, hurts, neglects or wounds. Such work of forgiveness, reconciliation and rebuilding trust and respect can be some of the hardest work in the world...but for those of you with less-than-perfect relationships with your parents or your own children, I urge it on you nonetheless. I urge it on you because I am spiritually convinced that we were intended – in this fleeting life of ours on this all-too-fragile planet – to be in close and right and caring relationship with our parents and children, even when we have been deeply and unfairly wounded.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, it has been almost thirty twenty years since my father – my good and loving and attentive and silly father – had a massive heart attack in the middle of the night and died. I still occasionally have dreams where, somehow, he has miraculously come back to life, and in the dream my mother and brothers and I are overcome with emotion at our luck of being able to share life again with him. But he is, of course, quite and irretrievably dead, never to return as a physical presence in my life. Yet my father, as all of your fathers, nonetheless powerfully remains with me. He remains with me as a constant and blessed spiritual and emotional presence that steadies my course and validates my humanness. I have my own cherished nose bubbles in a jewelry box at home...and bow ties in my closet which I treasure...but more than these things I have the legacy of the pride he took in having me as one of his sons...and the respect and affection he regularly showed to me. Good fathering is the greatest, most lasting gift any man can give to his children.

It is, most of the time, a simple, everyday gift...the gift of routine affection...of regular presence ...of steady protection...of enduring respect and of undying unconditional love. To all you dads out there today, let me simply and lovingly say, “do the best you can, guys, be there right and regularly for your kids.” And to my own father, Wendell Wells Alexander (Alex, for short), let me whisper what I probably didn't say enough...”I love you, Dad...I love you forever.”

Amen.