

“What My Father Taught Me”

A Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones; June 17, 2007

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

“A letter from a son to his father on the beginning of a new job at age old”

Age old, Old Man...
Yet young, you move beyond your years
To light another road.

Our sky hangs down around
You, thick with laughter and with tears.
Still on you go.

My awe builds dikes
Around me; they will hold my fears
Below the sight of you.

You are old, yet young beyond me.

The pounding of
Your stride across the fields of doubt
Resounds, and I am dumb.

I turn to see great fields
Of crimson dahlias, whose doubting flags
Flout all alike.

Behind my dikes
Of awe I stir, then try my path
Across the crimson fields,

And know now you are young beyond my years.

No one can know
The fields of doubt another treads,
But know that fields they are.

As dahlias bend
Beneath my step, their doubting heads
Spring back where'er I walk.

And out beyond my depth
Your figure solitary threads
Its way, Old Man.

Old Man, you are young beyond me.

--To my father, Robert T. Weston, by Dick Weston-Jones

The most significant thing my father taught me he didn't even know he taught me, or if he knew it, he never said it to me. It was "don't be fooled by what you say yourself, into believing that that is what you teach most profoundly. You teach by who and what you are, not by what you say."

I think he knew that. He just never said it in so many words. What he taught me by "what he was" is still alive in the way I act. I bet that's true with your father and you too. You fathers—take heed: that's how you teach your children. You teach them by who and what you are to them.

My father was what UU poet Ric Masten calls "a professional nice person." I'm paid to be that too, though sometimes I think my "niceness" quotient is deficient. Ministers who survive the ministry get the sharp edges of their personalities knocked off in their work with people. We're like river stones that get tumbled so much as we pass among people that we become smooth and round and polished. Unfortunately the sharp edges in people's personalities may be what makes them the most interesting.

As my father became an old man, the sharp edges in his personality came out again. He became feisty and sometimes acted curmudgeonly. Sometimes I wished the "professional nice person" would come back. When he was very elderly he lived in a nursing home. He wouldn't stay in his bed and it became dangerous for him to go stumbling about. It took six nurse's aides to strap him into the bed one night as he thrashed out at them. I think it was his medication more than my dad that was fighting. But still! "That old guy has a wicked upper cut punch" one said to me.

As I sat with him the next day I wondered if that was how I would be if I had to live in a nursing home. He had calmed down. He remembered the fight but not what it was about. I looked at him and thought about the genes that ran through him into me with some more from my mom. People often told us we sounded alike. Maybe my upper cut would be like his too.

I sometimes try to find out who I am by thinking of my father at my age. In 1970, when he was my age, he was starting a new ministry just as I have done. All this stuff I feel now he must have felt then. What am I doing? What am I seeing clearly? What am I denying in my life? Where am I going? What he did then taught me a lot about who I am becoming.

Seven years earlier when he was 65, the age most Americans think of as the age to retire, I accepted my first ministerial position, one that would prove difficult with feisty folk who didn't like the ministers they had known before. They chose me to try it out for their own congregation. I was sure I had the right stuff to be a good minister. Didn't I have my father's genes?

I asked him to deliver my ordination sermon. He took me aside and began to teach me more about ministry. "Dick," he said, "you've graduated and you're about to start your profession. But you haven't lived much yet and you don't really have much to say or know how to say it." He wasn't at all subtle. Then came the uppercut. "I'm going to give you a pile of my sermons and you can preach them until you learn how for yourself."

I was stunned by his arrogance. I declined. I didn't know then that he might be right. I had little to say but that damned church was going to listen to me whether they liked it or not. A bunch of them didn't like it much. I only stayed three rocky years and I wasn't a polished pebble when I left.

As I started my second year there my dad accepted a call to a new church himself. He was 66 years old, just getting going. He was leaving his church because some long-term members didn't like what he said either. I didn't offer to loan him any of my sermons. They wouldn't have done him any good, but I did write the poem to him that I read at the start of our service, "A letter from a son to his father on the beginning of a new job at age old."

He didn't much like it. "I'm not old," he said. "Where do you get off calling me old?" He didn't retire from ministry until he was approaching his eighties. He still didn't think he was old. "Old is a choice," he said and he chose not to be it.

I'm still a kid myself. I think he was right. Don't ever grow old. You have to let the body get old, but don't ever get old inside. He taught me that by whom he was even more than by what he said.

Many years earlier my father taught me another lesson. Again he taught me by whom he was rather than by preaching wise words. It was to love your children. Love them no matter who they are and what they do. Be there with them. Touch them a lot. Make sure they know you love them.

I had a tough time in college, especially in my sophomore year. My father saved me from it. Here's how I saw it in the conclusion of a long poem I wrote titled "A Myth of My Childhood."

Winters follow summers
 (or is it reverse?)
 and sometimes
 none may come at all
 or one may come
 and not be chased
 and stay through
 spring or fall.

The winter of my college year,
 the second,
 came early.
 Its chilly breezes
 sent the leaves of my mind
 scattering, blowing wild
 through the countryside.
 When I reached out to gather them in
 I found they were gone
 and I was left standing naked
 'til the warmth of spring would come to me.

I drew in tight,
 unable to move,
 to do more than
 hold up the frost
 that the early winter
 had set upon my limbs.

In that place I waited.
 Nothing happened.
 Two months went by.
 My birthday came
 to be routed by Christmas
 and one final month of school.
 I was still locked,
 held tight by my winter
 with no way to open my world.

One night
 as I sat in my room,
 my father came in and
 sat down beside me.
 He loosened my freeze with his clumsy words:
 “You know how important you are
 to your mother and me,” he said,
 “and how sad we are with your—
 whatever it is that is happening to you.”

But the words
 didn't do it.
 It was tears falling, his.
 I had never seen them before.
 They broke my freeze.

He became my father fully
 that moment
 and I,
 no longer his boy,
 was released
 to become
 my own man.

That was my last night
 of childhood.
 The thaw set in
 by his warm tears
 set me loose
 from the winter
 in which I was freezing.

It was reaching and
 touching and
 holding and
 knowing
 Him
 finally come home
 from the war
 as my father, and
 not just a “preach”
 any more.

An autobiographical note: My mother and I spent much of the Second World War homeless after my father resigned from his church to enter the Navy as a chaplain. We had to move out of the parsonage his church had provided for us because the new minister's family needed it. Mom and I traveled about, living with former members of churches my dad had served.

Ten years later in college I had five “F's” going into that moment with my father. A month later, after a whirlwind finish of the semester, I got my final grades, four “A's” and one “F.” My one “F” was the only one I ever got. It was in Creative Writing. I had writer's cramp and simply turned in no writing.

Love your children. Love them whoever they are and whatever they do. Be there with them. Make sure they know. My dad taught me that. It's not just for the short run. Loving lasts better than anything.

The "Harvard Men's Health Watch," (June, 1998) a health newsletter reported that research they'd been conducting since 1954 (the year I nearly flunked out) shows there is a link between "parental love in childhood and health in adulthood." They followed a group of undergraduates they had then, and compared their health 35 years later with the students' self-reporting in 1954 of how their parents treated them in childhood.

They were all men but I bet it's true with women too. They asked the young men to rate their parents on "six positive aspects of parental caring (loving, just, fair, strong, clever and hard-working) and eight negative aspects (severe, stingy, brutal, mean, nervous, poor, punished frequently and drunk)." How'd you like your young adult kids to rate you? It's a little scary.

Later, when the men were in their mid-50's they compared each man's original perception of his parents with the status of his health in middle age. They said "the results were striking."

"Only 25 percent of the men who rated their parents as loving and caring had developed a major medical illness, but 87 percent of those who rated their parents as uncaring had experienced at least one problem: coronary artery disease, hypertension, duodenal ulcers, and alcoholism were the most common. The impact of parental caring was not explained by other variables such as a family history of illness, the death of a parent, parental divorce, or the subjects' own smoking habits or marital experience."

My dad was always loving. He never used that uppercut on me. I think I have him and mom to thank for the 63 years I went before I had a major medical problem, my colon cancer. (They cut it out and I'm called cured.) Cancer is not one of the diseases connected to parental loving in childhood.

If I'm wrong, and if the research is disproved, and if your kids are ornery and difficult to get along with as they grow up? Love 'em anyway, even when it looks like there'll be no pay off. You never know, until it's too late to rework their childhoods. Make sure they know, even in the depths of your doubts. Maybe that's all you'll get, doubts, and it's got to be enough.

As Phyllis McGinley said in a poem:

Ah! Snug lie those who slumber
Beneath conviction's roof.
Their floors are sturdy lumber,
Their windows weatherproof.

But I sleep cold forever
And cold sleep all my kind,
For I was born to shiver
In the draft of an open mind.

My father taught me that too, not by what he said though he did say "Cherish Your Doubts," but he taught me that best by who and what he was. And he taught me never to grow old. By god, I'm glad for that.

Best of all he taught me to love my children. It goes better that way. But I'm still practicing my uppercut for when I get to that nursing home and they tie me down.