

A Theology of Parenting

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Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

At First Church we begin every child dedication with this reading. When it came time for my own son to be dedicated here I did not look for something else, something more scriptural, unusual, exotic, meaningful. There isn't anything more important for a parent to know than "Your children are not your children." Those of us who are parents, or who serve in parenting roles (whether grandparents, siblings, teachers, or friends), will spend a lifetime learning this lesson, again and again, sometimes in great excitement and joy, sometimes in great fear and sorrow. As parents and individuals, we will be remade in this journey.

My dictionary defines theology as "a rational interpretation of religious faith, practice and experience." More directly "theology" can be translated from the Greek as "God speech, word, or reason." I think of theology as "God talk," with a broad definition of "God."

A theology of parenting focuses on what is sacred, transformative, immanent (present) and transcendent about parental work. A theology of parenting raises religious and ethical questions; what is of ultimate meaning in this work? Why do this work? Is parenting, for example, a blessing, a sacrifice, or both? How do we know we have done well? Our answers to these questions shape how we parent, how we understand and accept ourselves as parents, how we raise families, and hence, shape society.

Parenting is about hope and fear, work (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual), relationships (including partnerships), family building (or surviving) and personal revelation. Parenting illuminates unexpected, hidden, and uncontrollable thoughts and feelings. It is impossible to parent without being awakened to ourselves, our families of origin, and to others.

The work of parenting explores the delicate balance of parental and children's needs and rights. It brings individuals and communities into connection, conflict, and change. What interests me most though about parenting, is the long journey, and where it takes us on our search for ultimate meaning. What does it mean to be a parent?

In preparation for this sermon I asked many of you to write me your thoughts about parenting. Thank you to everyone who responded. Your comments were extraordinary. Many of you sent me your thoughts beginning with an apology "I don't really have anything to say" or "This might be just my opinion so don't take it too seriously . . ." The apologies interested me. We seem to worry about the validity of our experiences, especially if we aren't sure how we did (or are doing).

Others of you wrote with great enthusiasm using phrases like "It was just the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to me," or "parenting is a privilege and an honor," or

"something I'll always remember is the "high" I got each time I held those little guys in my arms for the first time!" or "Parenting a child is the most important, awesome, and most challenging and fulfilling job anyone will ever have. And the happiness that comes with it is sometimes overwhelming." Most of the enthusiastic responses came from either parents of infants, or parents whose children were grown and independent. Those of you living with children, or helping grown children seemed to have more complex responses (living together in close quarters probably brings the daily challenges closer).

Most of you, though, were somewhere in between, remembering good times, but confused about outcomes, or relieved by "outcomes" yet troubled by the pain or confusion of the journey. I hope you hear what I am saying. All too often we think there is some "perfect" family out there, that someone else has it. Yet almost everyone who wrote, no matter how enthusiastic, also shared their questions and struggles (people you would think are "perfect").

Almost every note I received was filled with profound sincerity and humility, which left me with the conclusion that parenting is a campaign of shock and awe that forces most people to be "real." Your response also said a lot about the transformation of parenting, generally through shocking experiences (internal or external). (Transformation not equated with peace - but a deepening of human experience).

In the 2003 film, *Lost in Translation*, there is a scene when Bob (played by Bill Murray) shares with Charlotte (played by Scarlett Johansson) his experience as a father

Bob: "It's the most terrifying day of your life the day the first one is born."

Charlotte: "Nobody ever tells you that."

Bob: "Your life as you know it *is gone*. Never to return. But they learn how to walk and they learn how to talk and you want to be with them. And they turn out to be the most delightful people you will ever meet in your life."

Bob's comments note both shock and transformation. And I don't think it is a coincidence that Bob is crying by the time he is done speaking. Several of you wrote to me about the shock of parenting, both in relationship with others, and as individuals. One person said, "Ever since we had our daughter, paradoxically, I feel as though I've suffered a head injury - yet, I feel more aware than ever before." Another person wrote "My husband and I agree the best description of parenting comes from the comic who said that raising children was like having a bowling alley in your mind."

Related to relationships and parenting, a recent study in the August 2003 *Journal of Marriage and Family* notes that couples married with children report 10% less marital satisfaction than childfree couples.¹ As Bob says "It's the most terrifying day of your life the day the first one is born." There aren't many individuals or couples prepared for terror, and just the addition of one beautiful, innocent family member is a big change.

A recent article entitled "What Motherhood Does To (and For) You: The Good, the Bad, The Surprising" gently compares the addition of the first baby with a three way relationship.

A decade ago we used to watch this call-in show on MTV about sex. Almost each week, someone would phone in for advice regarding a ménage a trois . . . And without fail Dr. Drew, the show's therapist, would strongly advise against participating in a threesome. Once you bring another person into a relationship, the doctor would explain (again), things just aren't the same. Strip away the amateur porn overtones, substitute "floppy-headed newborn" for "hot co-worker at the strip club" and we'd have to agree with Dr.

¹ Stephanie Wilkinson and Jennifer Niesslein, "What Motherhood Does To and For You: The Good, The Bad, and the Surprising" in *Brain, Child: The Magazine for Thinking Mothers* (Spring 2004), 46.

Drew's statement. After we become mothers [or fathers], any given relationship may be better or worse, but it's not ever the same.²

I found great humor in a recent "Ketchup Advisory Board" commercial on Garrison Keillor's radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion*. Once again Barb and Jim, the couple good-naturedly featured on the "Ketchup Advisory Board" ads were struggling with challenges in their lives. On a second honeymoon they reminisce about their younger, free-spirited ways. Barb says, "Oh Jim, what happened to us?" Jim replies, "We had kids and they sucked the life out of us. Eighteen years of sleep deprivation and paranoia." Is it terrifying forever? No (although there can be worrisome patches). Is it the end of every partnership? No? But does it challenge and change every individual and couple? Well of course, "Yes."

In her book *The Shelter of Each Other*, author and Unitarian Universalist, Mary Pipher writes

In our rapidly changing world, people who stay married for fifty years really have multiple marriages to the same mate. They have a romantic relationship, a child-rearing relationship, and later one in companionship and care taking. One marriage ceremony at the beginning is not enough to hold such a marriage in place. Couples need new ceremonies and rites of passage, second honeymoons [like Barb and Jim] and even third and fourth ones. It's good to renew vows and write new vows every few years.³

Parenthood not only challenges couples, it also challenges individuals. Many of you wrote to me about the influence parenting has on our inner lives (why theologians have ignored this vast terrain for years, I can't imagine). One parent wrote, "What has been most profound to me is that I have finally reached the ultimate testing ground for the personal and spiritual work I have undergone." Another member wrote, "Parenting turned my ideas of strength and weakness upside down. It exposed me to areas I wished I hadn't been exposed and I don't know that I am better for that awareness."

Some of the funniest comments I received were the "one-liners" describing parent-child relationships, but more importantly, offering self-revelation: "I used to want my kids to be independent. Now I want them to be independent as adults." Another member came up to me and said, "I have only one thing to say: My desire to parent my adult children far outstrips their desire to be parented." Ultimately parenting draws us very close to the mirror of ourselves. We see our needs for control and respect. We see our guilt, vulnerability, self-doubt, and fear. One of our members who is not a parent, but who has gladly served in a parenting role wrote with some courage about something many of us are afraid to say

I find it frightening how much my sister looks up to me because I know I will disappoint her at some point . . . The thing I hate most about this relationship with my siblings is the guilt I feel that I will never be able to do enough for them. I cannot give them everything they need or deserve. I can never spend as much time with them as I would like. I can't protect them from everything, or anything really. Parenting seems to be this strange phenomenon where the parent has so much influence over how this life will be, and at the same time so very little control.

One of the most poignant responses I received was from a member who made the courageous choice to face internal pain about her mother in order to be a better parent. She wrote

²Wilkinson, 44.

³ Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding our Families* (1996), 237.

It was all great until my youngest child was six and things were very stressful. My spouse and I were both working. I was finishing a degree. It was a kind of crossroads. There was one night when I heard the kind of words come out of my mouth that my mom had said to me that I had sworn I would never say, and I scared myself thinking that I could be becoming my mother. I started therapy to make sure that that didn't happen and in sorting through the past went into a pretty serious depression. I realized that I had probably been coping with depression since my late teens or earlier and had to work really hard this time to get out of the deep depression. Medication helped, so did knowing I was doing a pretty good job of being a mom.

I have only been a parent for two and a half years, and I have already had the experience of thinking "I just parented like my parents, and in a way that I never want to do again." This is one of the most shocking, universal, and transformative experiences of parenting. It feels like the pits, and it can be the pits for everyone if we continue. In addition, if we came from abusive households, raising children will evoke a host of choices and ghostly memories about our own childhoods. It is inescapable.

However, these moments can also be a new beginning, exploring our past, naming our truth, finding our chosen (instead of reflexive) self, even healing, and growth. Parents in this situation, please don't confuse the difficulty and pain with a lack of potential. Sometimes the greatest transformations take the hardest work and the most courage, but they can lead to reconciliation and release.

As the great Hindu scripture, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, reminds us, the greatest battlefield is the one taking place within each of us. Our commitment to our children can be the one thing to give us the courage and strength to make painful, awkward changes, as well as sift through troubling childhood memories. Parenting can change us for the better, if we make the choice to let go, and let the change inside.

Parents wrote to tell me that their children also made them more authentic, helped them figure out what really matters, helped them laugh, gave them the ability to stand up to people, made them more empathetic, more patient, encouraged them to focus on the present, and taught them to see through the eyes of another person. One father wrote to me about watching the suffering of Iraqi children on the television. He wrote

I imagined that one of those children was my son. I experienced such a swelling of emotion: empathy, anger, fear, rage. A tear rolled down my face . . . I am hard pressed to explain why I feel so much more empathy about these kinds of things now - but I am glad for it.

Our world desperately needs this kind of connection. Another parent wrote to me

I can't remember who said it, but it is as if in giving birth [broaden to give birth, adopt, care for children] something in you opens and never quite closes and that this opening gathers in the sorrows and concerns of children everywhere . . . it's one of the most beautiful pieces of this chosen path.

Over the years I have ministered to many parents who feel adrift in the face of a child's needs. Sometimes this is particularly painful for parents who care for other people's children, teachers, nurses, doctors, therapists, clergy, and don't know how to help their own children, or missed the subtle early warning signs that their children needed help. It just happens, not because we failed, or don't care, but because we are human. I loved this insight from Mary Pipher "I

would never argue that families are great, only human."⁴ Likewise, I would never argue that parents are great, only human, and able, with courage, to open up to the joys and sorrows of their own children and children everywhere.

One parent wrote to me about a time when her son was in need

[Although a professional in the field] I had nothing to offer him professionally. All I could do was be with him, for hours on end, while we weathered the storm together. At the end, I was left with an unexpected emotion - gratitude. Gratitude, that I have been given the honor of parenting this child. Gratitude, that I have the luxury of time and space to devote my attention to him. Gratitude that after each storm he is restored to his special self. I feel profoundly grateful that the long, strange trip of my life has led me to this point where I can be present with my children.

Something in us opens so that we find gratitude in our struggles.

Several years ago I facilitated a support group for parents with teenage children. I often saw these parents come to class, and I know from what they said that they felt battle weary, and given the strange trip of adolescence, were questioning their merit and decision making while struggling with utterly unexpected and at times, for them, painful and embarrassing situations. One parent came up to me after a session and said, "Now you will never want to have children. I'm sorry." In reality, I felt encouraged to have children because I thought I might have a closer idea of what I was getting into, and I learned that there will be parents like me (no matter what happens) and that we will be able to help each other, together.

What these parents could not see because they were in the middle, but that I could clearly see, was how heroic and noble they were and are. My admiration for the members of this group was and is enormous, their humor, hard work, sacrifice, humility, honesty, respect for one another was moving and profound, and I am sure earned at cost. It is a gift of opening to oneself and others, and no matter how difficult, it is a beautiful part of this chosen path. It is of ultimate meaning.

Parenting is an experience best understood in the long run. Any one person dropped in our households this moment might see disaster, but in the longer run, a clearer picture develops. We learn and grow in many ways on the way. Mary Pipher writes that "What will survive of us is love."⁵ We will get many opportunities to demonstrate love, and sometimes our efforts will succeed and sometimes they will fail. Mostly we will do the best we can and no matter the outcome, our love will survive.

Several years ago I went on a pastoral visit to one of our members, a somewhat "crusty" older gentleman. I always remembered his poignant and insightful remark. Although his grown children were now in the position of caring for him he said, "When you are a parent you never stop being responsible."

Parenting doesn't end when children turn 18. Even with grown children, we still parent. We still wonder if they are safe, if they are happy, if we did OK. Sometimes as grown children we pay their bills. Sometimes they move back into our homes. Sometimes we raise their children. One parent wrote to me

When your children have been difficult . . . and now their adult lives are a mess, as a parent you cannot enjoy and/or take pride in their lives, and, in fact, you have to support them . . . It is a challenge to live one's "golden years" in a satisfying and serene way. Trying to separate your life from your children's lives is not easy.

⁴ Pipher, 226.

⁵ Pipher, 221.

Many people who wrote me found great consolation and pride in the fact that their children were good and kind people. This validated their efforts and struggles, and I am happy for them. Yet some parents felt troubled by their children, who might be "a mess." It would be so easy to sum up this sermon with words like "The happiness and goodness of our children makes it all worthwhile." But this would not be fair to all parents, nor to the integrity of parenting.

Is our success as parents measured by our children (their happiness, productivity, health)? This might ease our fears as parents, but my answer is no, because it lures us into the murky ground of predestination, that somehow there is an elect group out there, and the signs of their merit is measured in their success. My friends, life is random and because of this it is not fair, not maliciously cruel, but not guaranteed, not easy, not clear.

Life is precious and stands on its own merits, whether we have children or not (parents not more exulted than childfree individuals or couples). Yes parents are vitally important and responsible for their children, but they cannot be responsible for all things all the time. As one of our members said "Parenting seems to be this strange phenomenon where the parent has so much influence over how this life will be, and at the same time so very little control." Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. One parent wrote to me "I have always considered children to be loaners. We get them only a small percentage of their lives and then return them to the world."

Another parent reflected

Maybe there is some kind of divine plan and the end result, whenever that might be, will be a total sense of peace, connectedness, and belonging for everyone . . . And so our purpose is to continue to struggle with relationship with other people and . . . each generation has the opportunity to take a small step toward that peace.

What will survive of us is love and it cannot be measured in a parental success checklist. Parenting is that small step of risk, work, revelation, and connection no matter how joyful or sorrowful.

Sometimes in parenting I am reminded of the shamanic journey, where the gifted but unskilled apprentice goes out alone on an adventure, to be consumed, often literally eaten, in order to be reborn and bring wisdom back to the people. This is how I see parenting, with insight learned on the way about loaners, separating children's lives from our own, love, gratitude, connection, something opening that never closes, courage. We must open our hearts wide unto the body of life and permit ourselves to be carved in unexpected ways, so "Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness; for even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow." Happy Mother's Day.