

Lori Whittemore
June 19, 2022
This Is For The Fathers
Reflection This is for the Fathers

I chose this broad title for today before I realized that it is not only Father's day weekend, but also Pride and Juneteenth as well. I wrote a short bit about Juneteenth on Friday, although I may have gotten the date wrong by a day. And today's reflection will be a bit about both Pride and Father's day. Trying to speak to all things that are important for us. Let's start with Pride. AND let's start with pronouns. I understand Unitarian Universalism to be a liberational and liberationist tradition. Especially universalism. Universalism meaning quite specifically that all have access to the Holy. That salvation is available to all, regardless of how you seek it. At its core, Universalism theology is liberation theology. Your salvation, my salvation is not tied to creeds or traditions, specific prayers or mediation by clergy. It is not to be caught up in sacraments or membership. If I had to describe a specific systematic theology of Universalism, I would, without hesitation, name liberation theology as the theological underpinning of this liberal religious tradition.

Liberation theology gives a nod to the oppressed. Affirms the direction of liberation from those who suffer or are oppressed. It isn't the missionary coming to heal the natives, it is the natives, not only telling what, if anything needs healing, but also naming and living into the healing that is of their own making. Liberation theology sees humans as intelligent, inspired beings capable, through their own agency, of seeking a path towards salvation. Worthy of the love and support of a loving God and a loving people. Liberation theology offers preferential deference to those who suffer and those who are suffering. And liberation theology explores the path to overcome suffering. The path to overcome oppression. Buddhism also affirms a similar approach. Each person suffers, each person can identify their own suffering, each person can identify the sources of their suffering and each, embracing the 8 fold path may transform their suffering. These both point to the fact that an individual's suffering can be named, understood and transformed through their own inspiration and instigation. Liberation.

So what does that have to do with pronouns? Well let's begin with the concept of normativity. This country and many/most European countries, hold white as the standard. We can understand this in a number of ways. Blacks were brought over as slaves, counted as non human, regulated as nonhuman and weren't even given access to our so called society through the means of voting until 1964. I will table that conversation for another day. But so it is with gender, gender identity, sexuality, sexual expression etc. Society exists in a state of heteronormativity. All of society privileges the white, hetero family. That is changing, at least in our liberal geographies and communities. And in no small part by the brave queer folk who fought, lost their jobs, housing, lives, to be who they were. Who they are. Who still fight today for these things. Who, given our political climate, may have a harder fight ahead of them.

I cringe when I hear, "in my day men were men and women were women" and sometimes even, "people were gay or straight not all over the place". Like people fit into clean silos of existence. Even if you are sexually attracted to men and women you are considered bi-sexual, when it feels way more complex than that. Because sexuality, like pretty much everything else,

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exists on a spectrum, not on an either/or, or a this or that. We as a society, a heteronormative society, preference either/or, this or that. We set all of our standards to fit into those categories. We exclude, discriminate, harass, oppress those who don't fit. Some outright hateful ways. ANd some in more subtle ways, which my daughter very aptly told me is actually more hateful. Because it is lurking, condescending. it is just below the surface that you cant quite name. But it is influencing and implying and creates a tacit approval of privileging someone's perspective.

For those who know themselves to not fit into specific privileged categories, there can be fear and suffering. As liberal, liberative religion, that supports the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations, acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in the congregation; there is a constant requirement to explore areas where these issues exist in this community and in your lives. Thats what you signed up for, truly, in this tradition, every Sunday and commit to every single day of the week..

I am preaching. And I am trying to practice what I preach. And I hope I am not momming you (because it is father's day afterall) . My daughter and their partner use her/ them and they/them pronouns. That took a lot of getting used to for me. It was hard for me to wrap my brain around. I made some jokes along the way, until I recognized that in joking I was denying the oppression and discrimination they get from calling themselves outside of normativity. I love my daughter and I would do anything to support her and make her life easier and yet I joked about exactly who she/they identify as. Like denying that it is okay for someone to be attracted to or love someone of the same gender, I am denying that it is okay for her/them to live into a fuller gender expression than I do. In essence, I deny her humanity when I do this. And in fact everyone who experiences their life as trans or nonbinary. I have only recently, since last December decided to use pronouns in solidarity with those who are not heteronormative. I am not fully there yet. I dont always remember to use them and I still hesitate in some context of my life to do so. I am working on it, in my 4 different email contexts. I have it on authority it is even hard from gay parents that this is hard to wrap their brains around.

So I point us back to our principals, back to our liberation bones. It is our identity to stand with those who have been oppressed, who are still oppressed. It is Pride weekend, I feel invited to consider who is out within those who are out. Owning my own pronouns, acknowledges that my identity is one of many identities. And that is okay, accepted and even honored by me. It is the start of de-privileging my identity over other's identities. It is just, equal and compassionate, it does recognize the inherent worth and dignity of others. I invite you to an awakening around this. You don't have to name and claim your pronouns if you aren't comfortable or in agreement with my reasoning. BUT that is why I am beginning to claim mine. So when you see pronouns after my name, please understand that I am working to liberate myself from the privilege of my identity and expressions. I am working to stand with those who are courageous enough to be all of who they are in the face of a society that wishes them to conform and deny the fullness of who they are. I can see it will be a busy fall, but let's put that

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discussion in the parking lot also and commit to exploring it in one way or another again. As the conversation is only beginning. Happy Pride.

Now, about fathers...

Thanks so much to Brian for opening up our Father's Day reflection. In his fathering voice, naming all the ways that we have experienced fathers or experienced being fathers. There is no doubt that it is a day to celebrate, reflect, mourn and regret all at the same time. And I know there are stronger feelings as well. As I was preparing for this part of my time with you, I read, and researched ways to approach this. And then I went to the texts. The epic texts that have informed me as a foundational Christian and also as a lover of epic stories other than the Bible..

The Bible, for one, certainly offers guidance, example and exhortation on the matter of parenting, fathering and being a child. Of course God, the father, the ultimate archetypal parent. The creator of all that is, was and ever will be creating life out of no thing but of pure life. And starting the tale of fatherhood, parenthood from a place of obedience and lack of obedience. The downfall of humanity being based on disobedience. Told orally in simple terms to our ancestors thousands of years ago, as other ancestors were told epic origin stories in their own places.

Some quick reflections on Christian fathering and parenting. My first reflection on parenting in the Bible is the story of Abraham and Isaac. Where Abraham being unable to have children with his wife, is given his wife's slave to have a child with. After the child is born, she is sent into the wilderness without provision or protection to die. His wife does finally have a child and Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice the child on a mountain and all but plants the knife in his child before God changes God's mind. And there are so many examples of how fatherhood and childhood and motherhood was equally horrible. In the olden days before written tradition. Polygamous marriages, children of rape, children sold into slavery, offered up for sex to strangers, stoned for disobedience, killed by Pharaohs. Frankly according to the OT, the time before the birth of Jesus, the time before written history, the time of oral stories about the origin of humanity, do not reflect well on father's. So let's not use those as guides for good parenting.

Like in most ways, the time that begins with Jesus, in the early stages of written history for "our" written history interprets fatherhood a little better. The example of a father adopting a son from a fiance who was already pregnant. Magnanimous. The prodigal son is also a story of a generous, forgiving father that welcomes a son back after a fall from grace. Father' seeking Jesus' healing for sick children. Examples of Father's getting it right. And then also, exhortations to fathers and parents about how to bring children up. In love and in faith and by example. For me the written NT is what God's love really means and this is what you need to do to pass it on. Of course it is much deeper, richer, nuanced than this quick connection of dots. In reflecting on this, while preparing for today, what stuck with me was the theme of obedience in fatherhood. For Jesus, obedience unto death even. That is the word that sat with

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me as I prepared for today relating to the Bible. And if you think about the Bible as a story of the arc of humanity, you may see it as one of the stories of humanity's early development. A time of tribes becoming kings, when behavioral control preserved lives, land and other resources. God providing guidance and demanding obedience of us was a way, is a way of ordering society for preservation. For law and order. For a younger civilization. For children to early to reason. Obey thy father.

But here we are in 2022. Here we are in a place that is really beyond monarchy, mostly. Our societies are blended. Plurality, globalization is the norm mostly. We are not, at least in this good company and in this good tradition, not sinners in the hands of an angry God. We applaud and encourage a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, not blind obedience out of fear of shunning or death at least in these four walls. This is not true for probably at least 1/4-1/2 of the population of the earth, but for us it is not our paradigm anymore. And in the North American, European and Scandinavian countries, for the most part, we are not as Christian as we used to be. Wisdom literature, with epic stories, origin stories, have been more recently contextualized through more relatable tales and more relatable characters.

I am speaking of course about Harry Potter. Perhaps many of you have not read the books. It is a seven part saga about a young man whose parents died at his birth, lives with his abusive aunt and uncle, discovers he is a wizard, goes to school for wizards and has many very amazing adventures fighting off evil wizards and saving the world from darkness and the dark lord. If you haven't read the books, it would make for good summer reading and if you haven't seen the movies, they make for great viewing on cold winter nights. I am sure you are wondering where I am going with this but stick with me here.

There is something remarkable and relevant to considering this series that was written in the 1990s. With dozens of characters, beautifully developed in detail. Characters steeped in peculiarity and nuance. There are very few father figures. And the ones that are present or referenced are not particularly good. The 2-3 that get any nod at all are pretty weak in expression. Of course you have Professor/headmaster Dumbledore...the God like figure. Harry, our protagonist, his father is dead. AND throughout the movie is only referenced as being mischievous and a sporty guy. But the other men..Dursely the uncle, abusive. Hagrid the giant, oafish but protective male figure. Perhaps the most clear references to a father is a friend's dad, Mr. Weasley is a bit of a wise fool and a terrific family man. AND his nemesis father, Lucius Malfoy, a wizard set on killing him or running Harry Potter out of Hogwarts. Harry does have a Godfather, who is a shapeshifter. Interesting idea. His true father figure is a shapeshifter. And killed in the end too.

What does this epic tale tell us about fathers? They are abusive, elusive, inclusive and always changing shape. They are absent mostly. The child, the children have to make their own way. Define their own sense of morality. Take care of one another. I am sure the fact that JK Rowling was a single mother influenced her perspective on parenthood to be sure.

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As the Bible speaks from a tribal through kingdom and then onto an occupied time. Jesus' time was a time of occupation by the Romans...what does Harry Potter tell us about our time? The OT and NT tell us many things about our God . I talked about the theme of obedience and referenced the good, the bad and the ugly here. What does Harry Potter tell us? I think it tells us about fatherless children defining their own moral code and setting unwavering paths of friendship, and loyalty to one another. Not so much a kingdom but more of a collective. Kind of matches where liberated western culture sees itself. And of course there are dark lords fighting for power, but love and loyalty to friends is a primal message. With or without fathers.

This weaves perfectly into our UU world today. You may have no father. You may have bad examples of men in your life. You may have a wonderful father or fathers or grandfathers. You may have strong, smart women who shepherd you along. You may have brief encounters with a father, get support from a friend's father or stand watch someone else's father behave in destructive ways. You don't have to use the Bible as your guide, or Harry Potter either. It doesn't matter if your father was or is absent, evil, misguided or goofy. You are all welcome to take that gift of being parented by them in whatever that looks/ed like and be your own hero. Set your own standards and hold dear your own principles for living.

You made your dad a dad. They made you a son or daughter. There is something they have given you that has uniquely made you into the person you are today. Today is a day, the day to reflect on that gif, be grateful, and give thanks

May it be so..