



Unitarian Universalist Men's Network (UUMeN)
2003 Sermon Contest Winner

Two of My Fathers

Rev. Victoria Weinstein

Delivered April 6, 2003 at the First Parish Unitarian Church, Norwell MA

Anniversaries of important events in our lives are like telescopes in time. It doesn't matter how far we are chronologically from the event; when the anniversary comes around, the distance between ourselves and the big event collapses and we stand fresh and raw and vulnerable in the present and the past, feeling it all over again.

It has been twenty years this week since my father died. The emotional telescope experience of this past few days makes me aware that twenty years is a relative term, and while I am glued to the news of the war and sick at heart at its unfolding tragedies, and while I am very much living in the present moment with this beloved community, there is the lingering sensation that I am seventeen years old and an cataclysmic loss has just occurred in my personal life.

In 1983, April 5th fell on a Tuesday. I came home from a dress rehearsal that night full of my own high school stardom, and figured that all the cars in the driveway were family members converging on our house to gather for my debut as the leading lady of our school's spring musical, "Bells Are Ringing." That's how it is at seventeen years old. If the driveway is full of cars, it must be about you!

When I walked into the house, still in full theatrical make-up, my mother met me downstairs, took my hands in hers and said these simple and terrible words: "Honey, Daddy died."

What I remember next is being helped up the stairs by mom and my father's three older brothers, being passed from one set of arms to the next, looking into one stricken face after the next: Uncle Mark, Uncle Dick, Uncle Marvin, until I got to the top of the stairs and embraced my little brother who was then fourteen years old. All of those men. Those giants of my childhood, my father and his three older brothers. Even today, they are titanic in my memory and imagination.

Let me tell you one story that perhaps better than any other might illustrate what kind of force of character my father possessed: all our lives, my Dad pounded it into our heads that we were WEINSTEINS and should be proud to bear that name. He was above all a family man. We're Weinsteins, we're loyal to the name, and we don't tolerate mispronunciation of it! This was a constant project. For example, maitre d's in restaurants: "Mr. WeinSTEEN, your table's ready." "It's WeinSTEIN." (Dad had a wonderful, distinguished low voice that he liked to make *really* low when he wanted to make a point) As with the father, so with the children. For instance, at school during attendance taking: "Vicki WeinstEEN?" "It's WeinSTEIN. Here." By third grade or so all my classmates had learned to chime in with me. "STEIN!"

This always startled substitute teachers.

My dad, who was the child of a proud and accomplished Eastern European immigrant family, had just the littlest chip on his shoulder about perceived anti-Semitism, you see. Those who couldn't be bothered to pronounce his name correctly did not earn repeat business or friendship. Part of the reason he moved us to New Canaan, Connecticut was because of his dream to belong to the New Canaan Country Club where he had caddied as a young man. Movin' on up! However, even after we became residents, Carl Weinstein was not allowed to join the club. No Jews allowed. He might belong to the Unitarian Church, but he wasn't going to be playing golf at the New Canaan Country Club. Not with a name like "Weinstein." (Don't feel too sorry for him. He played plenty of golf on beautiful courses other places).

So on the morning of his memorial service at the Unitarian Church in Westport, Connecticut, the minister rose to address the hundreds who had gathered to celebrate my father's life, and began his remarks by saying, "Carl WeinSTEEN was a man who...." And out of the crowd there was an immediate, unison rumble of correction: "...**STEIN.**"

Much to his credit, the minister stopped midsentence to regard the family and friends with an astonished and amused expression, eyebrow wry in the air. The explosion of laughter that followed lasted a good minute or so, and the minister recovered most gracefully by saying, "Well, that alone tells you a good deal about Carl Davis Weinstein."

And it does, indeed. He was loyal to his name and many were loyal to him. He thrived on irreverent humor.

You may wonder how my father died. He was only fifty years old, which seemed young to me at the time and which seems ridiculously young to me now. He had a heart attack, that is how. He had had his first heart trouble in his early thirties and was a veteran of open-heart surgery by his forties. Bum arteries, yes, but also a type A personality that might be more accurately described as "Type A+."

It isn't so much how he died that stays with me. It's *why* he did. It's why so many men get caught, as did my father, in an endless rat race of competition and stress and the feeling that they need to prove themselves to their wives, brothers, neighbors, ancestors, kids and the guys at the country club by the size of the house they have and the kind of car they drive and the kind of company they work for. I well remember the little celebrations Mom would plan at home for each of my dad's promotions as he rose the corporate ladder. What I also remember is sensing that he was trapped in workaholism, far too easily given to fits of rage over small things at home, and how I wished he could do what the doctor recommended: slow down, calm down, learn to relax a little bit.

One time we were together, the two of us, driving home from a dinner with Uncle Marvin and Aunt Mae. This is a hard story to tell. We were having one of our typically intense father-daughter philosophical conversations, as we really loved to discuss all kinds of important topics out of a special *simpatico* and delight in each other's minds. About ten minutes from home my dad pulled into the parking lot at a little store where he sometimes picked up the Sunday paper. The store was obviously closed as it was late at night, so I turned to question him why we had stopped. I saw that my father was sitting holding helplessly onto the steering wheel and crying.

I panicked. I asked “Dad, what’s wrong!?” I had only seen him cry twice before that I could remember: once when my siblings and I had had an especially bad day as little kids and he had been overly harsh with us, and once when Jimmy Carter won the presidential election in 1976 (Dad had worked long and hard for the Carter campaign). Through his tears, my father explained to me that he was so proud of me, he knew I was going to grow up to be such a terrific woman and he was so sorry that he wasn’t going to be around to see it.

With a sinking heart I tried to reassure him. “Of course you will! You’re just feeling mortal because you just had a heart attack, but you’re going to be fine! You’re going to live to be an old man, Dad!” But deep down I feared he was right. And he did leave us less than a year later.

Now, as the woman he didn’t live to see, I’d like to play that scene over again. Because I have a few things to say to him. Like: “Carl, you just have to do whatever it takes to change your life! Don’t cry: change!” He knew the need for this intellectually, but spiritually and emotionally he didn’t have the resources to make that change. This I grieve most especially: that any of us would feel so caught in our competitive, striving ways that we truly don’t know how to stop, even when we know it might cost us our lives, and cost our children their parents. I love my father and that love hasn’t gone away over the years – our relationship hasn’t ended just because he’s not physically here -- but I feel anger occasionally about all that he has missed; all that we missed together. I feel cheated of the chance to see him mellow a bit with age. (He would have *had* to have mellowed some by now!) I grieve that my siblings and I have been deprived of his presence for so many of our important milestones. I’m incredibly sad that Uncle Carl isn’t around to love a whole new generation of Weinstein cousins. I’m deeply sorry you’ll never be able to meet him.

I have a photograph on my desk here at church; a pile of photographs, actually. A few are ones I took at the end of the summer at our Cedar Hill retreat --kids playing, stuff like that. There is one particularly sweet photograph of Clayton Handelman standing with his tiny son Jonah in a snuggly holder on his back. Both of them look comfortable and happy. I cannot imagine, in a million years, my dad with a snuggly on his back. It just wasn’t done. Photos of my father holding his small children are endearingly awkward, taken in an era when it was still considered appropriate for fathers to make cute helpless expressions and hand over crying or stinky diapered babies to their wives, and everyone would laugh (Nowadays most wives or partners would be just as likely to hand the baby right back!).

I am so grateful that fathering has changed and is evolving to something that I think is far more emotionally rich for dads and their kids. I am so glad that we have men downstairs teaching Religious Education right now; something that was so rare when I was growing up as to be downright odd. Fathers are important religious educators of their own children. I think, for instance, of Jewish boys and their fathers studying the Torah together. I remember my father asking us what we thought of the sermon or Sunday School some weekends after church, as Mom served us a big brunch of what we called Jewish soul food (she also sat down eventually and participated in the discussions). Spirituality and religious development have never been, and should never become, something we consider “women’s work.” I am so pleased that this church has many men in leadership positions and so many men in the pews on Sunday mornings. This is often not the case in other houses of worship.

The other photos I have on my desk are of a men's group gathering of last summer, something (the Reverend) Jan Knost organized. What it looks like is a bunch of healthy, warm and friendly guys just hanging out together. What it is in reality is more than that : it is ministry to men, ministry between men. We have a woman's support group that meets here regularly, and I want to encourage the men in the congregation to keep making efforts to sustain a men's group. I will be happy to support it in any way I can, although obviously I am not the ideal gender to develop such programming.

Ministry among men doesn't have to consist of *Iron John*-ish male-bonding or involve shamanic vision quests or other typically "men's movement" activities. That doesn't seem to be the style of the men of First Parish. Nor does a men's group have to be all about smoking cigars, playing poker and telling the most haw-haw kinds of jokes and intentionally avoiding anything that might be vaguely described as emotional or spiritual. I've seen that kind of men's group, too. I think there's probably a more happy medium to be found! Men's ministry, like ministry to women, honors the ways that men experience the world from the perspective of their gendered reality, provides space and time for them to process through the big and small events of their lives together, and encourages each man to seriously attend to the life of the spirit that is uniquely his.

I remember when my father's father A.J. died, and my dad acted as though he was fine, but there was a terrible strained sadness in the house until my father's best friend John Rizos showed up with a bottle of something and took my dad home with him for a good, long visit. My father wasn't a drinking man, but he had a few with John and I suppose he cried and got some of his grief out in a way that he didn't know how to do with his wife and kids around. I'm not suggesting that ministry to men should involve drinking, but I do think it would be a blessing for everyone concerned if men formed relationships of mutual care that allowed them to better navigate the difficult terrain of masculinity that is imposed on all men by our culture. Part of that ministry would be to make room for the diverse ways that men are men: to free them from the limitations and tyrannies of masculinity as it is defined by the larger society.

Let me speak briefly about a man I greatly admire for having lived out a public leadership role that was characterized by gentleness, patience and nurturance – qualities that our culture has traditionally denied to men. While some dismissed him as a wimp, many more others felt deeply touched and cared for by his kindness. I speak, of course, of the Reverend Fred McFeely Rogers.

The only temper tantrum I ever remember having as a toddler, in fact, was when mom wouldn't let me watch "Mr. Rogers" one night. I had been sick with the flu and she wanted me in bed before the strains of that well-loved theme song would come tinkling out of the television. I don't remember who won that particular battle but I always meant to write Mr. Rogers a love letter and tell him how much he meant to me. When I heard that he died recently at the age of 74, I felt terribly sad, as did millions of people; both those who had watched him as children and those who grew to admire him as adults.

He was such a good man, and so easy to love. I relied on him. Some people didn't get the appeal. But I did. Mr. Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, had what I would later learn to call *pastoral presence*. Even from the television I felt he was really looking at me. Mr. Rogers was a father figure who never asked what grades we got and whether our team won the game. He practiced unconditional regard: he just wanted to know how you felt inside, and wanted to know that you felt valuable whomever and however you were. He never raised his voice (he was the only grown-up I knew who never did!). He changed into his play clothes when he got home (his mother knitted those sweaters, which now reside at the Smithsonian) and he spoke gently about real things, even things that sometimes scared me, like divorce or death. . . or being sucked down the drain while taking a bath. He did us a world of good. His show was 900 episodes of blessing.

So they are both gone into the Eternal now, both my beloved alpha male daddy and the gentle television father figure who provided me with my first alternative version of masculinity. Both have lessons to teach. Mr. Rogers said it all with his warm and kindly eyes: *I see you, and you matter to me*. And Mr. Weinstein says it all by his absence: *Live, and live well, because I didn't quite know how to, and the cost was very high*.

We let them go, because we have to, taking what wisdom we can from them about the nature of manhood, and of fatherhood and the question of how to have life more abundant. In their honor and in their memory, let us *choose life* ourselves, being fearless and honest about what that takes, and let us stand by our brothers, our uncles, our fathers, our sons as they do the same. Let us love our men. Let us support them in choosing life.

Amen. Shalom. They live in us.



The Unitarian Universalist Men's Network supports a mature, liberal religious masculinity with resources and leadership.

UUMeN

P.O. Box 3070, Madison, WI 53704-0070.

Toll-free: 1-800-227-6670. E-mail: uumen@usa.net

www.uumen.org