

Faith from our Fathers

Dennis Angle writes, "On Christmas morning, my 8 year old son, Jeff, awoke to find a dinghy in the living room. Santa worked some real magic to get it there.

June finally arrived, six long months later. A neighbour's son joined Jeff for the inaugural sail. They provisioned the boat with potato chips and pop. The dingy was trailered to the boat launch. Four little arms guided the boat down the ramp, watching fiber glass and water touch for the first time. Jeff checked for leaks, smiled and strapped on his life jacket.

The two boys hopped in and shoved off. They tightened the sail and pointed the tiny craft out into the lake. The wave Jeff gave toward shore was halfhearted, his hands busy managing the tiller and the bag of chips. The boys fixed their eyes on the horizon, oblivious to the shore behind.

I focused the camera and recorded the moment for posterity.

As I watched the transom rise and dip over the waves, I recalled my first sail many summers ago. In an album at home, there is a faded black and white snapshot. The picture shows two brothers in a canoe with a sail made of bed sheets. Funny, but I don't remember my dad taking that picture.

Today, as a father, I like many of the fathers here today rejoice in the love that I share with my children. As a son, this day has a nostalgic melancholy feeling, realizing that my father passed away 44 years ago on the 15th of June. I suspect that many of you have similar feelings as this day rolls around.

Occasionally we go home to Cambridge, Galt as it was once, the place of our birth and our children's birth; the place of my nurturing, molding, becoming. Every time that we return something has changed. The main intersection was known as four banks corner for obvious reasons. Now there is only one bank. The other bank buildings are occupied by restaurants, lawyer's offices and one is the Beauty Bank. Many of the old buildings have been torn down and turned into park land along the river. Most of the changes are good ones, but it's not like home. You reach the point somewhere when you realize that things will never be the same again.

When you get out the picture albums and glimpse yourself, 10, 15, 30, years ago, it hits with some impact.

Thomas Wolf wrote, "You can't go back home again, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting, but are changing all the time."

He is right of course. When you do go home the old landmarks are gone, people are missing, and those who remain are grayer, more portly, balder, and simply older.

I have changed. My young man's dreams are all, but forgotten. I am now living in the future that I looked forward to then. There seems to be little connection between ancient fantasies and present reality. You can't go home again!

There is nostalgia about that; uneasiness; sadness and perhaps some tears.

And then there comes a realization. You can't go home again, but in some way home comes to us through the tears. We cannot re-enter the past, it can only be recalled, but the past is somehow embodied in our present. All that we have met and experienced in the past, is part of us.

It helps to answer one of the great questions of life; who am I?

I am part of a family; parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, part of those whose funerals I attend. We are made of the gifts and wounds our yesterdays summon to mind. We are shaped by the experiences which memory gathers and carries along. We are in part our grandparents, uncles, aunts and our fathers. I tell you this not only because it has significance to me, but because I think most of us have similar experiences.

My father like most fathers was not perfect; he was a real person with a certain greatness about him despite his human frailties and common foibles. I guess I became more aware of that as it became my turn to be a father and as my children went through various stages of growing up. There were many ways in which I did not want to be like my father and yet realize that I too was not the perfect father.

I have concluded that what makes any father great, is being real; human; being one's own person and sharing your love.

Perhaps the faith that fathers pass on to their children is just that, being real and loving their kids.

In Jesus daily life, he referred to God as Abba, father. That's not popular these days, but it expresses an ideal relationship between God and God's children.

Perhaps it even suggests that is what God gave to Jesus, to be real, to be his own person and to love God's children.

This relationship is alluded to in the reading for today when Jacob, in his dream, is encountered by God who promises that he will have many decedents who will be blessed by God. It's an awesome responsibility to be the father of God's chosen ones.

As fathers, perhaps the greatest gift and responsibility we have is to be our unique selves, to pass on to the next generation the

memory of a real person, not perfect, not awesome, somewhat flawed, but real and loving.

I want to share with you a story written by John Powell which speaks volumes to me on this Father's Day. I hope it says something to you about our relationship to our fathers, earthly and heavenly.

I first met Tommy 15 years ago as I watched University students file into a classroom for their first class in Theology and Faith combing his long hair that fell below his shoulders. There were earrings in both ears and piercings in his nose and lip. I know that it isn't what's on your head, but what's in it that counts, but on that day, my eyes and mind blinked. I filed Tommy under "S" for strange. Tommy turned out to be the "Atheist in residence" in my course. He constantly objected to, or smirked at, the possibility of an unconditionally loving God. We lived in relative peace, although at times he was a serious pain in the back pew. When he turned in his final exam, he asked in a slightly cynical tone: "Do you think I'll ever find God?" I decided on a little shock therapy. "No." I said emphatically. "Oh," he responded. "I thought that was the product you were pushing." I let him get to the door, and then called out, "I don't think you'll ever find God, but I'm absolutely certain that God will find you." He shrugged and left.

Later I heard that he had graduated and I was duly grateful. Then came a sad report; Tommy had cancer. Before I could search him out, he came to see me. He was quite thin; the long hair had fallen out as a result of chemotherapy. But his eyes were bright and his voice was firm.

"What I came to see you about", he said "Is what you said to me on that last day of class. I've thought a lot about that, but when the doctors removed the malignant growth, I got serious about locating God. When the malignancy spread, I really began banging bloody fists against the doors of heaven, but God didn't come out. So I quit trying. I decided that I didn't really careabout God; about an afterlife, or anything like that. I decided to spend what time I had left doing something more profitable. I thought about your class and I remembered something else you said.

The essential sadness is to go through life without loving, but it would be almost equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.

So I began with the hardest one, my dad. He was reading the newspaper when I approached him. Dad I would like to talk to you. It's really important. The newspaper came down slowly. What is it? Dad, I love you. I just wanted you to know that."

Tommy smiled at me and said with obvious satisfaction, as though he felt a warm and secret joy flowing inside of him.

The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I could never remember him doing before. He cried and he hugged me. We talked all night, even though he had to go to work the next morning. It felt so good to be so close to my father, to hear him say that he loved me. It was easier with my mother and my little brother. They cried with me too and we hugged one another and we shared things we had been keeping secret for years. I was only sorry about one thing; that I had waited so long. Then one day I turned around and God was there. God found me even after I stopped looking for God. Apparently God does things in God's own way and in God's own time.

"Tommy," I asked, "Would you tell my present students what you have just told me? Think about it and if and when you're ready give me a call."

In a few days Tommy called and said he was ready for the class, so we scheduled a date. He never made it. But before he died we talked one last time. *I'm not going to make it to your class", he said, "Will you tell them for me? Will you tell the whole world for me?"*

I told them Tommy....as best I could. **And together we say Amen.**