

Honor Thy Father
The Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota
Rev. Roger Fritts
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As a minister who officiates at memorial services, I sometimes find myself in the position of interviewing adult children about their fathers. Once a family gave me a 500-page autobiography to use to preparing a eulogy, but this was an exception. Because our fathers lived for many years before we were born, and because not all fathers are forthcoming about their lives, often children do not know the answers to the questions. I ask:

What year was your father born?

Who were his mother and father?

Did he have brothers and sisters, and if he did, was he the first born, the middle child or the youngest?

As a young man, what was his dream for his life?

When did your mother and father decide to get married?

What kind of parent was your father when you were growing up?

How did he feel about his work?

What were his hobbies?

Did he read, and if he did, did he have any favorite writers?

What was important to him?

Several years into my work as a minister, I realized that I could not answer all these questions about my own father. I had fragments of stories, but there was much I did not know. So one summer about twenty-five years ago, I asked him to tell me about himself.

He was born in June of 1919, in the hills of Eastern Kentucky. In the 1960s, our family watched this TV show "The Beverly Hillbillies," that made fun of the people of Eastern Kentucky and the people of Beverly Hills. Today most people in America still think that the mountain residents of Kentucky are backwards, barefoot people. Feuding with the neighbors and brewing moonshine whiskey are their main activities.

Yet my father did not live up to the hillbilly stereotype. My ancestors did not make moonshine or engage in feuds. Instead, they were coal miners and schoolteachers. My dad went to the University of Kentucky, where he became an electrical engineer. Eventually he moved to Arizona where he worked for the Bureau of Reclamation of the Department of the Interior, but for my father, Kentucky was always his first home. On Father's Day, I think of my own father, who died in 2002 at the age of eighty-three.

When I asked my Dad to tell me about his childhood, he would say that the Appalachian Mountains are like a foreign country. He would tell me that the people in the mountains do not think or act like anyone else in the United States.

Snake handling is one example. Snake handling in churches started in Tennessee in 1909 and still

goes on today in worship services in Appalachia. Theologically it is based on an ending of Mark's Gospel, which says "And these signs will accompany those who believe . . . they will pick up snakes in their hands . . ."

As a young man, my Dad worked at a gas station in Harlan County. One regular customer was a snake-handling preacher who carried his rattlesnakes around in the trunk of his car. He regularly asked my father to check his spare tire in the trunk of his car and my father regularly refused. The preacher would laugh at my dad and tell him "you ain't got no faith."

That is one view of life in Appalachia. However, it is not all ignorance and superstition. Good schools are scattered throughout the mountains and hollers. Sixty-five miles north of my father's hometown is Berea College, founded in 1855 by an ardent abolitionist. Before the Civil War, it was a part of the Underground Railroad that helped slaves escape the south. In addition, there is Union College, Sue Bennet College, Lincoln Memorial University and Cumberland College, where my father got most of his education.

After two years of attending public school and not learning to read, his mother, who was a schoolteacher, took my Dad out of the public school. She enrolled him in a private elementary school run by Cumberland College and used to train teachers. He so attended Cumberland College from the third grade through his first year of college.

One of his teachers was Bess Mahan Rose. The students called her Miss Bess. She never married but she did have some romance in her life. Her male friend was James Lloyd Creach, the president of Cumberland College. According to my father, they probably would have married except for one thing. Miss Bess had a problem with her petticoat. It seemed always to hang an inch or two below her dress and James could never bring himself to tolerate this imperfection.

My Dad said that Miss Bess got her job in a peculiar way. A man named Will Mahan willed \$50,000 to the school with the provision Bess Rose would have a job teaching at Cumberland as long as she lived. Many people thought Bess Mahan Rose was Will Mahan's daughter.

Miss Bess taught my father about books. She had him read the whole Bible, not for inspiration but as literature. He read Shakespeare's plays, and memorized the most famous parts. He read Emerson's essays and had to memorize many of his sayings. Miss Bess never mentioned that Emerson was a Unitarian minister. Miss Bess taught at Cumberland College until she died. She did her final teaching from a wheelchair.

Williamsburg, Kentucky is about ten miles north of the Tennessee state line. Mountains full of coal are all around the town. Today you can travel on interstate 75 and look at the insides of the mountains the engineers cut away to make a place for the highway. You can clearly see the layers of coal. The coal played a role in creating the ignorance for which Appalachia is famous. Ova Rhodem, who married my grandfather's sister, was the superintendent of the school in a mining camp at Black Star, Kentucky. My dad said that the county paid Superintendent Rhodem a salary and the mining company paid him an additional equal amount. For that additional amount, he agreed to run an inferior school and make sure the students could not qualify for college. This is

one way the mine owners assured themselves that they had a continuous supply of cheap labor.

Of course, the mine owners also fought the formation of unions. There was a great deal of bloodshed. Harlan County became known as "bloody Harlan."

When my dad was growing up in the 1920s and 1930s there was a definite class system in Williamsburg. The division was between the rich who owned the coalmines and the rest of the people in town. Next door to my father lived the Cheelys. They were part of the rich set. They had an airplane and lived in a beautiful southern mansion. On the other side of my Dad's home was a family that had no plumbing. Water for the house came from a hand pump in the kitchen that supplied water from a well under the floor. My father's family was somewhere between. They did have indoor plumbing and city water. The town had two Baptist churches. First Baptist was for the rich and Second Baptist was for the poor.

Dad had childhood friends among both the rich and poor. Edgar (his next-door neighbor) and my father were good friends. Their friendship lasted until they were about seventeen when Edgar's parents forced him to go to Virginia Military Institute. Edgar was about to do the unforgivable and marry a coal miner's daughter. When Edgar grew up, he followed his father's example and got himself an airplane. He died when he crashed his plane in Mexico.

Another rich friend of my father was David Ancel Perkins. His family spent the winter months in Florida. In 1927, my father saw a photo of his friend David in the Louisville Courier Journal. The newspaper photo was entitled "eight and eighty-eight." It was a picture of John D. Rockefeller age eighty-eight, and David Ancel Perkins, age eight, playing golf together on the Rockefeller's golf course in Florida, just north of Daytona Beach.

My Dad's friendship with David Perkins pointed out the class system that was all around my father. Their fifth grade teacher, Alice Davis, would occasionally punish students with a big wooden paddle. Once David and my father got into trouble together. Alice took the boys out into the hallway. However, instead of the usual paddling, she gave both boys a hug and asked them not to get in trouble in the future. You do not paddle the son of a wealthy owner of coalmines.

The friendship with David Perkins lasted into high school. It ended one day when David said he could not understand why some miners thought they should be able to buy a car. My father thought of the four cars in the heated garage at the Perkins house and their chauffeur and he just could not be David Perkins's friend anymore.

My father died in Arizona in 2002. Nevertheless, I still feel connected to him and to the place where he grew up. Last summer the Unitarian Universalist Association held its annual meeting in Louisville, Kentucky. Before and after the meetings, I drove the backcountry roads of Kentucky, through some of the poorest counties in the United States. In the Cumberland Mountains, I saw men with bushy beards sitting in rocking chairs and staring from the porches of shacks. Some speak in accents I can barely understand. I saw mobile home dealers with signs saying "MAKE YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE." I saw notices saying "JESUS IS COMING. ARE YOU READY?" I read news stories about people whom a snake has bitten at church service. In some

ways, visiting the mountains where my father grew up is like visiting a foreign country.

Still, in those hills are also artists: musicians, quilters, dancers and storytellers. In the mountains are caring people, people who value education and learning, people who have wisdom because of life experience. It can be beautiful country. In the mountains at night this time of year are millions fireflies under a sky full of stars.

Our American Unitarian culture is a product of our British American culture. We give status to speakers with English accents, and dismiss people with southern or "hillbilly" accents. We value complex intellectual and cultural abstractions and discount concrete, simple speech.

My father taught me the values he learned growing up in Appalachian Mountains. Once I told him that I was taking a philosophy class on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. He responded: "I guess that will not do any harm, but most people don't give a damn about big words. They want you to be clear. They want you to be reliable. They want you to be honest. They want you to be fair. They want you to have courage to stick by what you believe." He taught me these values. Be clear. Be reliable. Be honest. Be fair.

Now I have been talking a great deal about myself this morning, but I hope it has stimulated you to think about your own father.

Each of us has a unique relationship with our father, not always good. Your father may have abused you, or your dad may have abandoned you. If this is the case, you may have no desire to honor your father. On the other hand, some of us have had a very positive relationship with our father. Therefore, if they are still alive, a card, a phone call, or a special e-mail today feels right.

I often find myself in the position of interviewing people about their fathers. Like a journalist, I ask questions to help me prepare a Eulogy, a brief statement about the highlights of a person's life. Sometimes it is only necessary to ask one question, and then family members start talking faster than I can write notes. Other times people give me short answers and wait for my next question.

I ask,

Where was your father born?

What were his parent's ethnic backgrounds?

Where did he go to school?

Did he ever tell stories about his childhood or his young adult years?

How and when did your mother and father meet?

Do you have an old résumé, showing where he went to school and where he worked?

Where did he like to go on vacation?

Did he write any letters to you about his life? How did he spend his retirement?

It is always an honor for me to be with families as they explore the answers to these questions. No child knows all the answers. For all of us there are gaps, many mysteries about our fathers.

However, if we are lucky, if we had a father who shared even a little bit about what mattered to him, what he valued, and if we have experienced him as a person who respected us and gave us the room to find our own life's dream, then we know far more than the simple details of his life. We have some sense of our father in all his complexity and we can honor who he was.