

Meditations on Parenting, Nurture, and Mission [1]

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Prologue

Months after my father's death in 1984, my mother wrote: "I am trying to remember how really blessed I am. God has given me so much. He allowed us to take part in His creation of four wonderful children. He gave Alex and I forty-three years and you kids."

Over the past several years I have often returned to these words as I have meditated on the meaning of being a parent and struggled to be one myself. What are those patterns of meaning to be discerned in our lives as parents? What are we seeking to nurture in ourselves and our children? Is parenting integral to our vocations or missions as human beings? The questions are large and not easily answered, but some initial clues are provided, I believe, by two convictions that emerge from my mother's words. First, as parents we are co-creators with God in relation to our children. And second, as parents we are not "owners" of children, but stewards of lives given us to watch over, protect, and nurture as gifts to the human community. My mother's convictions have become my own - though I leave aside her judgment about how "wonderful" her children are - and thus these reflections are grounded not only in a shared faith but also a shared experience as a parent.

The Religious Heritage

The conviction my mother expressed is echoed, in varying ways, within the religious heritage of humankind. That heritage is unanimous in affirming that human life unfolds within a divine-human nexus. We are not alone. This common but multiform witness has been expressed in an astonishing variety of ways, ranging from the concrete imagery and practice of primal traditions to the soaring abstractions of philosophers and theologians in both East and West. In this multiform heritage, virtually every aspect of human being and becoming has been tracked to its divine ground in order to disclose our rootage in the mystery of the Ultimate.

Consider, for example, the rituals that surround birth and name within Jewish and Christian communities, or the elaborate ethical codes designed to inform familial relations within Confucianism, or the more than one hundred rituals that mark important events and stages in the life of a Hindu child, or the ancestral rituals of Shinto, or the Tibetan Buddhist charting of the transition from life to death to rebirth, or the dream quests of Plains Indians to secure one's vocation, or the respect for elders and grandparents encouraged by African tribal religions. In all these practices and beliefs we see evidence of the conviction that divine and human life are profoundly connected to one another and that we cannot fully apprehend, let alone comprehend, human life without recognizing the presence of the divine in the midst of human being and becoming. Yet, curiously, many of us, especially in the secularized West, find ourselves cut off from this rich fund of insight and practice. The truth of the divine-human context seems increasingly forgotten.

The Parenting Crisis

This forgetting seems particularly ironic given the apparent crisis in family life in North American societies. We often read of the “crisis of parenting.” There is a danger of overstating this crisis – or of misunderstanding its nature – and neglecting the extent to which parents continue to love and care for their children, despite the cultural forces that seem to undermine family life. Still, there is a crisis, and one of its causes is the loss of those larger contexts of meaning that have been mediated to us through the religious traditions. I believe that parenting becomes disoriented and problematic when we lose ways of relating the day-to-day tasks of child-rearing to these larger contexts of meaning, and indeed, to God’s purpose for creation.[2] This loss leads family life, especially parenting, to collapse upon itself and become captive to narrowly biological, or commercial, or power understandings of parenting. In this article, I want to suggest some ways to reclaim and articulate the larger, religious context of parenting. I shall focus on the theological grounds of nurture and mission and draw out some of the implications for aspects of parenting, especially for that aspect called “fathering.” These later reflections on fathering gain immediacy for me by the death of my own father, and by my efforts to be a father to my four children. In these situations, I have found the darkness of my way illuminated by the examples of others, and by the insights of traditions, especially Christian, that in their life-giving words and practices have disclosed the divine ground that sustains me with a grace beyond reckoning. My assumption throughout is that there is a divine ground that shines through and in our experiences: here sustaining, there reproofing, and renewing, in order to lift us beyond ourselves to that Ultimate mystery in which we live, move, and have our being. Two further points need to be made before turning our attention to the central issues of these reflections. First, the theological assumptions present here need not be in conflict with other, more social scientific accounts, of the family and parenting. Indeed, some effort should be made to correlate the insights and wisdom of these disciplines with those of theology. For, to use a classic formula, grace fulfills nature. But grace also undergirds and renovates nature, and hence a theological perspective on the family raises questions about the origin and destiny of that institution which transcend social scientific analysis alone. Theology places parent-child relationships in the context of humanity’s relationship with its divine Parent. Parenting is thus both a fully human and a fully divine activity. Parent and child alike begin to discern a presence beyond themselves in which their lives unfold. This awareness frees the parent from an overwhelming or destructive sense of responsibility, while also expanding the resources to be called upon in the rearing of children.

But this must not be construed to “sacralize” the family, as if every family were part of an unchanging divine order. Thus a second and equally important point must be made here, namely that families are transient. Relationships may be eternal, but the family, as the institution for nurturing a new generation, is not. As children grow to maturity, the family must dissolve in order that the child may be freed to assume his or her individual vocation within the whole human family. We might say, in Paul Tillich’s terms, that the family aims to be “theonomous,” i.e., an institution that points beyond itself while simultaneously being sustained by that Beyond which is manifest in its midst and its ground.[3] Unless the family has a horizon beyond itself, it tends either to unduly elevate itself or, on the other hand, to fall back into the autonomy of the individuals in a family. Neither of these options is desirable. It is a theonomous notion of nurture and mission that I seek to articulate here.

The Divine Human Nexus

Divine-human co-creatorship is the foundation of parent-child relationships. From the moment of conception through the life of the child, I have found myself, as a child and as a parent, co-operating with forces larger than myself. All parents have moments when they experience the mystery of a child, standing in awe before the little one and wondering, “Where did this child come from?” This may sometimes be said in exasperation or amusement, but it nonetheless points to the mystery of the child as one who is not merely an extension of ourselves, or a function of the environment. And all children at times find themselves overwhelmed with the world into which they come and as they seek to discover themselves and their place within the mystery of being. Our parents are the primal mediators of the mystery of being to us in their actions which hold us, protect us, and sustain us, and in their words which mediate the meaning of things to us.

So parenting is the co-operative nurturing of the given potentialities of a new life towards the discovery of that child’s individual vocation within the radiant rings of community that extend from familial, through social, to cosmic life. As parents we discover that we not only co-operate with one another as mother and father, but also with others in the extended family (grandparents, aunts and uncles), the neighborhood, community and social institutions, friends, and strangers in the world in the nurture of children. I have often been grateful for those others who have given to my children time, skills, stories, advice, and experience that I, by myself, could not. The parent occupies a crucial place in the network of relationships that both form and provide a context for a child’s life, but it is silly to regard oneself as the only parent. Moreover, the child, from an early age, has access to larger realms of meaning and significance through his or her dreaming, imagination, contact with nature, and interaction with other children. Much of this the parent can only watch and help the child to interpret and understand; the parent cannot control its content.

An awareness of the larger network of parenting should, however, free the parent from both an excessive and exaggerated sense of his or her own role. While we loom large within our children’s lives, it is a “largeness” that does not stop at our physical and psychic boundaries, but discloses our roles as mediators to the mystery of being. More through us than from us children gain, for example, what Erik Erikson has called “basic trust” or, alas, “mistrust.”[4] They also gain a sense of their own dignity as persons, a love of virtue, respect for others, etc. But this is a mediatorial role and it is not wholly in our control. Much shines through us as parents, but what the child catches is partly due to things over which we parents have no control. The child is not merely “ours,” but also belongs to the world and to God. To say this is not to dodge responsibility, but to acknowledge some other dimensions of our experience as parents. It is also to underscore our role as mediators.

Signals of Transcendence

Moreover, we often fail to recognize how our life in families is filled with what Peter Berger calls “signals of transcendence.” In his *Rumor of Angels*, Berger cites the following example:

A child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream, and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats. At such a moment the contours of trusted reality are blurred or invisible, and in the terror of incipient chaos the child cries out for his Mother. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, at that moment, the mother is being invoked as a high priestess of protective order. It is she (and, in many cases, she alone) who has the power to banish the chaos and restore the benign shape of the world. And, of course, any good mother will do just that. She will take the child and cradle him in the timeless gesture of the Magna Mater who became our Madonna. She will turn on a lamp, perhaps, which will encircle the scene with a warm glow of reassuring light. She will speak or sing to the child, and the content of this communication will invariably be the same – “Don’t be afraid – everything is in order – everything is alright.” If all goes well, the child will be reassured, his trust in reality recovered, and in this trust he will return to sleep.[5]

Here we see the crucial mediating role of the parent, but we can also see that this points to something beyond the event, namely, the conviction that there is an order that the parent may truthfully mediate to the child. But what is its status? Outside, as Berger notes, not everything may be in order. Does this make “order” a lie? No, for as Berger argues there is a transcendent order which sustains us even in the midst of disorder. Our lives as parents and children are shot through with experiences of this order-beyond-disorder, experiences which only the language of religion can account for. Unfortunately, so much of the language of religion has been overly moralized that we often hear only an endless list of “thou shalt nots.” Or it has been darkened by experiences of hypocrisy and duplicity that render it fit for ridicule and skepticism. But when we hear it afresh then it has the power to illumine our experience and disclose those larger dimensions that are present to our experience.

Nurture

Our vocation as parents, then, is to provide a kind of nurture for our children that is alive to the “signals of transcendence” that are to be found in, with, and under our lives. To nurture is to care for what is given in a new life and to seek to nourish it toward its destiny or ends. Let me note three features of this notion of nurture. First, care is the form love takes in relation to new lives. Care extends from the biological through the spiritual dimensions of these new lives. It is regard for the wholeness of a new life and should not be restricted to a narrowly physical conception of life. Second, the term “given” underscores the realization that the child, from the beginning, is a soul or person with distinctive capacities waiting to unfold. The child is not a “blank slate” or a “formless set of potentialities,” but a formed soul which we must nourish and help to find its individual vocation. This notion of the child stands over against the tendencies of parents to either see children as created by the environment or merely as extensions of themselves. Neither view gives either the parent or the child the requisite distance from themselves or the other that grounds respect and leads to a growing mutuality and eventual friendship. Third, nurture is not only presence and means, but it is also direction towards ends. Those ends must be stated generally but they nonetheless affect the way we respond to their lives, interpret their actions, and shape their care.

However, at the heart of our nurturing must stand the parents’ silent consent to being itself. Unless the parents hold within themselves some sense of the gift and goodness of life itself, the nurturing process is compromised by what we might call an affective metaphysical contradiction.

How do we mediate the mystery of being to our children if we ourselves stand in an unresolved, or hostile, or estranged relationship to that mystery? To speak of this “consent to being itself” is not to suggest that every parent must be a saint, a mystic, or a philosopher. Rather it suggests something much more simple, something that radiates from those mothers and fathers that are simply glad to be and hence can receive new lives in that same spirit. This consent to being is prior to all the other circumstances that shape our lives and is, in my view, the most precious gift we, as parents, can mediate to our children. And such consent is also crucial to the life of the child as it is the ground of their dignity as persons and of their own subsequent self-acceptance. In our highly commercial culture, which confuses being with having, the primacy of the mystery of being – and our consent to it – are certainly obscured, if not wholly forgotten.

Nurture as Mission

Given what has been said about nurture, the theme of nurture and mission takes on a distinctive focus: nurture is itself the mission of parents. At the heart of nurture lies an imperative that is central to the fulfillment of divine purposes, namely, the care of the new generation and the mediation to that generation of the mystery of being in the world. Here mission is not something apart from our nurturing tasks as parents, but is inherent within them. For nurture – genuine caring – is related to ends and aspirations that are grounded in the very purposes of God. When we fail to recognize the transcendent grounds and the aspirational ends of nurture, then our roles as parents become disoriented and subject to the commercial and consumerist values of our culture. Nurture of the new generation does not, of course, exhaust our missions or vocations as human beings, but it lies central to our mission as parents. Thus we must ask about the ends of nurture itself.

The Four Fronts of Nurture

I have already argued that nurture rests in the matrix of consent to being itself as the mystery of divine presence and gift of life. Here the task of the parent is simply that of being present to a child, a transparent being-with that mediates something beyond. Given the “busyness” of our lives, we often underestimate the importance of sheer presence, of just being with our children. Being with them in silence, in play, in nature, in shared activities, in taking care of hurts, in eating, in conversation, in getting ready for bed, in all the day-to-day repetition, is to bestow upon our children the gift of our being. The emphasis here falls on being-with, not just on doing the tasks that need doing. This is a difficult, but important, capacity to cultivate. Repetition always threatens to overwhelm being with the child in these moments and it even becomes more difficult as the number of children increase. But at the bottom of repetition (re-petition) lies a petition, the petition to be with another. Here as elsewhere, we must take care not to smother the child, for to be with involves a recognition of the other as a creature of dignity. Nor is this a call for omni-presence in the child’s life. Being with involves the contrasting good of being apart. These goods must be balanced for the welfare of all involved. But I have emphasized the being-with because it is neglected when nurture is understood in a too narrow sense of providing for. And also because it is important for fathers, as well as mothers, to be with their children in the day-to-day moments of life. I remember with great appreciation moments with my parents throughout my life when I was simply with them and that terrible moment in the late ‘70s when my father suffered his first major heart attack and I realized there would come a time when I would no longer be able just to be with him. As parents we must remember to be with our children.

But in the midst of being with our children, we need to ask what we are aiming at when we, as parents, care for the next generation. When seen upon what Rosenstock-Huessy calls “the cross of reality,” then nurture discloses four faces in relation to each front on the cross.[6] Those fronts are the past, the future, the inner and outer. It may be helpful to focus on each of these fronts in order to differentiate some of the aspirational ends of nurture.

1. Respect for the Living Past

In writing of tribes and families, Rosenstock-Huessy observes:

The first priests instituted in the tribes were mothers and fathers. They were put in authority to represent to the newborn the whole past world of the tribe, by teaching them the second names of the tribe, by making these children in their youth form their lips to the invocation of the ancestral spirit, and by establishing that whenever these names were formed the children had to stand in awe and reverence.[7]

This underscores the responsibility of parents to mediate a sense of respect for the past, or better, a living heritage to the present generation. Many today grow up without any sense of the intergenerational character of life, nor with any genuine respect for the past. And those who do not have some appreciation of the past often convey to their children only a rigid veneration. But a living heritage is access to that vital company of men and women through the generations who now call upon us to take up our place in the unfolding of humankind. As we increasingly enter a global society, it becomes ever more important to weave the life of new generations into our collective heritage, the common autobiography of humankind.

2. Faith and the Future

In relation to the future, we strive to give to our children the gift of faith. Not faith in a narrow sense, but faith as an inspired orientation towards the future. Faith is the capacity of one generation to inspire the next. As the foundation of a vital life, faith gives our children the necessary capacity to respond creatively to the events, demands, and sufferings that come their way. Such faith is a basic disposition or orientation that permeates every aspect of life, and is not to be identified with any. It is not this or that belief, but the capacity to smell out that which makes for life rather than death in all that will be put before them as worthy of belief. Such faith cannot be taught in any other way than through living example. Here it is the spirit speaking to spirit in ways that kindle and fan into a living flame what is given to all in their being as creatures of God.

3. Dignity Within

In relation to the inner front, we strive to awaken in our children a sense of their own dignity as human beings. This is not earned, but given or bestowed by God in the gift of life itself. The task of parents is to facilitate in their children a recognition of their inherent, God-given dignity. This does not rest either on performance or on social approval: it just is. Out of an awakening to their own dignity will come that positive respect for self and others that we want to see in our

children. A sense of dignity will also serve the child well in relation to his or her own future in that it will save him or her from undue regard for peer opinion and social conventions. It is the sense of inherent dignity that leads to capacities for independent thought and action.

4. Stewards Without

In relation to the outer front, we strive to awaken in our children a sense of responsibility in regard to our social world and a sense of stewardship in regard to creation. Responsibility grows out of our early experiences of interaction with our parents, siblings, and peers. The responsible self learns that the larger social world is not just something to which he or she must simply adjust, an impenetrable monolith unresponsive to his or her contributions. Rather, it is a something upon which our actions have an impact. As we listen to our children, play with them, encourage them to resolve disputes with their siblings, etc., we prepare them for ever increasing spheres of social interaction. Of equal importance, but different in nature, is the end of encouraging in our children a sense of stewardship in regard to creation. Having grown up in rural North Dakota, I have often been struck by how limited the experience of many is in regard to the vastness, power, and beauty of the created order. Those endless vistas of sky and land together with the ceaseless and ever-changing dramas of clouds announcing the weather have marked me forever. The sheer scale of creation calls forth an attitude of regard and care when we see it as an expression of divine creativity and not merely “stuff” to be done with as we will.

Obviously a full discussion of these aspirational values, and their grounds, is not possible here. But it is hoped that the above might lead to some reflection and suggest something of the multiform ends of nurture. Moreover, I have wanted to suggest that while such ends are, in part, mediated through the parents (both immediate and extended) they also point towards the presence of Divine life in our midst. Perhaps I can make this latter point a bit more concrete by speaking of my father.

Fathering: Human and Divine

As I indicated earlier, my father has recently died (1984). He was sixty-seven. About six and a half years before his death, he suffered a major heart attack that led to his retirement. That moment was especially important in my relationship to him in that it was then that I became especially aware that he would die some day. I remember then praying that it would not be then because I was so reluctant to face life without being able just to be held by my father, to talk with him. The shock of his possible death generated in me, at levels I only became aware of when he died, reflections and meditations that deepened my own sense of the mystery of fathering.

My father's life was marked by considerable suffering. He caught tuberculosis in his early twenties and spent two years in a sanitarium. As a result he had one collapsed lung. He came from a farming family that highly valued a kind of strength he did not have. His own father was a hard man, and all my father's working life was a struggle for survival. Yet in the midst of all this, he came to be a man of patience and great affection for his children. His marriage to my mother was central to his own emergence, and that was communicated to his children. Out of his own struggles and weakness he was able to mediate to me, and my sisters and brother, a strength of character and a love that, in many respects, exceeded him. It was as if what he gave us was not his own but something that sustained and nourished him as well. It is here, I believe, that we

encounter the mystery of fathering, namely, that fathers mediate the divine life to us both in spite of and through themselves. (The same would hold true for mothers.) Somewhere Karl Barth wonders if our notions of the Divine Father is a projection of what we have known in our actual fathers, or if our fathers reflect and mediate the Fatherhood of God which proceeds them.[8] I have become more and more persuaded it is the latter, that there is something shining through our fathers that leads us to apprehend the Father beyond. When I say this I am well aware of the many problematic relationships between fathers and children, but even here I would suggest that the reason we see such relationships as problematic is because we already are in relation to the Father Beyond and thus we “know” what is amiss.

In this mediatorial notion of fathering, it strikes me that a father is called upon to fulfill two crucial tasks. His role in the creation of a new life is different from the mother's: his task is to confirm, in word and deed, that this new life is “My beloved Son/Daughter in whom I am well pleased.” The person who conveys this to the new life is truly the father of the new life. Such a word needs to be spoken not only at the beginning of life, but over and over throughout a life. When such a word takes up residence in the heart of a child then the child is at home not simply within the community of the family but within the life of the cosmos. The other crucial role of the father is to love the mother, not as mother but as wife. The first society we know is that of the family. In large measure, what we learn here will determine what we expect in the larger circles of being. As the nursery for our participation in the whole human family, the love we know and experience in the family will set the tone and direction of our love elsewhere.

Many in our culture seem to perceive “fathers” – both human and divine – as a threat to autonomy and the full realization of personhood. Such has not been my experience. On the contrary, it is the affirmation of the father that frees us to achieve our own selfhood and to proceed towards our own individual vocations within the human family.

Mothering: Human and Divine

Mothering likewise is both human and divine. Here we in the Christian traditions have much to learn from the other religious traditions. In India, for example, divine life is often imagined in terms of a couple, such as Krishna and Radha. And the feminist movement within Christianity has made us all painfully aware of the patriarchal distortion of our faith. Mothering is not only taking care of daily life, but also mediating the mystery of life's beginnings and our own sense of being “at home” with ourselves and our world at the deepest levels. We need to learn to say with Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century Christian mystic, that “God is our Mother.” This bestows the full dignity of our human mothers, a dignity that we have intuitively felt but failed to acknowledge theologically. It will allow us, in our mothering vocations, to heed the call from Beyond that is present in every hurt we comfort, every joy we celebrate with our children on the road to claiming their own distinctive personhood.

Epilogue: Claiming Our Vocations

I have been suggesting that a central purpose of parenting is to enable each child to discover his or her personal vocation within the human community. This discovery is facilitated by the religious conviction that our lives are embedded in an overarching context of meaning and

purpose – God’s purposes for creation. To believe this is to live in solidarity with the whole human family. Thus we want our children to discover a vocation that transcends merely material and commercial ends. For children eventually grow up and leave home and become the next link in the chain of generations that stretches from creation to consummation. Here again it will largely be the formation they have received in the family that will facilitate their transformation again and again as their lives unfold. But by nurturing an openness to the spirit-filled dimensions of life we, as parents, will have contributed what we can to their own discovery of a vocation that will serve humankind, the fitting form of service to God.

NOTES

[1] This piece was originally published in SEASONS, The Inter-faith Family Journal, Vol. 8, Number 1, Spring, 1989, pp. 10-15. An earlier version of these meditations was given at a conference on “Nurture and Mission” sponsored by the New Ecumenical Research Association (New ERA) in 1985. I am grateful to the members of that seminar for their criticisms and their constructive observations.

[2] I am also aware of the distortions of the religious traditions that occur in the hands of parents who see and use these traditions to legitimate their own destructive needs for power and control. The sign of genuine parenting sustained and transformed by religious faith is a vibrant love that permeates and enhances the lives of the entire family.

[3] Paul Tillich uses “theonomy” (the state of being governed by God) in contrast both to “autonomy” (the state of self-governance) and “heteronomy” (the state of being governed by another). As God’s creatures, human beings are rightly governed only if they are divinely governed. But in a fallen world, perfect theonomy can at best be approximated, never fully achieved. See Systematic Theology, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63), I:54, 83-86; III:249-275.

[4] See Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. Norton & Co., 1950).

[5] Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1970), pp.54-55.

[6] See Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *The Christian Future, Or the Modern Mind Outrun* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), esp. pp.166 ff. and *Speech and Reality* (Norwich, VT: Argo Books, 1970).

[7] Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, “Tribalism” in *I Am An Impure Thinker* (Norwich, VT: Argo Books, 1970), pp.124-125.

[8] Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/4, The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), pp.245ff.