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Fathers, Myths and Meaning
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What is the role of father? I think about this every Father's Day. In so many books I read, fiction or non-fiction, if it's not the father then it's the mother we are all trying to forgive, let go of, attain some distance from so this great big person and mythological being in our lives can stop having control of our automatic responses each time our spouses or friends or colleagues do something that upset our expectations. This is grist for the mill in our individual and couple's therapy sessions and personal work.

I remember a class I took in my undergraduate years when I studied Postmodernism, which is the study, generally said, of how we are not solid identities but multiply identities that shift and morph depending on situation and context. Jacques Derrida, almost impossible to read, is one of the fathers of this movement, and he writes about how the word chair for instance does not refer to the same thing in all instances and that it in fact refers to different types of things depending on the context, culture and situation in which one lives.

Equally so, the words we use to refer to ourselves: good, true, strong, right, able bodied...all live in a context of a culture and situation and time and also in a context of their opposites and that we are also wrong and false and weak and differently abled all the time too and they too have contexts that dependent on culture and situation. We hide one self from another depending on culturally acceptability of these selves.

Minister is a good example of how this happens. One must be a certain set of qualities and not others and feels pained when in relation to those parts of self that don't fit the definition of minister culturally. I go through this all the time.

Father is another identity that gets strongly labeled in our culture. One way or another, it does not have a lot of flexibility in its definitions. It gets placed, wherever it is placed, with a lot of solidity.

Any person that has an identity that is total, that is scripted, that is written out completely, screams to be rewritten. Today, I would like to rewrite father, to allow the image of father the gift of teaching us how to let the Father Image go: to open us all to the capacity to accept that we are multiple, rich, contradictory, hewn from many cloths.

Here are some of the descriptors of Father I gleaned for this sermon from multiple sources:

God, when considered as the first person of the Trinity, the status of a religious leader, a position of leadership in an organization, a person who begins, invents or first makes something. Provider, rationalizer, keeper of the gate, hauler, protector. One who knows how to make things right.

Here are some of the adjectives I learned for father from Wikipedia: Baby Daddy, Birth Father, Biological Father, Posthumous Father, Putative Father, Sperm Donor, Surprise

Father, Cuckolded Father, Presumed father, social father, absent father, second father, and my personal favorite holiday father.

Fathers it seems are gods and demons, biological tadpoles and nurturers, folks who show up when we need them and folks who let us down in ways like no others ever can, except maybe our mothers, but that's another story.

What might happen if we allowed ourselves and each other more fluidity in our identities, more latitude in our capacities to be and become with each other? Might we all be able to forgive and live with more ease and hope?

What is a good enough father in this paradigm? True to this sermon, seeking more than a father that plays to our scripted stereotypes, I cast my net wider than usual and found Harvey Milk, an openly gay man who was never a father and yet fathered a movement and nurtured so many into an expression of themselves that forced us all, gay and straight, to look at the rigidity with which we define the categories of identity, self, love, sex, and marriage.

Harvey Milk, after graduating from the New York State College for Teachers in 1951, joined the U.S. Navy. Following his discharge in 1955, Milk moved to New York City, where he worked a variety of jobs, including public school teacher and Wall Street investment banker.

In late 1972, he moved to San Francisco, California. There, he opened a camera shop called Castro Camera on Castro Street, putting his life and work right in the heart of the city's gay community.

For much of his life, Milk had stayed quiet about his personal life. He had known since high school that he was gay, and even in the wake of an emerging gay rights movement, the deliberate and careful Milk chose to remain on the sidelines.

In San Francisco, his life and outspoken politics evolved. As Castro Camera increasingly became a neighborhood center, Milk found his voice as a leader and activist. In 1973, he declared his candidacy for a position on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. A novice politician with little money, Milk lost the election, but the experience did not deter him from trying again.

In 1977, Milk, who was known affectionately as the "Mayor of Castro Street," finally won a seat on the San Francisco City-County Board. He was inaugurated on January 9, 1978, becoming the city's first openly gay officer, as well as one of the first openly gay individuals to be elected to office in the United States.

While his campaign certainly incorporated gay rights into his platform, Milk also wanted to tackle a wide variety of issues, from child care to housing to a civilian police review board.

Milk's ascension had come at an important time for the gay community. While many psychiatrists still considered homosexuality a mental illness at this time, the liberal Mayor Moscone had become an early supporter of gay rights and had abolished the city's anti-sodomy law. Mayor Moscone had also appointed several gay and lesbian people to a number of high-profile positions within San Francisco.

On the other side of Moscone was Supervisor Dan White, a Vietnam veteran and former police officer and fireman, who was troubled by what he perceived as a breakdown in traditional values and a growing tolerance of homosexuality. Elected to the San Francisco City-County Board in 1977, he frequently clashed with the more liberal Milk on policy issues.

A year after his election, in 1978, White resigned from the board, citing that his salary wasn't enough to support his family. But White subsequently changed his mind regarding his resignation and asked Moscone to reappoint him. The mayor refused, however, encouraged by Milk and others to fill White's spot with a more liberal board member. For White, who was convinced that men like Moscone and Milk were driving his city "downhill," it was a devastating blow.

On November 27, 1978, White entered City Hall with a loaded .38 revolver. He avoided the metal detectors by entering through a basement window that had been negligently left open for ventilation.

His first stop was at the mayor's office, where he and Moscone begun arguing, eventually moving to a private room so that they could not be heard. Once there, Moscone again refused to re-appoint White, and White shot the mayor twice in the chest and twice in the head. White then went down the corridor and shot Milk, twice in the chest, once in the back and twice again in the head. Soon after, he turned himself in at the police station where he used to work.

White's trial was marked by what came to be known as the "Twinkie defense," as his lawyers claimed that the normally stable White had grown slovenly prior to the shootings due to abandoning his usually healthy diet and instead indulging in sugary junk food such as Coke, doughnuts and Twinkies.

In a surprising move, a jury convicted White of voluntary manslaughter rather than murder, and White would subsequently serve just six years in prison.¹

Harvey Milk treated people as if they are valuable because they are human beings, not because of identities firmly established and codified by dress, sexual identity or race. He saw humanity something we express on a continuum and lifted it up as valuable in and of itself. His *I* contained multitudes and he allowed other *I*'s room to contain the same. This is a fatherhood that can allow us all room to breathe, to flourish to build narratives in the

¹ <https://www.biography.com/people/harvey-milk-9408170>

present and the past that have room for stories that can see more than one identity as valid, more than one script as whole, more than one process as good and right and valid and worthy of our lives.

When we can accept that we as human beings are made of so many contradictions, so many unfinished pieces, so many ends that do not meet neatly, not only will we then allow young people to name their genders as they experience them and allow them bathrooms that meet their need so they need not feel humiliated when they have to relieve themselves, and will stop calling this some kind of identity politics that keeps liberals cut off from people who live for instance in the rust belt. The need for health care and minimum wage and the need to use a bathroom that corresponds with one's experience of one's gender are not separate issues. They are tied up in each other.

Those identities, the transgendered person and the rust belt middle class white worker, are both worthy of attention, care, and national attention. People are dying from lack of attention, fair distribution of resources and a willingness to accept that we don't all fit into neat little boxes made for us by neat little people in neat little booths that fell apart a neat little hundred years ago. We are multiple and complex and contradictory and broken and fixed and right and wrong and good and bad and big and small and oh my goodness do we need to stop trapping each other in tiny boxes that keep us lost and alone.

On this Father's Day, may the container of Father teach us to break open containers and find inside love, like a dove, ready to spread its wings and set us and others we hold captive free, as we were meant to be. Amen.