

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, June 17, 2007
9:30 a.m.

My father's name was Charles Richard True. He was born in 1910, the son of Alice Goward Blake and Ralph Butler True. He was forty when I was born and ninety when he died. As a youth, he traveled up and down the eastern seaboard following my grandfather whose Depression Era employment involved building golf courses. Later he settled in Framingham, Massachusetts where he met and married my mother. He was eight years her senior, a renowned bachelor in our town.

He attended twelve different high schools and played the banjo in a band in Tampa, Florida. He worked on a tugboat and loved electronics. During the War, he ran a Raytheon plant and worked on the Manhattan Project. In my lifetime, he owned a Radio and TV Store and sold real estate. He never went to college. He loved convertibles and frozen pudding ice cream, and me.

He was five feet six inches tall and slight of build. My children called him "Dudgie." He went bald at the age of nineteen; scraped his head on the bottom of the pool, he used to tell me. His eyes were gray, his skin was dark, and his hair as a youth was thick and black, the opposite of my blonde, green-eyed mother. He had perfect teeth and he loved to dance and his face lit up when he smiled which was often. He fell in our driveway four weeks after my husband died and was taken off life support two weeks later. When I went away to summer camp as a child, he wrote to me every day. He was my best friend.

He loved ham radio and tinkered endlessly with my brothers in the basement. He loved to sail and sing and could tell a joke like nobody's business. I never saw him read a book but he put me to bed with a made-up story every night. Joe Wyer the Maine Indian Scout was my favorite character. Among my friends, he was famous for the twenty-minute rule: if it takes less than twenty minutes to clean up the mess, do it! My tiny suburban plot was the repository of his massive creative spirit: he transformed our garage into a summer theater, made a glass house in the backyard out of storm windows for sleeping under the stars, and patiently

looked on as ten of my friends nearly dug up the cesspool in an attempt to unearth Indian artifacts.

As a local businessman, my father knew everyone in town. I was his late-in-life child, his only daughter, the one he'd proudly take to lunch at Casey's Diner while my mom labored away in the Town Clerk's Office. Remember when we came home from school for lunch?

In my youth I adored him; in my teens I tolerated him; in my twenties, I ignored him; in my thirties, I was furious at him; in my forties I forgave him; and in my fifties, I miss him.

Isn't it interesting what we remember about our fathers, whether they are still with us or not? It takes a little digging, I think. Mothers are ever-present, while fathers emanate a *pre-sence*, something often felt, more than experienced. As a child, my father was lightness and joy, and this, of course, is how I construed God--lighthearted, playful, somewhat irresponsible, dubiously capable of withstanding anything too weighty. You see, in a world of God the Father, *our fathers become God*, replete with all the frailties and limitations our own personal patriarchs embody. This, my friends, is where many a faith runs aground, on the shoals of our father's imperfections.

My father's crimes and misdemeanors were largely errors of omission--ways in which he was not present to me and my brothers. Not everyone is so lucky. I remember attending a week-long workshop in California once for men and women who had been horrifically abused. I wept throughout the week as my colleagues shared stories of addiction and beatings, neglect and sexual and emotional violence. Faith for these friends was well-nigh impossible. "Lord of Lords" and "King of Kings" may sound great in Handel's Messiah, but for those mistreated at the hands of a male authority figure, these words leave them cold in their tracks. How can we pray, "Our Father . . ." when the source of fatherly power in our lives is destructive, not creative? How can we know a benevolent God when fatherhood for us evokes images of cruelty? How can we trust in a compassionate God when the sacred covenant of fatherly love is blatantly or subtly betrayed? How can we place our lives in the hands an almighty male God when the men in our lives have smitten our very souls?

The answer is, we can't, so many of us give up on "organized religion," which of course means giving up on Jesus and we pretend it doesn't matter. We keep God at a safe distance because if dear old dad was overbearing, just think of all that divine might. Even when our fathers are nice, lovely folks, it is inevitable that they will constrain our understanding of God the Father of All Creation. Human role models are just too delimiting. And though I am extremely sensitive to the feminist sensibilities that inspired God as Father/Mother/Sophia/Androgenous Life Force of the Universe, in the Judeo-Christian tradition God is a guy, and Jesus is a guy, and we need to work out what this means in our own lives and in our faith.

So how, my friends, do we do this? How do we separate our personal history from salvation history, our own fathers and their particularities from our one true Father in Heaven whose name we are asked to hallow and whose will, will be done? A deep and close reading of Scripture is a good place to start. The Hebrew Bible is an exhaustive catalogue of the distinction between human power and the power of God, and they are never, *ever* the same. Jesus is a good place to end: "The Father is in me and I am in the Father." We see the true nature of God in the life and teachings of Jesus, and we all, fathers and mothers and children alike can take refuge in that.

I remember so clearly the first and only time I ever saw my father cry. It was a serious time in my family's life. He was sitting on my brother's bed late at night cradled like a child in my mother's arms and sobbing. I wandered in sleepily in my pajamas and was sternly told to return to bed. I can still recall how absolutely terrified I felt. And though the thought was too big for my mind, the image of my big, strong Sunday School God collapsed. Did God weep? He must be no God at all. Little did I know.

Today is Father's Day, a day to celebrate the men who seeded us with life, who even in their humanness did their best to emulate the Father of us all. Let us celebrate them, let us remember them, let us forgive them and miss them and honor them, knowing that in the end, this is Our *Heavenly* Father's World and we can, indeed, rest in that thought.

Amen.