

FATHER LOVE

By Stephen Gladish

Everyone knows about mother love. Many stories and memories have been recounted, celebrating the humble and loving sacrifices of mothers, and mother love. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church makes these statements about mothers:

The sphere of the love of infants principally affects the mother (Conjugal Love 393)

The mother, as is well known has a more tender love of infants (ibid.).

This is because conjugal love is implanted in every woman, along with the love of conceiving children (Conjugal Love 223,393).

The mother who on earth loved all infants with maternal tenderness, is given in heaven infants as many as she desires to love and care for! (ibid. 410).

But what about father love? It's not so well known, is it? First, we must distinguish between a natural father and a spiritual father, A natural father bonds himself with external things of the child which he favors. He shuts his eyes to the faults of his children, because love of his children is the same as love of himself. (Of course, a mother can do this also.) In the spiritual world, we are told such a father paid no attention to the evil deeds and attacks of his children, even when he himself saw them commit these deeds. He and his children clung together like a "...bundle of sticks. And lest so harmful a company continue, they all were sent to hell, and the father was put under guard" (*Conjugal Love* 406). Here appears one clear example of a father who went to hell solely because of the way he raised his children. Nobody thinks that can happen. 'They're my kids, and I'll do what I want with them,' is a fairly common attitude.

A spiritual father, on the other hand, loves his children for their spiritual intelligence and moral life, for their fear of God, and devotion to uses serviceable to society. He provides for their needs mainly from his love of their virtues and upright conduct. If the father sees no such virtues in his children, he sets his mind apart from them, and provides for them solely from duty (Conjugal Love 405).

Most of us fathers (and mothers) fall somewhere between the pictures painted of natural and spiritual parents. Yet somehow, the divine laws of love, nurturance, and self-sacrifice traditionally have been ignored by fathers, and applied only to mothers. This is a mistake. Some Christian family counselors believe if we improve father commitment, caring, and affective responsibility, we will reduce both family and marriage discord and disease, of which there is plenty! It has often been said, "The role of the father is the most underestimated job in America." Time after time, causes of children's misbehavior, school failure, and poor mental health have been traced to father absence.

While children can usually count on their mother's love, the same cannot be said for the father. Yet, children who feel loved and prized by their fathers have a certain sparkle of happiness in their eyes—as well as a more useful and secure adjustment to life. There is nothing quite so

touching as a father changing his baby's diapers, or feeding his one-year-old, or rough-housing with his kids home from school, or cooking breakfast for the whole family. It is touching because we don't expect it, we don't see it, we're not used to it as a general rule. So many fathers think they must present a tough, in-charge disciplinarian image to the watching adult world. Presenting a loving, gentle man's image to the world, and especially to our children, will do much to stop the insanities of aggression and will, more importantly, help the children grow. What our kids think is far more important than what our adult friends think.

In addition to career counseling, one of my duties is to teach values in both a men's prison and a women's prison. Many of the prisoners have told or written stories of their childhood for me; so few had loving and involved fathers, and some came from wealthy families! One prisoner stood up to be sentenced, and the judge said, "Do you remember your father, the father you have just disgraced?" And the prisoner answered, "Yes, I remember him perfectly. Whenever I went to him for advice or companionship, he would look up from his legal briefs, and say, 'Run away, boy, I am busy.' My father made a great reputation for himself. I wish I'd known him."

Fatherliness is a beautiful gift, a character trait which enables the father to act toward his children with immediate empathy and responsiveness. A warm, loving father enables his son to accept his own tender feelings; a rigid, strict, punitive father activates these defensive qualities in his son and inhibits his development of fatherliness. A daughter often marries the kind of man she is most used to—a man like her father. Contrary to popular myth, the father is *very* important to his daughter's development, and the mother is also more important than imagined to her son's development. Many of us must practice fatherliness, just as the musician must practice on the piano to perfect his performance. We may not yet possess the gift of fatherliness; we may not have had the gift passed down to us by natural or acquired example. Still, we have a Divine example—the Lord, our Father, who is in heaven. He always loves us, cares for us, listens to us, provides for us, is with us when we're down, and is concerned about our eternal welfare. He is always waiting for us. He has a happy home ready for us. He believes in us, thinks the best of us, always forgives us when we err. We can learn the art of fatherliness, of real father love, from Him. And the more we practice it, the more He will flow in with His fatherly love. And we must eventually teach our children that in Heaven, the Lord is Father to all, and that we are not to be remembered as their father (see *Conjugal Love* 406).

There never can be an earthy replacement for our fathers, nor for us if we are fathers. We are the chief model for our sons to identify with. We are the first image of the Lord to our children. We are the first man for our daughters to relate to. We are the teachers of morals and values and justice, and how to get along out in the world. With their mother, we are the main model for marriage. How we handle our feelings, or don't handle them, will be imitated. How we approach the Lord, or deal with crises, will be imitated, even if we shoo our kids away and don't want to be bothered with them. As a matter of fact, the more a father rejects his child, the more the child might imitate him to win his approval.

What is the point of my message? *We are important*; fathers are very important, whether we like it or not, accept it or not. Nobody on earth can ever replace us. A child is waiting for us. Children are waiting for us to dispense our father love. Some of them will still be waiting for us to say "I love you," for years after we die. It is not enough for countless children to hear from their

mother, “You know your father loves you.” We must tell them ourselves, show them in person. Our family needs *us*, not some wage-earning image of the man who “brings home the bacon.” Possibly the major factor in the American family disintegration and disorganization is father and husband absence, aloofness, disinterest, and rejection. We must not neglect the priceless gift of fatherhood and father love. The returns in our fatherly investments are windfall love profits and eternal rewards, for both our children and us. Once, for Father’s Day, my kids each wrote me a book of happy times. Invariably, they remembered things they had done alone with me. Kids need individualized attention from their fathers. At the same time, there can be no favoritism. This has caused more problems than can be imagined, and it can cause even a good child to go astray. Every child needs equal respect, acceptance, and belongingness. Children need so badly to belong; if they cannot belong by being good, they will, sometimes instantly, try to achieve significance or recognition by being bad and misbehaving.

Not just the mother, but both parents can receive an influx of innocence into their souls and the inmost regions of their minds; both parents can be affected by the innocence of their children. The communication and conjunction of innocence is effected by the senses, especially by touch. We must touch our children more, and enjoy the gift of fatherhood as much as mothers enjoy the gift of motherhood. Through the gift of innocence, our sight can be inmosty delighted at seeing our children; our hearing can be inmosty delighted at hearing their sounds and their speech; our sense of smell can be inmosty delighted by their newly bathed smell. But most of all, we will be delighted through the sense of touch, by carrying them, pressing them to our hearts, hugging them and kissing them (see *Conjugal Love* 396). As they grow up, we can delight in their internal affections, the special landmarks of their minds, the development of their virtues and good conduct (see *Conjugal Love* 405). We can help them find their own way in life with our guidance and love, cherishing their independence and responsible actions.

How do we show our father-love? What are some of its masculine ingredients? First, knowledge: we must *know* our children. We must know many things. Who is this child, what are his powers and limitations? What are his needs? What is conducive to his or her growth? How do we respond to his or her needs? What are our powers and limitations? The father who says he knows his child completely, does not truly care. A child grows and changes every day, every moment. Caring involves continuously learning about the child—this is an act of humility. Father love has humility in it. The father who is willing to learn more about his child and himself, and what caring involves, is genuinely humble. We can learn from any source when we are humble. No source is beneath us—including learning from both our children and our mistakes.

Humility overcomes the attitude of seeing children and others as existing simply to satisfy our own needs, or treating them as if they were merely obstacles to overcome, or clay to mold as we please. Humility overcomes the arrogance of exaggerating our powers at the expense of our children. Humility overcomes pretentiousness, and helps us present ourselves without self-display, or concealment, or posing. When we are not humble, and we pretend to be someone we are not, we are, ironically, humiliated by having others see us as we truly are. And make no mistake about it, our kids can usually see right through us; they just know better than to tell us. Still, it causes confusion in them, which can lead to resentment and even revenge later on. Humility of caring protects us from the supremely present love of dominion—which creeps into all too many parental attitudes and actions.

Other manly ingredients of caring father love are patience, honesty, trust, and hope; it also includes courage, coping, and constancy. Add to that admiration, encouragement, devotion and direction. But the bottom line on love is growth. If there is no positive growth taking place, whatever else we are doing, we are not truly caring, we are not responding to our child's needs, we are not guided by the direction of their growth, we are not corrected by the day-to-day living going on. We have not helped them by seeing their hereditary weaknesses and working to combat them, or by setting goals for their spiritual and natural growth. Above all, parenting takes time and planning, and preventive maintenance, and participative management. Otherwise, we drift from one crisis to the next, devoting all our communication to lectures, tongue-lashings, sermons and warnings—and parenting becomes a burden.

Parenting takes commitment, caring, mutual effort, struggle, and goals. *Everything* we do has consequences. With no effort at all, we can end up in hell with that natural father in the *Memorable Relation*. We have a divine mission—to become spiritual fathers, to cooperate in leading our children to see God and to find heaven. Our families need us. The old saying, “The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother,” is true but not the only truth. “The best thing a father can do for his children is to take the time to love them!” Some family counselors encourage a total of an hour a day of applied father love with each child. Of course, with large families, doubling up is necessary. Father love, like the priceless pearl of conjugal love, is so rare today as to be scarcely known. It's time we changed that. And to those who are the exception to the rule, we salute you! We have learned from you. We will continue to learn from you. Every little act of father love is significant, and inspirational, reminding us all of the infinite love of our Father, who is in heaven.

Reference: Swedenborg, Emanuel. *The Delights of Wisdom Concerning Conjugal (Marriage) Love*, Swedenborg Society, London, 1953.

This article was originally published in *New Church Home* in February 1980.