



The Most Holy Trinity June 19, 2011 A

OUR EARTHLY FATHER, OUR HEAVENLY FATHER HEALING OF A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

The following article by Mary Cleary Kiely, appeared in the February 2009 edition of *US Catholic*.

When my young son asks me what God looks like, I want to tell him what he will probably only understand much later, that for children especially, God looks like the people in whom they vest their trust. God can be merciful or terrible.

I learned this through my relationship with my father, who died 11 years ago at the age of 72. Our relationship was always complicated. Early on it was Dad who taught me to write my name and to read simple books. He introduced me to the pleasures of walking in the woods. And he had a way of making the ordinary fun. In the fall he would rake up enormous piles of leaves for us to jump into, piles that we would burn afterwards in great billowy bonfires.

By the time I was 8 or 9 years old, however, my father was also drinking most of a bottle of vodka every night. In a haze of cigarette smoke and through a process I could not understand, the Dad I adored was being sucked away from me like a genie. The bottle I came to hate, in its habitual perch next to the kitchen sink, was for many years a barometer for the rest of us. The lower the level of the liquid in the bottle, the more trouble we could expect from Dad.

One terrible Saturday afternoon when I was a preteen, my pet parakeet got out of its cage. My father, who was already drunk, tried to chase the bird back in with a broom, breaking its leg and wing. Pathetically, I tried to repair my bird's leg with first aid tape, but he died soon afterwards. My favorite color was turquoise, and for years I dreamed and daydreamed of a bird of that color beaten down in flight, of crashing my car into a highway embankment, of escape.

That's when I gave up on God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. While I continued to attend Mass until I left college, mostly to avoid antagonizing my father, "merciful" and "paternal" no longer went together in my mind. I lived the truth of what I heard a priest say recently, that unless a child finds a little bit of God in her father, she will not find a father in God. Neither could I bear to think of God as a bird, even in symbolic terms.

Years passed. My father went in and out of rehab, but he always started drinking again, often on the day of his discharge. Then, when I was 27 and just back from three years in England, I found out that my father was doing most of his drinking away from home and so was driving drunk. How long would it be before he killed someone?

On one of the most difficult days of my life, I went to court and signed my father over for forced confinement. I hated the idea of caging him, but I just couldn't stand by and watch my father take someone innocent down with him. He was sent to a state-run psychiatric facility and forcibly detoxed.

For several months after, he received follow-up treatment at a private psychiatric hospital, where doctors figured out that he was manic-depressive as well as alcoholic. The doctors suggested that perhaps my father had unknowingly been self-medicating with alcohol for his mental illness. They immediately began treating him with lithium.

Dad was 60 then and, while he lived another 12 years, he never drank again. For the first few years of his sobriety, he was vengeful and difficult to be around. My parents divorced during that time. Initially, my father also refused to believe that I had been the one to put him in "lock-up."

With the grace of God and the help of a 12-step program, however, Dad eventually put the bitterness behind him and rooted himself in a new community. At his funeral I was astonished by how many people showed up to recognize his role in helping them to achieve and maintain sobriety.

In the last few years of Dad's life, he and I used to meet regularly in diners to talk. While there was no possibility of recovering all the lost years, I still felt grateful for the opportunity to build, however shakily, from where we were.

I came to understand that it is much easier to make peace with human beings than with ghosts and imaginings. In coming back to us, my father helped me, too, to let go and move on. The Holy Spirit, in whom I had lost all faith, began to rise again from the ashes of all that my father and I had been through together. My father gave me copies of his recovery literature. "Read this stuff," he urged me. "It's not just for drunks, you know."

Eventually Dad died of a heart attack. Now, with a 14-year-old, a 12-year-old with serious handicaps, and a 7-year-old running around our house, life for my husband and me is full of both blessings and struggles. It's fair to say that I have finally made some kind of peace with the imperfection of my father's love for me and mine for him.

In midlife I have come to realize that, on our own, few of us are capable of becoming the parents and the people that we had hoped or planned to be. If we are honest, we can see our individual faults and failings following us like footprints across the landscapes of our lives.

But I also now appreciate that the surrender to a higher power at the heart of 12-step programs is, as my father had come to understand, our best hope of becoming our best selves. When we acknowledge our weakness and humbly ask God for help, we are opening ourselves to the power of God, who can do with us what we cannot accomplish alone.

For me the first real experience of this happened about six months after my father's death. By turning over to God my struggles with a nicotine addiction, I was finally able to quit for good. These days I find myself asking God on an almost daily basis, in large matters and in small, to make of me what I cannot seem to make of myself.

After my father died, I became a lector at Mass as a special way of praying for the man who had taught me to read. It occurs to me that the short prayer I always say as I bow before going up to read—"Not me, Lord, but you through me"—is a pretty good summary of the most important thing I learned from my father about the miracles that are possible with God.

It's also a pretty good description of what I aspire to in my life and especially with my kids.

Knowing that human love and human effort will never be enough on their own, I still want to be the best mirror that I can of a God who came to be like us before he commissioned us to try to be like him. All of us look for God in human form, and we make and break images of God for each other every day. The faith and the trust of a child can soar like a bird into the heavens, but they must make their home on the earth.

I ask God to make me worthy of that trust and capable with his assistance of meeting the tremendous responsibility that is thrust upon us as parents, imperfections and all: that of helping to make the invisible visible and real.

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Reflection questions:

- How would you describe your relationship with your heavenly father?
- How would you describe your relationship with your earthly father—whether he is living or deceased?
- If the relationship is broken or wounded, what one step can you take to heal the relationship? I hope you know that even if your dad is deceased, you can still bring healing to the relationship despite unresolved issues.

A Prayer for Fathers

God our father,
We give you thanks and praise
For fathers young and old.

We pray for young fathers,
Newly embracing their vocation;
May they find the courage and perseverance?
To balance work, family, and faith in joy
and sacrifice.

We pray for our own father
Who have supported and challenged us;
May they continue to lead in strong
and gently ways.

We remember fathers around the world
Whose children are lost or suffering;
May they know that the God of compassion
Walks with them in their sorrow.

We pray for men who are not fathers
But still mentor and guide us
With fatherly love and advice.

We remember fathers, grandfathers,
And great-grandfather who are no longer
with us
But who live forever in our memory
And nourish us with their love.
Amen.

Have a blessed week, and Happy Father's Day

