

Children Will Listen  
Sunday, June 19, 2022  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snively

My father was a fairly hands on parent for a man of his generation. While he worked 6am to 6pm Monday through Saturday most of my young childhood, he would come home for lunch and eat with us. He often took my brother, sister or me with him to make a delivery if he was going to a dairy farm or somewhere else he thought we might find interesting. I am sure taking a child along in a fuel oil delivery truck would not pass liability muster for a company today, but it was a regular part of my childhood. In the evenings we spent time out in the yard and garden with my father. On Sundays after church, we might take a family trip, play a game together or work on a puzzle. My father was involved even when we were babies. He did drop one of the three of us in the kitchen sink when he was giving us a bath when an infant. Since my parents don't remember which one of us it was, when any of us does anything particularly stupid, we say we must be the one Dad dropped in the sink.

My father didn't talk much. He did things with us. When he accepted a gift of her pony for us when his cousin's daughter got a horse, he built a stable for the pony and put paint brushes in our hands to help paint that barn. When strawberry season came around, we picked strawberries as a family and we children would often then go with my father to drive round the neighborhoods selling them. We built floats for baby parades as a family with we children pulling many, many a tissue flower for those floats. My father taught us to work together.

Like any parent my father was not perfect. I had to unlearn the food portions he taught me. You mean a serving of a pie isn't a quarter of it and a serving of ice cream isn't a pint? My father thought feeding people was one way to show love. I was grown and out of the house, but every time I went home my car had something from my father's garden, my parent's freezer and their pantry loaded into it by Dad.

What did your father teach you? Has it helped you or harmed you or a bit of both?

My father's father died a few months before he was born, leaving my grandmother to raise three boys. She taught them well. My father could work the sewing machine, bring clothes in off the wash line, cook a Thanksgiving turkey, make candy Easter eggs, and help prepare corn or applesauce or strawberry jam for the freezer.

Maybe like my father you grew up without a father.

My dad did have an older man in his life. For much of his boyhood he worked on Frank Lauder's farm. When Frank died, my mother commented that Frank was the closest thing to a father my dad had. Maybe there was an older man in your life who was important to you. What did that person teach you?

Say a little thank you or sigh a "I survived" or both. Parents and parent figures are complicated people, as are we all.

What have our children learned from us? My daughter came to me when she was 12. I thought I had skipped over the up at night with your child phase of raising her, but she had never slept alone in a room by herself before she came to me. I ended up spending many nights on the rug by the side of her bed until she fell asleep. I hope she learned that I cared and that she was safe in our home.

My daughter's birth parents were not able to raise her, but the one member of her birth family that never was out of her life was her grandfather. He would regularly take my daughter and her sisters to a playground at the Baltimore airport where they could play and watch the planes take off and land. My daughter kept a bright pink rain coat her grandfather had given her as a gift long after it actually fit her. I hope my daughter learned from her grandfather and me that we were both aware that my daughter needed us both and others as well.

Despite having taken all the required trainings I didn't really know what I was getting into when my daughter came to me. I regularly reached out to her social workers for help at least one of which, I believe, had no children of her own. You could say she had no children, or you could say she had many, many children. You do not have to have raised a child to have had an influence.

Today most of the children we parented or influenced in our careers are grown. Many of us live in neighborhoods without children. Yet almost always when I have gone with some of you to a concert or a rally one of the things you will comment on is how nice it is to see children or young people. They are not part of our daily lives, but we still care, and we can still make a difference. We can babysit while someone else tutors a mom in English as a Second Language. We can tutor a young parent or drive them and their child to a doctor's appointment. We can help fund a scholarship. You can buy brand name peanut butter for the foodbank because you remember how your child didn't like the store brand when they were little. We can collect school supplies for the children of families who struggle to afford them.

Stephen Sondheim wrote, "Careful the things you say Children will listen Careful the things you do Children will see And learn." The one place you may see children regularly is at the grocery store. That six-year-old is watching when you let their parent in line in front of you with their fussy sibling who needs to go home. That teenage bagger is listening when you thank them or don't. There are a few other places we may see young people. That teenager working on your lawn crew this summer will remember how you treated them and their coworkers. You may see your neighbors' visiting grandchildren at the family pool. They will notice how you interact with them or don't.

In my file of clippings is a piece by Barbara Mullen titled "Sorry I Never Knew Your Name." She wrote it as a kind of thank you to the people who interacted with her over the years but as I read it think of the way these small interactions made an impact. Her examples will tell you that this was written a while back.

She writes, "It sounds crazy, maybe, but some of my best friends are strangers. Of course everyone's a stranger until we get acquainted, even mothers and fathers, but I'm thinking now of people I've met once or not at all, who offered a surprising kindness or a shared joke. Then we went our ways, I somehow richer for the meeting.

"Take the manager of the general store in Wadsworth, Nevada. That store was all that kept Wadsworth from being a ghost town that year. Waiting for the bus into Reno, some 30 miles west, my daughter was

too young to need a bus ticket, but she hurt with wanting one. The grocer tore off a scrap of pink butcher paper and lettered carefully: 'Admit one little girl to Reno.'

"We never saw him again, but that slip of paper is still a prized possession.

"Waiting for another bus in front of a woodworking shop in Berkeley, we started talking to the proprietor, who was stretching his legs a bit. 'Come in the shop a minute,' he invited. We followed him into his cluttered, wood-fragrant shop. Quietly, he searched for the right scrap of smooth wood, cut out an enchantingly small pig on his jigsaw and presented it with a bow. When we tried to say thank-you, he was already busy at something else.

"At a garage sale, I took a fancy to a funky old-fashioned bookcase, painted blue.

"There must be some mistake,' I turned to the girl in charge. 'This says free.'

"No mistake, help yourself.'

"But it won't fit in this little car.'

"Don't worry. We'll deliver it.' And they did!

"The list is longer than my memory.

"There was the druggist. After a brief stay in a strange town, I mailed a prescription back for a refill. It came by return mail, along with a note and a refund check! The note read: 'Since you were here, the price on this medication has been lowered. Also, we don't charge postage.'

"The amount was tiny—all the more reason for him not to bother, but oh, the principle.

"Another time, I sent a manuscript to a magazine. It came back promptly with a double apology. They were sorry they couldn't use it. What was worse while the editor was reading it, coffee somehow got spattered. They had therefore taken the liberty of retyping it and hoped I wouldn't mind.

"Buying a small cabin meant endless expense and frustration. The minute the roof was fixed, a plumber announced that the cabin needed a new hot water heater costing over \$100. A few days later, he showed up chuckling and apologetic. He had just taken out an almost new water heater for another customer; the problem turned out to be in the pipes rather than the heater, but the customer had decided on a larger model. So, the plumber had bought the extra one for me for \$25. He hoped that was O.K.

"In the same jinxed cabin one afternoon, a burglar took off with what seemed a huge share of my worldly goods. A lady who heard about my loss on the chatty local radio called to ask if I would like a dog as protection. Yes, but for some unremembered reason, I couldn't get out to their farm to get it. No sweat, she assured me; she would drive the pup in, along with a case of dog food. When the dog (who loved everybody) proved to be slightly more trouble than he was worth as a watchdog, she came and picked him up.

"It was exciting to tape eight-year-old John McGinn's first piano composition, but after we had played it a time or two the tape broke inside the cassette. I took it to a man who might be able to fix it. He didn't

know and he sat at his bench, turning it over and over as I eyed the sign on the wall: 'Labor- \$18 an hour.' Pretty soon he started fiddling with it and, in half an hour, got it back together.

"When I reached for my checkbook, he said, 'Naw, that darned thing was a challenge. I've never fixed one like it before and they say it can't be done but I did it!'

"There've been more incidents, many more, some almost too small to mention yet all too large to forget. The world may be crowded with criminals. It is also stuffed with wonderful people I don't really know, strangers who've brightened a day with a small thoughtfulness.

"I don't remember their names (and most I never knew) so it's impossible to thank them properly.

"Once in a while, though, I try to surprise someone back."

Barbara Mullen was not a child when these incidents happened. I expect she was a fairly young adult for a good number of them. Stephen Sondheim wrote, "Careful the things you say Children will listen Careful the things you do Children will see And learn." We are all forever children watching and listening to one another and learning.

To return to my father, he had a massive heart attack six, seven years before he died. At the time my mother, brother, sister and I were called into one of those little consulting rooms off of a cardiac care unit and told by the doctor to not expect my father to survive. But he did. When he was able to again speak with us, he said that while he was in surgery, he had seen a box which he new was his coffin. He was stepping into it when something told him, "not yet." For the years he lived after that every time he took an opportunity to do some small kindness, like help an older Mennonite women confused by the air pump at the service station to put air in her tires, my parents would joke that that particular act was why he was still here, the thing he still had left to do in this life.

May we each remember fondly the people who have done kindnesses for us. May we each be the person who does a kindness when the opportunity presents itself. Lao Tzu said, "Kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving creates love." May kindness be the gift we give to the children. They will listen.