

# Honor Thy Father

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In honor of Father's Day I found a list of some things you will never hear a father say to his partner or to his children. For example, you will never hear a father say:

“No, honey, sit this one out. I really can't wait to change that diaper.”

“Waiter! More ice cream for the little one!”

“Here, you take the remote.”

“You can't finish your peas? Go ahead and throw 'em away.”

“Can you turn up that music? It really calms my nerves.”

“As a matter of fact, let's both go get nose rings!”

“Go ahead, take my car—and here's fifty bucks for gas.”

The most common story about the start of Father's Day says that it started in 1909 when a woman in Spokane, Washington was inspired by Mother's Day. She asked all the ministers in Spokane to preach a sermon in honor of fathers on June 5, the date of her own father's birth. Her own minister agreed, but said that he could not preach the sermon until the third Sunday in June. The tradition continued and spread, encouraged by the retail part of our economy, which exploits our feelings about our fathers by encouraging us to buy gifts.

Of course each of us has a unique relationship with our father. Your father may have physically abused some of you or your dad may have abandoned you, so you may have no desire to honor your father. On the other hand, some of us have had a very positive relationship with our father. Therefore, if they are still alive, a gift or a card or a phone call today feels right.

My father was born in June of 1919, in eastern Kentucky in the mountain town of Williamsburg. Put in other words, my Dad was a hillbilly from Appalachia. What most people in America know about Appalachia comes from television, which teaches that the mountain residents are backwards, barefoot people, sometimes called “trailer trash.” Feuding with the neighbors and brewing moonshine whiskey are their main activities. For the better part of the last century, national newspapers carried comic strips such as “Little Abner.” It brought the image of the ignorant hillbilly to millions of readers on a daily basis. Today the world sees the people of eastern Kentucky in reruns of “The Beverly Hillbillies” or “The Dukes of Hazzard.”

This spring both CBS and NBC planned reality television shows that took families from Appalachia and placed them in wealthy neighborhoods of southern California. The idea was to use the ignorance of hillbillies as amusing entertainment for the rest of the nation. The networks canceled these programs after protests. Still the fact that some soldiers who tortured prisoners in Iraq were from the mountains of West Virginia and Maryland seemed to confirm the view that people from Appalachia are backward and ignorant.

Yet this is not my experience of my relatives or of many people in Appalachia. Not everyone lives up to the hillbilly stereotype.

In my own case my Appalachian ancestors did not make moonshine or engage in feuds. Instead coal mining and school teaching were the occupations of my father's family. My dad went to the University of Kentucky, became an electrical engineer and moved to Arizona to work for the Bureau of Reclamation, under the Department of the Interior.

When I asked my father to tell me about his childhood, he would say that the Appalachian mountains are like a foreign country. He would tell me that the people in the mountains do not think or act like anyone else in the United States.

Snake handling is one example. Started in Sale Creek, Tennessee in 1909, snake handling still goes on today at worship services in the mountains. Theologically it is based on an ending of Mark's Gospel, which says "And these signs will accompany those who believe . . . they will pick up snakes in their hands . . ."

My Dad worked at a gas station in Harlan County in about 1941. He said that one regular customer was a snake handling preacher who carried his rattle snakes around in the trunk of his car. He regularly asked my father to check his spare tire in the trunk of his car and my father regularly refused. The preacher would laugh at my dad and tell him "you ain't got no faith."

That is one view of life in Appalachia. However, it is not all ignorance and superstition. Good schools are scattered throughout the mountains and hollers. Fifty miles north of father's hometown is Berea College, founded in 1855 by an ardent abolitionist. Before the Civil War it was a part of the underground railroad that helped slaves escape the south. In addition there is Union College, Sue Bennet College, Lincoln Memorial University and Cumberland College where my father got most of his education.

After attending public school for two years and not learning to read, his mother, who was a school teacher, sent my Dad to Cumberland grade school. He attended Cumberland from the third grade through his first year of college.

My father had many good teachers. One he told about was Bessy Mahan Rose. The students called her Miss Bess. She never married but she did have some romance in her life. Her male friend was James Lloyd Creach, the president of Cumberland College. They probably would have married except for one thing. Miss Bess had a problem with her petticoat. It seemed always to hang an inch or two below her dress and James could never bring himself to tolerate this imperfection.

My Dad said that Miss Bess got her job in a peculiar way. A man named Will Mahan willed \$50,000 to the school with the provision Bess Rose would have a job teaching at Cumberland as long as she lived. Many people thought Bess Mahan Rose was Will Mehan's daughter.

Miss Bess taught my father about books. She had him read the whole Bible, not for inspiration but as literature. He read Shakespeare's plays, and memorized the most famous parts. He read Emerson's essays and had to memorize many of his sayings. Miss Bess never mentioned that Emerson was a Unitarian minister. My father said that following the Mahan will, Miss Bess taught at Cumberland College until she died. Her final teaching was done from a wheelchair.

Williamsburg, Kentucky is about 10 miles north of the Tennessee state line. Mountains full of coal are all around the town. Today if you travel on interstate seventy-five and look at the insides of the mountains the engineers cut away to make a place for the highway, you can clearly see the layers of coal. Coal played a role in creating the ignorance for which Appalachia is famous. Ova Rhodem, who married my grandfather's sister, was the superintendent of the school in a mining camp at Black Star, Kentucky. My dad said that the county paid Superintendent Rhodem a salary and the mining company paid him an additional equal amount. For that additional amount he agreed to run an inferior school and make sure the students could not qualify for college. This is one way the mine owners assured themselves a continuous supply of cheap labor.

Of course, the mine owners also fought the formation of unions. There was a great deal of bloodshed. Harlan County became known as "bloody Harlan."

When my dad was growing up in the 1920s and 1930s there was a definite class system in Williamsburg. The division was between the rich who owned the coal mines and the rest of the people in town. Next door to my father lived the Cheely's. They were part of the rich set. They had an airplane and lived in a beautiful southern mansion. On the other side of my Dad's home was a family that had no plumbing. Water for the house came from a hand pump in the kitchen that supplied water from a well under the floor. My father's family was somewhere between. They did have indoor plumbing and city water. The town had two Baptist churches. First Baptist was for the rich and Second Baptist was for the poor.

Dad had childhood friends among both the rich and poor. Edgar Cheely (his next door neighbor) and my father were good friends. Their friendship lasted until they were about seventeen when Edgar's parents forced him to go to the Virginia Military Institute. Edger was about to do the unforgivable and marry a coal miner's daughter. When Edgar grew up, he followed his father's example and got himself an airplane. He died when he crashed his plane in Mexico.

Another rich friend of my father was David Ancel Perkins. His family spent the winter months in Florida. In 1927 my father saw a photo of his friend David in the *Louisville Courier Journal*. The newspaper photo was entitled "eight and eighty-eight." It was a picture of John D. Rockefeller age eighty-eight, and David Ancel Perkins, age eight, playing golf together on the Rockefeller's private golf course in Florida.

My Dad's friendship with David Perkins pointed out the class system that was all around my father. Their fifth grade teacher, Alice Davis, would occasionally punish students with a big wooden paddle. Once David and my father got into trouble together. Alice took the boys out into the

hallway, but instead of the usual paddle she gave both boys a hug. She asked them not to get in trouble in the future.

The friendship with David Perkins lasted into high school. It ended one day when David said he could not understand why some miners thought they should be able to buy a car. My father thought of the four cars in the heated garage at the Perkins house and their chauffeur and he just could not be David Perkins's friend anymore.

My father died in Arizona two years ago, and it has been several years since I last visited his hometown of Williamsburg. Nevertheless, I still feel connected to him and to the place where he grew up. Today if you drive on the back country roads of Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Maryland, you will see some of the poorest counties in the United States. In the Cumberland Mountains you will see men with bushy beards sitting in rocking chairs and staring from the porches of shacks. Some will speak in accents you can barely understand. You will see mobile home dealers with signs saying "MAKE YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE." You will see notices nailed to the telephone poles saying "JESUS IS COMING. ARE YOU READY?" You can still read in the local papers news stories about people who have been bitten by a snake at church service and are in serious condition at a local hospital. In some ways visiting the mountains where my father grew up is like visiting a foreign country.

Still, in those hills are also artists; musicians, quilters, dancers and storytellers. In the mountains are kind people, people who value education and learning, people who have wisdom because of life experience. It can be beautiful country. If you go into the mountains at night this time of year, take a walk in the woods. You will see a million fireflies and a sky full of bright stars.

Our Unitarian culture is a product of our British American culture. We tend to place more value in speakers with English accents, and to discount people with southern or "hillbilly" accents. We tend to value complex intellectual and cultural abstractions and to discount concrete, simple speech.

However, my father taught me the values he learned growing up in the Appalachian mountains. Once I told him that I was taking a philosophy class on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. He responded: "I guess that will not do any harm, but most people don't give a damn about big words. They want you to be clear. They want you to be reliable. They want you to be honest. They want you to be fair. They want you to have courage to stick by what you believe." These are the values my father taught me. Be clear. Be reliable. Be honest. Be fair. Have courage.

As a minister I often find myself in the position of interviewing people about their fathers. I ask many questions.

What year was your father born?

Where was he born?

Who were his mother and father?

What were his parents ethnic backgrounds?

Did he have brothers and sisters, and if he did, was he the first born, the middle child or the youngest?

Where did he go to school?

As a young man, what was his dream for his life?

How and when did your mother and father meet?  
Where was it that they decided to get married?  
Did your father serve in the military, and if he did, what was that like for him?  
Did he ever tell stories about his childhood or his young adult years?  
What kind of parent was he when you were growing up?  
Do you have an old résumé, showing where he went to school and where he worked?  
How did he feel about his work?  
Where did he like to go on vacation?  
What were his hobbies?  
How did he spend his retirement?  
Did he read, and if he did, did he have any favorite writers?  
Did he write any letters to you about his life?  
What was important to him?

For most of us there are many gaps, many mysteries about our fathers. However, if we are lucky, if we had a father who shared even a little bit about what mattered to him, what he valued, and if we have experienced him as a person who respected us and gave us the room to find our own life's dream, then we know far more than the simple details of his life. We have some sense of our father in all his complexity and we can honor and celebrate who he was.