

## WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY DAUGHTER

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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Reading:

*“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.” (Khalil Gibran)*

Though my child belongs not to me, she is my child and always will be.

I watched her, running up the driveway on that second day of school, bouncing along, in white ankle socks and Stride Rite sandals and a summer dress hand-sewn by an English grandma. I watched her at eight and nine, two yellow braids and a Cookie Monster lunch box. I dropped what I was doing and ran out to meet the bus, in those days when she was little enough to be swept up in my arms and unembarrassed by my affection

I watched her carrying a trombone case and a school bag that just gets heavier, trudging up that driveway on cold winter mornings in junior high when no one wore a winter jacket or socks, no matter how much snow covered the yard. I watched her just last week when her boyfriend came to meet her in his car, and they walked out together arm in arm, he carrying the trombone case. Then, when I watched her asking questions of the admissions officer at a liberal arts college, I knew that I could count the number of days I have left to watch her from the window.

Spirit of life, watch my child when I cannot. Encircle her with love, protect her from a world which has become cynical. Knowing that I cannot stop time, not even for a moment, and freeze the picture of her from my window, let me hold her gently in my memory. Let all those children she once was remain joyful spirits enriching my reminiscences.

Spirit of life, watch all our children. Keep them safe as they adventure toward adulthood, and let them turn and wave to us as they step out of our care and into the world of their making.

Elizabeth Tarbox, *Lifetides*

Sermon:

In January of last year, Victor Fidel sent me an email asking for some pointers on preaching. Victor was then serving as president of All Souls, and he was preparing his sermon for Lay Sunday later that month. I had taught a course in preaching at Union Theological Seminary the previous fall, and besides, I have several decades of relevant experience. So I sent Victor five pointers on preaching.

A few weeks ago, Victor asked if I could provide him with a similar list of pointers on parenting. He and Heather are expecting their first child in about a month. I told him I would take his question under advisement.

It's true that I have some experience in parenting, plus many years of counseling young people and families. But most of what I know about parenting I learned from my daughter Zoe, who was six weeks old when I preached my first sermon at All Souls. Zoe turned 23 last month. She has grown up to become a wonderful young woman, and I'm inordinately proud of her. Yesterday, she graduated from the University of Rochester with a master's degree in Biomedical Engineering.

I would like to say two things at the outset. First, our most important responsibility as parents is to love our children. As our baby dedication reading reminds us, children come into this world at our invitation, not of their own accord. It is thus our duty to love them always. My sermon today is not a statement of why I love my daughter, but rather my testimony of what I have learned from her about what she needs from me. This is how I aspire to love her.

And second, I wish to acknowledge two other parents in Zoe's life: her mother Linda and my wife Holly, who is Zoe's stepmother. When it comes to the emotional intelligence that parenting requires, Holly has been my teacher – along with Zoe. And Holly has been a godsend in her ability to deal with the emotional stress and cultural contempt that typically accrue to stepparents in our culture. Thank you, my love.

And with that, we're off. Here are 10 things I have learned from my daughter.

**1. Like all other human beings on planet earth, your children get delivered in bodily form. Tell them the truth about life in a body.**

The human body is an amazing organism, especially when all of its systems are more or less in working order. It's the means by which we experience whatever we experience: the sight of a flower, the sound of a melody, the taste of an apple, and the feel of a breeze. Yet the workings of the human body can also be a source of profound anxiety, especially during puberty and adolescence. The unique configurations of our individual bodies can make us objects of ridicule. Our bodies also make us potential targets of sexual assault, especially if we are female or LGBTQ. The best protection you can provide your children against these anxieties and injuries is to talk to them – early and often – about their bodies and what it means to live in them. Talk about love and

sex, about gender identity and power, and especially about the difference between what a person looks like on the outside and who a person is on the inside.

**2. It takes a village to raise children. And you're not the head of the village anymore.**

In the old days, when neighborhoods were defined geographically and the larger world intruded mainly through three channels of highly-censored television, parents had a significant degree of control over their children's environments. Today, through ubiquitous and addictive media devices, your children have immediate access to a global village over which you have little control. Many of these digital villagers aren't interested in your children's physical, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Rather, they are interested in exploiting your children's innocence and curiosity for financial gain. Here's one example: one-third of all internet traffic today is pornography, which is becoming increasingly violent. Online bullying and sexual harassment are commonplace. In order to provide for your children's positive emotional and spiritual formation, communities like All Souls will be even more important in the future than they have been in the past.

**3. Save your speeches for someone who is listening. Your children are too busy watching what you do to listen attentively to what you say.**

I'm not suggesting that your words don't matter, which they do. But words need to reinforce what you demonstrate with actions — and not substitute for actions, or what's even worse, attempt to offset them. Your primary task as a parent is to live a life worthy of your children emulating. In the ways that matter most, they will tend to become like you. Of course, sometimes children insist on doing the opposite of what their parents do, especially during their teenage years. Nonetheless, your behavior sets the standard by which they will judge themselves and everyone else. As Dr. Albert Schweitzer once said when asked about raising good children, there are three keys to effective parenting: "Set an example, set an example, set an example."

**4. Wherever you set the boundaries for your children, expect them to be tested — repeatedly.**

It's the job of parents to set boundaries, and it's the job of children to make sure the boundaries can withstand testing. Give your children enough room to make mistakes and even get into a modest amount of trouble, but not enough room to inflict serious damage on themselves and others. In order for children to grow up to live meaningful and satisfying lives, they need to learn how to deal with physical and emotional risks, personal failures, and social disappointments. You will want to protect them from all these things, but you shouldn't — and ultimately you can't. Studies

consistently show that children who aren't given the freedom to stumble and even fall on occasion don't develop a good sense of emotional and ethical balance. When they do fall, however, love them even more, because that's when they most need your love.

**5. The quest for quality time is a fool's errand. What ultimately counts is the quantity of time you spend with your children.**

Why is this true? Because quality time — when you and your children connect deeply and talk openly about things that matter — represents only about two percent of the time you spend together. (I'm making up the percentage, but it's distressingly small.) And here's the rub: you don't get to decide when quality time happens; your children decide. The only way to ensure that you're around when your children want to connect deeply and talk openly is to be around a lot. Given parenting patterns today, this is a tall order — especially given that our economic expectations often require each household to have two full-time wage earners. But if you develop a pattern of spending significant time with your children when they are young, the payoff will eventually come.

**6. Habits will give structure to your children's lives. Rituals will give their lives meaning.**

Since we eventually become what we repeatedly do, it's worth taking time to develop good habits — and to help our children do the same. Good habits keep us on the right path even when our resolve falls short. Habits that help us access life's deeper meaning and higher purpose are called rituals. Take the time to develop family rituals: say grace at dinnertime, express gratitude for the day at bedtime, give away to a family-chosen charity half of what you might have spent on birthday and holiday gifts, volunteer as a family once a month to feed hungry people or clean up a park. You'll know it's a ritual when your children say, "But we always..."

**7. Life isn't fair, which is why you need to instill in your children an instinct for justice.**

If your children wake up in the morning after a full night's sleep with a roof over their heads, and if they have clothes to put on and adults to care for them, and if they have a school to attend and teachers to teach them, then your children are among the luckiest human beings ever to live upon planet Earth. Relatively few people in human history have enjoyed these blessings, and many people alive today don't have them either. If your children do have them, then your children are lucky. They haven't earned them; they've simply won the human lottery. Your task as parents is to teach them that life isn't fair — and at times they will be treated unfairly. But you also need to instill in

them a deep sense of gratitude for what they have been given and a profound sense of obligation to those who have not been so fortunate. Justice is the human effort to level the playing field – to push back against nature’s caprice and human selfishness.

**8. Confront the challenges of life not as disasters to be survived or battles to be endured, but as problems to be solved.**

Good things happen in life, and bad things happen in life. And sometimes good things happen in life because bad things have happened. No matter how privileged or how challenged your life and your children’s lives may be, you can usually find plenty of evidence that things are good, and you can usually find an equal amount of evidence that things are terrible. Life will give you sufficient evidence to convict it of whatever you charge it with. To avoid teaching your children to be worry warts or doomsday prophets, focus their attention — and yours — less on what’s past and more on what’s possible. Teach them to approach difficult situations as problems to be solved. Practice the art of possibility.

**9. Reward your children for their diligence and persistence, not for their accomplishments.**

If your children are exceedingly fortunate, they may have been born with talents — or they may develop skills — that enable them to stand out from everyone else. But chances are they won’t. Like most children and most people, their accomplishments will be more or less average. If they are going to develop a healthy self-image and an ample amount of self-respect, they will need to feel good about working hard and doing their best — whether they end up on top or not. In the language of Carol Dweck’s book titled *Mindset*, model for them a growth mindset, which focuses on effort, rather than a fixed mindset, which focuses on outcome. And let them know that you will love them always, no matter what.

**10. Being a parent may be the best opportunity you will ever have to grow up.**

Conventional wisdom says that your job as a parent is to help your children grow up. If you're fortunate, your children will indeed grow up and become independent and interesting human beings, though it will have less to do with your parenting skills than you're likely to take credit for. But the truth is that they may represent the last best hope of you yourself becoming fully and finally an adult, which requires taking responsibility for someone whose connection to you can't be resigned or reneged upon — even if you end up not liking how they turn out. Parental love, which may be the best intimation we have of divine love, represents a commitment to love someone always. The hope, of

course, is that your children will grow up to embody all your best hopes for them. But even if that eventually happens, there will be times that they will test your commitment. If you pass the test, you'll be a grownup. And what more could you offer your children than having a real grownup for a parent?

I close with the prayer Elizabeth Tarbox offers in her meditation on saying goodbye to our children. She writes:

Spirit of life, watch my child when I cannot. Encircle her with love; protect her from a world which has become cynical...  
Spirit of life, watch all our children. Keep them safe as they adventure toward adulthood, and let them turn and wave to us as they step out of our care and into the world of their making.