

## What Do We Owe Our Parents?

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June 15, 2008

### Reading: “The Lanyard” by Billy Collins

The other day I was ricocheting slowly  
off the blue walls of this room,  
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,  
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,  
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary  
where my eyes fell upon the word *lanyard*.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist  
could send one into the past more suddenly—  
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp  
by a deep Adirondack lake  
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips  
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard  
or wear one, if that’s what you did with them,  
but that did not keep me from crossing  
strand over strand again and again  
until I had made a boxy  
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,  
and I gave her a lanyard.

She nursed me in many a sick room,  
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,  
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,  
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,  
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.  
Here are thousands of meals, she said,  
and here is clothing and a good education.

And here is your lanyard, I replied,  
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,  
strong legs, bones and teeth,  
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,  
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.  
And here, I wish to say to her now,  
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,  
but the rueful admission that when she took  
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,  
I was as sure as a boy could be  
that this useless, worthless thing I wove  
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

**Sermon:**

What do we owe our parents? A simple, straightforward question. But there are no simple, straightforward answers. My immediate response to the question is: “It depends.” It depends on what they have done for and given to us. Or what they have failed to do for or to give to us. It depends on what their needs are in order to continue a productive, fulfilling life. It depends on what we are in a position to do for or give to them. It depends on our attitudes and our deepest feelings about our parents and our relationship with them.

Our sense of what we owe our parents also depends to a large extent on where we are in life in terms of age and maturity. As our reading this morning suggested, when we are young, our perception of the value of what is given relative to that which is received may be a bit skewed. Indeed, our whole attitude about our parents, and our images of them, evolves over time as we grow and mature in understanding and appreciation.

I found one description of that process that goes something like this:

- At 4 years old: My Mommy and Daddy can do anything!
- At 8 years old: Mom and Dad know a lot! A whole lot!
- At 12 years old: “Mom and Dad don’t really know quite everything.
- At 16: Mom and Dad? They’re hopelessly old-fashioned.
- At 18: Those old fogies? They’re way out of date.
- At 25: Well, they might know a little bit about it.
- At 35: Before we decide, let’s get Mom and Dad’s opinion.
- At 55: Wonder what Mom and Dad would have thought about it?
- At 75: Wish I could talk it over with Mom and Dad. . .

It’s in these later years of life that we are likely to develop a real appreciation for what our parents have given us. Especially for the wisdom that they passed on to us along the way, even though we may not have appreciated it fully at the time. Anne Ard talked about this in her “Healthy Relationships” column in the Centre Daily Times

yesterday. In honor of Father's Day, she wrote about the importance of celebrating the wisdom imparted by Dad. In her case that meant a legacy of protection and of independence: teaching the simple habit of always wearing a seat belt, and giving the enormous gift of encouragement to learn and achieve.

It's up to each of us to reflect on the gifts that our fathers – and our mothers – have given us in our lives, that have helped us to be who we are. And if we find that those gifts have been helpful, then we should certainly reflect further on how we can repay some of what they have done.

That repayment may come in many forms. Financial assistance if that is what's most needed. Help in making decisions about living situations. Just being there to share of yourself. Actually saying "Thank you," and being specific about what it is you're thankful for.

But what about when the relationship with parents has been less than ideal? When it has been characterized by animosity, neglect (or perceived neglect), even downright meanness. The closest relationships, such as those between parents and children, often encompass both the highest highs and the lowest lows. How do we grapple with the idea of what we owe in cases like that? Do we owe those people something just for bringing us into the world, regardless of how they treated us and cared for us as they raised us?

I think that, along with whatever regrets, or resentments, or disappointments we feel, we do owe some degree of gratitude to those who made our existence possible. And another thing I think we owe them is honesty. We can do our best to avoid the extremes of oversentimentalizing on the one hand, and focusing entirely on the negative on the other. Along with thanking our parents for their gifts to us, we can also – with compassion and tact – express our regrets and disappointments.

And finally, I think that we owe it to both our parents and ourselves to do our best to find forgiveness for those regrets and disappointments. If we can come to the understanding, deep within ourselves, that parents, too, are only human, and don't always live up to their best intentions, perhaps reconciliation is still possible. Let us not be the ones to stand in the way of making peace, out of stubbornness or silly pride. We don't owe it to our parents to forget or deny the past, but we do owe it to them and ourselves to make the best we can of the present and the future.

For many of us it's too late to be thinking in terms of thanking our parents for their gifts, or for expressing to them our disappointments or our forgiveness for their shortcomings. But it's never too late to make good on those debts we feel we owe our parents, even if they are not here to accept our repayment.

The movie, *Smoke Signals*, tells the story of a young Native American man's journey to come to terms with the life and death of his father, an alcoholic who had abandoned the family. The literal journey is to go and collect his father's ashes. Toward the end of the movie, as the young man releases the ashes into a swiftly running river, we hear the poem "Forgiving our Fathers" by Dick Lourie:

maybe in a dream: he's in your power  
you twist his arm but you're not sure it was  
he that stole your money you feel calmer  
and you decide to let him go free

or he's the one (as in a dream of mine)  
I must pull from the water but I never  
knew it or wouldn't have done it until  
I saw the street-theater play so close up  
I was moved to actions I'd never before taken

maybe for leaving us too often or  
forever when we were little maybe  
for scaring us with unexpected rage  
or making us nervous because there seemed  
never to be any rage there at all

for marrying or not marrying our mothers  
for divorcing or not divorcing our mothers  
and shall we forgive them for their excesses  
of warmth or coldness shall we forgive them

for pushing or leaning for shutting doors  
for speaking only through layers of cloth  
or never speaking or never being silent

in our age or in theirs or in their deaths  
saying it to them or not saying it –  
if we forgive our fathers what is left

As in any human relationship, that between a parent and a child is full of challenges. Some parents, and some children, may fall short in their attempts to know, understand, honor, and love one another. It may be a temporary bump in the path that you get beyond, or it may be longer-term, weighing on you for years or even decades. If we're going to face life honestly, this, too, must be acknowledged.

As one way of recognizing and addressing the complexity of our relationships with, and our memories of our parents, I'd like to lead you through a meditation that is an adaptation and combination of two meditations that appear in the book *Maps to Ecstasy* by Gabrielle Roth. I used these meditations last year on Mother's Day and Father's Day, and offer this blended version now, as we consider all of our parents:

[Please get comfortable. Close your eyes if you wish.]  
Imagine your parents sitting across from you. Bring them into focus, get a feeling for their overall being – who they are, how they operate with people, in the world. What emotions are evoked? Think of three things you love about your parents, qualities you find endearing. Think of three things that put you off, alienate you. Reflect on how all these qualities are in you as well, on how much alike you are, how intimately connected.

Look your parents in the eye. Let your feelings about them surface, and imagine saying them out loud. Empty your heart of all the things you might have choked back for years, telling them everything you feel till there's nothing left. Imagine what they would say in response and let them say their piece. Then breathe calm into the empty space that is left.

Imagine some form of physical contact with your parents. Rocking them in your arms, massaging their feet, embracing them. Find a way to effectively imagine and feel this intimate connection.

Now let your parents go, placing them opposite you in your imagination. Look into their eyes, and search deep within yourself to find the power and the courage to thank them and to forgive them absolutely. Thank them for creating your body, for nursing and clothing and caring for it. Forgive them wholeheartedly for their failings, their weaknesses, their shortcomings, their mistakes, and tell them how you, of all people, truly understand the challenges they faced. Thank them for your strengths and infirmities, your blessings and curses, your achievements and wounds, acknowledging that – like a tree or an animal – you are perfect just as you are with all your imperfections and that they are the source of your being.

The forgiveness we seek for our parents, especially if they are no longer physically available to us, is something that happens inside, within our deepest selves. Our gratitude for their gifts may happen like that too. But I think there can be an outwardly-directed component as well. Perhaps the best way of repaying the debts we owe our parents for their gifts, their wisdom, their support, is to pay those things forward. To pass them along to our own children, and to others we encounter along life's path.

In fact, I think the primary thing I owe my parents is to be the best person I can be – even better than they were - by building on their lessons and their wisdom. Sometimes that means learning from their mistakes, and thus avoiding some of my own. Sometimes it means following their examples, or even their unfulfilled dreams. I'd like to share one example of each of those from my life.

The one thing that has taken me the longest to forgive my parents for – and I think I'm just about there – was that they didn't let me play Little League baseball. I think they had no idea how deeply that hurt me, since I had neither the words nor the courage to express it. They simply laid down the law, and I obeyed. Two things came out of that trauma. One was that I vowed never to do such a thing to my kids. And that meant not simply letting my kids do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, but being sensitive enough to see and understand their hopes, dreams, and desires and not unnecessarily stand in the way of their realization.

The other thing I took away from that situation had to do with their motivation. I couldn't play Little League because it would have interfered with our family meal time, which was sacred. I've been a little more flexible as a parent, more willing to compromise, but that commitment to be together as a family on a consistent, regular basis carried on. And I think I've been the better for it. So even with the lingering resentment

over missing out on Little League, there was also a sense of gratitude for the positive family values that were being passed on.

The example I want to share about following and building on my parents' example and dreams relates to my finding my way into a life of ministry. When my father was a young man, he felt called to the ministry. And so he enrolled at Central Michigan University in Liberal Arts, with the intention of going to divinity school after graduation. He would have graduated in 1942, but in the middle of that last year of college, he had a crisis of conscience. His brothers were being drafted into the military, while Dad had a deferment. He didn't feel right about that, and so he did what he felt was his duty. He dropped out of school, enlisted in the Army, and went off to war.

When Dad got home, he didn't return to school. He met my mother, fell in love, started a family, and got married, more or less in that order. With the demands of supporting us, his family, he worked full-time in a factory, repaired sewing machines part time, and occasionally drove an ambulance for a local funeral home. He never did get back to school. He never did fulfill his dream of ministry. Life got in the way.

I don't think I ever felt a particular obligation to be a minister in order to complete my father's dream. I did feel an obligation to complete a college education. His experience led him to place great importance on our getting as much education as possible. As it turned out, my older brother went to seminary right out of college, and has been a United Methodist pastor for over thirty-five years. I don't know whether he felt that he was completing Dad's dream or not. I never thought about my own path that way until after the fact. But I think that it did my Dad's heart good to have two sons pursue a life of ministry. I like to think that it took the edge off his regrets and disappointments with the path his life did and did not take.

But did I owe it to my father to become a minister? No. I owed it to him to be the best that I could be. To build a fulfilling life of achievement and service. To live out the values that he and Mom imparted to me throughout my life. As it turned out, after decades of wanderings and false starts, the best way I found to do all that was through this life of ministry. As much as that may have been a gift to my parents, it was made possible through the gifts and guidance they gave me over the years.

After all of that, it will probably not come as a great surprise when I tell you that what you owe your parents is something that you must figure out. But I will say that you don't owe them any more than what you have in you to give. Whatever you have is enough. So reflect on what you have received from your parents, and think long and hard about what you owe them in return. It might be simple gratitude and love. It might be forgiveness. It might be tough honesty. It might be the gift of your presence and attention. It might be sharing your home and your life. It might simply be to follow their example and live a life they and you can be proud of. Or it might even be a lanyard.

So may it be.