

The Father as Given

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Paternity is given. One accepts paternity as a gift and allows oneself to be given to. I, the father, become father because I am given to myself as father—I am given to myself as a cause of the formation of life, as a nurturer of life, as a guide to the becoming of a finite person. Whether I have chosen to be a father or find myself to be a father by accident, my being a father is a state of being given. The father is one who receives his being as father. Who gives? The play of life gives and the child gives.

To choose to be a father is to choose to hope. For when one chooses fatherhood, one chooses to bring another person into presencing in the world. As father, one participates in the coming forth of someone from nothing into being in the world. What is called forth? A person is called forth—a dynamic being of mindful becoming. I am given a person who begins in total dependency but slowly develops into one of freedom and self-conscious self-realization. And this being, which is a dynamism of self-determining freedom, shows herself to be weak and finite and yet presences as a vessel of infinite value.

When one's child is born, one holds in one's embrace a person of promise. She stands as much the person she is as the person that is to come. One's love of one's child is the love for a being who powerfully calls you to opening, to responsibility, and to love because she is present, but also because she calls you to call forth the she that is promised by her presencing as a baby. The child present as a baby is so truly and

profoundly present that we cannot but be drawn to her. However, a baby is also a presence of the person who is still to come. My child's presence is a present presence, but also a presence of promise. And as she grows, I become more and more invested in the presence of one who is present and to come. Thus, parents are drawn into care. As soon as the child is born, we are caught in the narrative of the child's becoming; we are caught in the story of one who, from utter powerlessness, grows into her power as a free and capable person.

As soon as a child is born, we gift him with culture. We give him life ways, a language, a rationality, a sense of goodness, and an understanding of what a full human life can mean. We also share with him our genetics which enframes our embodiment. Parents also model love, hope, patience, creativity, and the possibilities of realizing a full human life. These gifts are from us and yet do not come from us. They are given even when we do not know that we are giving. They are our gifts that we cannot claim to be our gifts for they are given through us, with or without our consent. But as loving parents, we are also aware that we are obliged to give to the beloved other gifts that will ensure his being a capable person, so that he may realize the promise of his being. Thus, we raise our children by giving them our inheritance in riches, in skills, and in wisdom, in the hope that they will flourish as human beings.

This task of giving and self-giving is the reason why parents believe that they give the gift of life to their children. This is the grand narrative that parents tell themselves: that they are the givers of life to their children, that it is their responsibility to guide these children to what the parents understand as their potential, and that they somehow have the capacity to protect their children from evil, danger, and even death.

Parents are indeed given a gift, but what a fearsome gift. In the life of our children, parents stand before infinite value. A person is a bearer of infinite value. My child, the person closest to my heart, I especially see as a bearer of value. I experience this value in her presencing not because of a particular way of being, not because of a particular accomplishment of humanity, not for any doing, but for her mere presence, her being there

worthy of all my self-giving, my sacrifice, the death of my self. All this I am willing to give because the child is. Her being is a call, a powerful call to responsibility and to value. Thus, I can only see her as infinite. I can only see her as one who deserves the promise of wholeness and someone who must not die. And this is the fearsome gift of fatherhood. In fatherhood, one is given to love a being of infinite value and yet the given beloved is a being that is finite and vulnerable. The infinite beloved can be hurt, brought to sorrow, and die.

To be given as a father is to be given as finite. In fatherhood, one is made fully aware that one is a finite being holding in one's heart and arms a being of infinite value and of potentially tragic finitude. In parenting, a father is given to himself as one who keeps the fragile beloved safe, but in thus being given, he is given to himself as profoundly finite. The father is called to be strong, but in being called thus, he embraces this fundamental contradiction—that he, too, is finite and possibly broken.

I am writing this thinking about my children and how they were raised and loved by a broken man. I have lived my whole life with borderline personality disorder, and because of this, my children have had to face the instability of a man driven by the loss of control over passions that break from the depths of an unknowable disquiet. And so, despite my love and self-giving, my fragile beloved beings of infinite value and love were hurt by their own father's finitude and his broken heart. In my own broken condition, I have modeled love and self-giving—but I have also caused deep scars that have somehow shaped their becoming. How then does one live with that?

Truly, parenthood is primarily a gift—a contradictory gift. A father is given to himself as given to. A father is given a child, a person of infinite value and utter fragility, that he must protect and guide in becoming. As given to, the father is gifted with the selflessness and strength to die to oneself for the beloved other. But in being given to, one is also given the gift of the greater awareness of one's finitude. With this awareness comes the reality of weakness and brokenness. A father does not only fail; he can also hurt the beloved more than anyone because he is supposed to be the

child's refuge. Where can the child find shelter if the father is not only weak but the cause of her pain?

As I stated in the beginning, the gift of paternity is the gift of hope. Perhaps we are given this contradictory gift of paternity because it is only in this way that we can be awakened to our finitude and brokenness, and it is perhaps in realizing this that we are given the gift of hope—the hope that we are called to bring the other to fruition because there is an Other who calls us and will bring us to fruition.

We also hope that in the brokenness of our being infinitely responsible for the beloved, we would be able to forgive ourselves and that we would be forgiven for all that we have done and have failed to do in this grand vocation. Perhaps the final gift of fatherhood is forgiveness. Because in the end, that is the greatest gift the child can give.