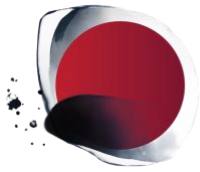


Fathering Journal 1



To achieve a desirable outcome with your children,
you must engage them at their level,
in their mood, and their tempo.

I am sitting in the study, and I hear them. The entire day they have been together. I have just returned from work and am tense from a long day in the consulting room. Hearing their voices, I feel the tension rising within my body. He won't let her be. While she is trying to cook, he is constantly pressing her. I anticipate an explosion. Something has to give, and I rise from my chair to intervene. I know, also, that in this moment he needs his father. I feel it in my body. The irritation I am already feeling is growing due to the distress in their



relationship. I could feel angry and follow that vector and intervene with a compounded anger that I am feeling...but I don't. I am determined to hold what I am feeling and help move their tension in a positive direction. Besides, when I am successful at doing this, I always feel better myself.

Feeling out of control, I recognize that my son needs someone to push up against. I am that someone. Holding my tension, I go to him and suggest that we wrestle. His eyes light up. In this moment, I feel redeemed; all of my tension simply drops away. I am making a good choice. He has found what he is looking for and I feel it. Removing my glasses, we begin. He is laughing and letting go. I mindfully contain him, enjoying his scent, the strength in his back and the ever-so-smooth curves of his body. I love this boy in such a painful way. I do not let go; I remain conscious of his safety and am holding back so as not to push him too far. Still, he calls out for her, "Save me, Mommy!" He runs to her arms and is "home" again, but for only a moment. He returns with full vigor, and we resume our ritual. In and out of the mother matrix he moves, charting his course into life.

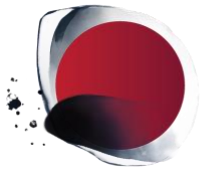
What brought me to this encounter was the experience I had within my own body. I just know, in the most physical way, how to hold my son, in all situations. It doesn't mean that I am always right; this simply means that I have a built in way of knowing. My hunch is that we all have this if we are willing to settle into our experience and trust the subtleties of our engagement with our children. I know when to act and when to hold back. I am also fully informed by the look in his eyes, the feeling in his body, and the behavioral exchange; there is a "rightness" in these moments.

There is no Shortcut to the Fathering

"Care of the soul's fathering . . . requires that we sustain the experiences of absence, wandering, longing, melancholy, separation, chaos, and deep adventure. There is no shortcut to the father."—Moore, 1992, p. 39

Remembering my son in his Infancy

For me, fatherhood has been, and continues to be, a messy and glorious experience. Twenty years later, I can still smell my baby boy's head as he lay sleeping on my shoulder. I can hear his gasping as he wrestles me on my stomach. I remember the morning when his sweet breath of infancy, honeyed with his mother's milk, became stronger and more distinct. I still feel the growing strength within his body twisting in my



embrace. I still hear the sounds, words, and eventually sentences through which he opened and shared himself with me. I still feel the pain of his every fall and disappointment.

Celebrate the Ordinary

I have a rather simple belief about fathers. We are doing the absolute best we can and yet most of us feel that this is not enough. We must learn to celebrate what we are already doing well. This is not an attempt to discover something extraordinary about ourselves or about how we are going to build relationships with our children. Rather, it is an endeavor to recover the ordinary that presents itself in every moment.

I am a Father

“I am a father,” may be the first words a man speaks to his family or friends soon after the birth. I remember calling my father from the hospital and uttering those very words. It may have been the first time I claimed the feeling of fatherhood, an odd moment when I realized I was both my father’s son as well as my son’s father.

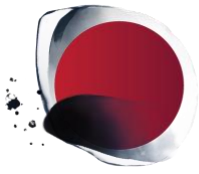
Becoming a father is physical

When I became a father, I went through so many changes that it is difficult to account for them today. These changes were all the more alarming because they were completely unexpected. My wife – we knew she would change. We could watch her changing, almost by the hour. She had all that physicality of pregnancy: new life inside her, organs shifting, hormones blazing, nesting instincts emerging. It was evident that she was pre-programmed for this extraordinary unfolding. What about me?

The French word “couve’e,” meaning to hatch, is used when men take on the symptoms of pregnancy: vomiting, weight gain, mood swings. I had some very personal and dramatic developments of my own, and I realized that as men, we, too, change the very moment we discover that we have helped create life.

Becoming an Active Father

Before the baby, my wife and I were travelers, workers, and I expected that we would find our way into parenting much like we had accomplished most everything we did: we worked hard, took risks, and approached each opportunity together as an adventure sparked by our curiosity. Fatherhood, whatever that meant, was a role I had signed up for. I knew I was up for the part, but I had trouble identifying with the script. I was developing a



vague sense that all of this was gradually happening to me. I was a passive participant and had yet to figure out how I could become a genuine and active partner, to be a father. Then the baby was born, it all became real. In the fathering moments, life unfolded with an intensity that had the power to usurp all other considerations.

The world as I know it has changed. A tiny being has become the center of my life in a natural and healthy way as I become a significant part of his world, holding him in the center of all that is. His needs eclipse my needs in so many ways. I had no idea what it really meant to function with so little sleep! Life without sleep, real sleep, seems unbearable. Yet six weeks later, here I am, still unable to imagine going on. My boy sleeps for exactly forty-two minutes if and when he takes his nap. I have forty-two minutes to nap myself, make a few phone calls, or continue with my research. It is precious time, and it is never enough. – My Fathering Journal, January, 1991

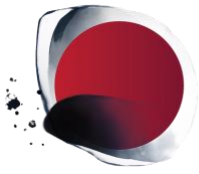
A Father is a Father

There is only one primary applicant for the position of father. Sure, there are other individual males and even females who could provide a degree of paternal involvement. However, there is only one birth father. With this in mind, the father holds the position regardless of the individual competencies he may possess. He is the father whether or not he can hold a child, listen deeply to the child's needs, perform tasks when he does or does not feel like it, deal with repetitive demands to care take a situation, move through the limitations he faces when cleaning up a mess made by his child, or hold a situation in such a way that it is safe and nurturing. In fact, he has the job; whether he is "qualified" for the position is not the point. The competencies required are his to develop and apply regardless of his limitations.

Seeking Fatherhood

When we secure the position as father, we do not receive an operation manual. So how do we proceed? Simply put, a father can father if he is willing to show up, pay attention, and not harm himself or his child. We do the best we can in every moment and keep the child at the center of our thinking, listening deeply to his or her voice and trusting the basic principles of relational interdependence. As you are seeking to make sense of fatherhood, fatherhood is seeking you.

Negotiating Providing and Nurturing in Fatherhood



Many men perceive themselves as good fathers because they are out in the world providing for their families. We rate our success on endeavors that demand a separation from the family. Yet, we also realize that other aspects of fathering only happen while we are home. Many men are compelled and want to nurture their children directly. We may simply not know how to get there. As one father said to me, "My life has so much meaning because of my relationship with my wife and kids." Yet, he also told me that he believes that when he pursues parenthood by spending time with his kids, there is a lack of societal support, and he feels it places him at a disadvantage when competing with childless individuals in the workplace. He experiences a split between his contemporaries who parent children and those who do not.

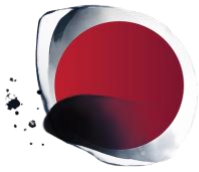
How do we Define Fatherhood?

Can we really define fatherhood? Probably not. We can, however, ask ourselves questions that bring us closer to what it means to father. I think if we try, we can begin to evoke our personal experience of the father and the memories of our own father or men we admire. Perhaps it is this remembering, feeling, seeing, and listening deeply that is required.

Be There for your Child When he Needs You

I am sitting at my computer working and hear his cry. I wait, like any attentive father, to see if his mother is going to him. He continues to cry, and it slowly dawns on me that she is working. We both work full-time, we are raising this boy together, and I realize, "I am on today." Reluctantly, I let go of thought, push away from the computer, and go to him. Once he is settled, I attempt the impossible: Can I keep typing while cradling him in my left arm? I do so for a while. I can complete a sentence, a paragraph, maybe a section. I am impressed by my ability to hold a train of thought and dexterously type with one hand while cradling my baby in the other. Surely this is some measure of my physical and mental agility. Yet, even as I congratulate myself, I wonder, is this what I want to be doing, holding my child in the margin of my attention?

Truth be told, sometimes one arm is all we have to give. Other times, one arm is all that is required. He doesn't want your full attention. He shies away from the brightness of your gaze; maybe he just wants to know that you are there when he needs you.



How You Treat a Father

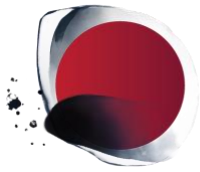
"I felt abused, irritated, and annoyed. I gave Jonathan back to Claudia and headed for the shower, grumbling, 'First he craps on me, then he pees on me, and now he throws up on me. Is that any way to treat a father?'. . . I didn't find it funny--that is, not until I'd had time to reflect on it several days later." — Greenberg, 1985, p. 103

As a father, this has or will happen to you. It is unavoidable simply because children generate a lot of mess. This scene illustrates an infant's behavior, but the toddler or teen will do the same thing. They are going to shit on you: "Dad, you don't have a right to control me." "You suck!" "Give me a break, quit always telling me how I am supposed to be." "What now!" You will hear some rendition of this more times than you can count, and like the father mentioned above, you will protest that this is no way to treat a father.

Finding Multiple Avenues for Solutions

When my son was young, he loved to play with Legos. This went on for years. First it was the large size, to prevent swallowing, and as time progressed, the pieces became increasingly smaller, and as you've probably noticed, increasingly expensive. I was the parent who was charged with playing and constructing and solving the architectural challenges of creating the machines, houses, and people with intricate combinations of color-coded interlocking blocks.

My wife was vacuuming, and I heard a loud clinking sound in the metal tube. I interrupted the cleanup and asked if she knew that she was vacuuming up the Legos. "Sure. I am tired of stepping on them in the middle of the night!" She was right, of course. It was not her job to clean up after the "boys;" it was ours. So I took it on and became the keeper of the Legos. Whenever I found a stray, I would place it in a bowl reserved just for that purpose. Even when my son and I were most diligent, some pieces seemed to migrate from the construction site under the stairs up into the playroom, even down to the basement. When I tried to get my son to take on this responsibility, he would assure me that he would. However, I resolved to be his back-up man. I seldom asked him to help but would begin to pick-up after our play together and even after his solitary play. I did this because it worked. We had the right pieces when we needed to build something because fewer pieces were lost.



I didn't have to fight that ugly battle of trying to dictate my son's behavior. We did not power-struggle over something that had multiple avenues for solution. And best of all, I too found that in the darkness of a midnight wakeup, I was less likely to pierce my foot with one of those easily missed pieces.

Negotiating Space for Yourself

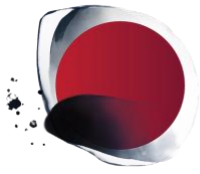
I remember a time when I came home from work and my son was all over me. I was dressed in a silk shirt and jacket. As I was eating a salad, he began tenaciously gnawing away at the edges of my sanity with his demand for my attention. Tense and tired, I interrupted his advances, hoping that I'd given him enough: "That's nice honey;" "What a big boy." Still, he advanced. It was as though he wanted to get under my skin. I couldn't tolerate his sticky ice cream hands on my wrist and finally I snapped: "Honey, please stop pulling on me." Slowly he crumbled and faded to his mother's lap. Frustrated, I pulled back, and we distanced ourselves. Within moments, I negotiated some space for myself in exchange for a story to be read after his bath. And I realized that it would take some doing to recover the balance.

The Ritual Dance of Father-Son Love

It is after dinner and the evening rituals begin. He is dancing and beckoning, "Come on Dad, let's play." We head to the living room, and I assume my position on the floor. For the next hour, we wrestle, punch, and roll about. He remains in control. Now he is an Indian with tomahawk in hand, chopping the air. Now he is a character in one of his videos and ties loose knots around my legs. He grabs rubber balls and flings them at me. I throw them back. Occasionally, a ball catches him a little too hard, and he runs into the other room to show the "wound" to his mother. Moments later, he charges back and pounces, gently nipping at my ears; I blow on his belly; he complains and runs for another weapon. A basket flies through the air in my direction. On we go tumbling, scratching, father, and son in our dance of love.

Finding Meaning in the Everyday

One morning my son calls for his mother. While she is preparing his bottle, I walk quietly into the room. He waves to me as I lay across the end of his bed and mutters "good morning" in his sleepy voice. His hand extends to me, and I hold it for a while, massaging his fingers gently. No words are spoken. The action seems to be pulling him from his not-



yet-awake consciousness into the world. After a time, he withdraws his hand and says, "Go." That is all he says, "Go!" I smile and reply, "ok." As I leave the room, I add that I will see him in a while. He smiles and nuzzles deep into the bedding.

I Communicate My Presence

The other day, while my son and I were visiting a friend and colleague, something occurred regarding a project that we were working on. We had been developing a proposal and suddenly realized that much more work was required. On the way home, I was distracted. My son asked me what I was thinking about. Sorting through my pre-occupation, I briefly shared my concerns and then, with some effort, returned to our discussion about how we were going to spend our day together. His prompting me to articulate my distraction allowed us to reconnect and continue to breathe into life together.

I realized something probably known by all but worth repeating: if I am distracted, I communicate distraction. If I am dull, I communicate my dullness. If I am present, I communicate my presence and the life that emerges strengthens our relationship.

Presence requires a capacity to hold both my child and my internal world.

He stands in front of me, scowling. I offer him hugs, space, food, drink, toys, a trip to the park – all I get is a whiny “No!” This is frustrating! His discomfort is growing, along with mine. There are so many more ‘productive things’ I could be doing with this time, if he would only tell me what she wants!

Then I remember: he is two years old. He may not even know what he wants. Maybe all he wants is to be cranky.

I sit on the floor in front of him. Smile. Look into his eyes. Tell him I love him. Hold out my arms, patiently, holding quite still. Slowly he approaches, allows me to embrace him, lays his head on my shoulder, and cries. We are together now.

Reference

Moore, Thomas. (1992). *Care of the soul: A guide for cultivating depth and sacredness in everyday life*. New York: HarperCollins.

Image (Search Fathering Notes) courtesy of: [Felipe Souza @lipedsz](#)



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