



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

**What's the Deal with Father's Day?**

George Waters, Guest Preacher

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Hi, my name is George, and I'll be your lay minister for today. (I can't tell you how many times I used that line at parties in college and never got anywhere.)

For those of you visiting the church for the first time, I'm not the minister. In the summer we invite people from the congregation who think they have something to share to lead the service. So if you come back all summer long you will see someone different up here every week.

It's sort of refreshing. There's kind of a "Forrest Gump" vibe— you never know what you're gonna get. If you are new, I do invite you to come back in September when our regular minister, Lissa Gundlach, will be back, so you can see how someone with actual training does this.

As Reverend Lissa reminded us last Sunday, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King famously said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." He didn't mention the asterisk at the end of that sentence, though. Asterisks get in the way of poetry. But there is an asterisk there, and it says that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it only bends toward justice if the people in this room, and many others like you out there, jump up, grab that sucker, and bend it manually.

And after Orlando, we are reminded again that out there right now, amassed against us, there are many, many people who are actively, passionately working to bend the arc in the wrong direction.

So you are needed, and not just in some abstract way.

The killer in Orlando was once a child. He was a blank slate. He could have been anything. As I listened to accounts of the slaughter last Sunday, a lyric jumped to my mind from, of all places, the musical "South Pacific." It goes, "You've got to be taught to hate and fear / you've got to be taught from year to year / It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear...you've got to be carefully taught. You've got to be taught before it's too late / before you are six or seven or eight / to hate all the people your relatives hate...you've got to be carefully taught."

We may find out, in the case of the Orlando killer, that goes for self-hate too, which is just as culturally taught, and just as poisonous.

One reason why I brought my children here a decade ago was specifically so they could grow up surrounded by other kids who were being taught acceptance of differences, tolerance, and compassion.

Clearly, there is work to do in the world. You are needed. Part of the reason why a lot of you come here every Sunday, I think, is to recharge after a long week of arc-bending. Between your job, or caring for an elderly parent, or raising your kids or rebutting political nonsense from your friends on Facebook, there's not a lot of energy left over for arc-bending. So we come here to recharge, to be with our community, to remind ourselves we're not alone in this big job.

At this point, you may be wondering why the title of today's service is (Seinfeld voice) "What's the deal with Fathers' Day?" A couple of weeks ago they pressured me for a title they could put in the church bulletin . . . so I asked myself what anybody in that situation would ask . . . "What title will allow me to do my Seinfeld impression?"

And then, of course, after it was too late, I thought of the perfect sermon title: "There is no I in UU." Somebody please use that. All right, well, let's make this father thing work.

My dad loved to laugh. He had a huge laugh, so he would have really enjoyed this today. It's kind of . . . poetic . . . that I am giving this sermon on June 19th, because it is 10 years, to the day, that he passed away. My dad was, much like Sid Galley, whose life we'll be celebrating here at noon, one of those deeply good guys.

He made it to age 92, and he was lucky in many ways; he had all his marbles right to the end. And, look, you can't complain about 92 years, although you always wish for more.

Losing your dad leaves an ache that is never entirely gone. I remember watching some TV show not long after my dad died, I think it was "Grey's Anatomy," and there was a scene in which a guy's father had just passed away. He was devastated, and with tears in his eyes he asked another character, who had been through the same experience, "Do you ever get over it?" Her answer was one of the truest things I've ever heard, on TV or anywhere. She said, "No. But you get used to it."

You get used to it.

This is true of so many things. We get used to so many things. Our own mortality. How is that possible? But we do.

I acted in a show in my twenties, "Spoon River Anthology." It's basically a bunch of characters who are dead but who stand up and tell the audience about their lives. Their joys, their regrets. One character I played has always stuck with me. He used the metaphor of chickens, how they live their lives unaware of the inevitable chopping block, but he reminds us that humans don't have that luxury. The piece ends with this: "For what is it all but being hatched, and running about the yard, to the day of the block? Save that a man has an angel's brain, and sees the axe from the first."

Sees the axe from the first. That is some dark truth right there. Sorry to bring it up. But how do we deal with that, so we can go about our lives, running about the chicken yard, figuring out our taxes, finding parking at Trader Joe's . . .

I remember, when I was a kid, I had an epiphany. I ran in and told my dad, "Dad, I'm not ever gonna die." He looked at me kind of amused. "Oh? Why is that?" I said, totally confident, "Because I don't know how." I thought I had nailed it! I was at an age where, if you didn't know how to do something, say, cursive writing, it wasn't happening. "I don't know how, dad."

I have never forgotten his rueful laugh. It was a laugh that was, at once, affectionate but still assured me I was completely full of crap. (By the way, when our minister comes back in September, she doesn't say crap. But hey, it's summer!)

I don't remember what my dad replied, exactly, but it was probably something along the lines of "Well, the rain doesn't know how to fall, either."

Mary Oliver asks, "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?"

I discovered a poem in college. You probably know it. It's called "Desiderata." I have always remembered this one line, because it really wowed me. The line goes, "And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should."

No doubt. No doubt? Doubt is why I walked in that door 10 years ago. If you have no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should, you might want to visit one of Pasadena's many other churches. As our opening words here every week say, "We welcome you whoever you are and wherever you are on your spiritual journey." Your spiritual journey. We don't say "Congrats, here's your fast pass to heaven! Please say hello to your tour guide, Leonard Nimoy." No, we affirm that you are here as a seeker.

Whether you believe in a Creator, or an afterlife, or neither, you did come in that door this morning, hoping for . . . something. . . above everyday life.

The day before my dad died, it was Father's Day. My wife and kids and I went to visit him and my mom, and at some point he rather casually asked the question, "Are you guys going to church anywhere?" I realize now that he was already having chest pains, that he probably knew what was coming, he was 92, and he wanted to make sure our lives were in order. He had gone to the same liberal Christian church for 45 years, and the worship and community there had enhanced his life tremendously. I realize now that he wanted that for us.

But my answer that day was no. In fact, I had left my childhood church at 18 for college and had just . . . never gone back. So when he died, I took his question as a kind of nudge.

I wanted what he had, for my wife and me, and for my kids. So I did what, I hear, a lot of you have done. On-line I found the Belief-O-Matic. (Google it if you don't believe me.) Answer 20 questions about your beliefs and your ethics and boom, it tells you what religion suits you best. The answer for me involved eleven syllables I had never heard of before.

Unitarian Universalism? Is that the one where everybody has to wear white tennis shoes? No, that's the one—is that the one? —where you only eat quinoa on Fridays?

I'm in the pulpit today, on Father's Day, directly because of a father's nudge. My dad was not a UU, he was a UCC, but he spent a whole life bending that arc in the right direction. He was needed. You are needed.

What's the deal with Father's Day? It's the day I celebrate the nudge; the nudge which led me to the church of the open mind and the open heart. The church of the seeker.

On some Sundays, when the sermon's right, and the choir's really soaring, you can practically hear that arc of the moral universe hum with optimism.

May we live up to its call.

Amen.