

## **Mother's Day 2011: On Being a Parent**

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Have you ever heard of the “third rail”? That’s the ribbon of steel through which the electric current runs that powers subways and electric trains. What happens if you touch it? Why are there so many warnings about third rails? —reach out, touch it and you’re fried. Well, I’m going to ignore the warnings and handle the third rail in these remarks. Let’s see what happens.

It’s going to mean that we have to travel back into the near past—past the elections, Bin Laden’s death, the revolutions in Arab nations, the tornadoes in the American South and the earthquake and devastation in Japan. They’ve been an extraordinary couple of months. I’m not going to be talking about these events, not today. Instead, I’m going to talk about parenting—that labour- and time-intensive undertaking of rearing, educating, initiating and fellowshipping a human being into the company of mature adulthood. It’s work that requires sustained attention; it takes love, imagination and a lot of confused muddling through by care-giving persons and by a community that has already achieved adulthood. It’s a tough thing for just one or two adults acting alone to pull off all by themselves. The whole social landscape of which a growing young person is a part contributes to making her into what she is going to be. And so in this sense, I believe that parenting entails or is something that all of us do, whether we have children or not.

After all, the word “parent” is derived from the Latin verb *parere* which means “to produce,” “to bring or lead forward.” If that’s the case, I believe that everyone in this room is a parent, a producer, a creator, a mentor, a maker. Each of us has, does, and will bring something

that is “not,” *into being*. And the something I want to focus on today—the goal of our creative, skilled parenting lives, that which we hope to achieve as an outcome is *an adult human being*.

The truth is, though, if someone comes along to propose a better or best kind of parenting, if he or she criticizes the parenting of others—watch out! It strikes raw nerves. The third rail. It’s not hard to understand why—parents, and mothers in particular, and their parenting methods have been whipping boys for pundits, therapists, school administrators, politicians and cultural scolds who dump the very decline and fall of civilization at the feet of moms and dads, especially moms.

Just a few months ago, it seems almost a lifetime, the media were overwhelmed by a blizzard of articles, reports, and commentaries about parenting that accompanied the publication of Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Do you remember? It was quite the phenomenon, dominating the life and style sections and the opinion pages in the news until recent events bumped it out of the way. I lost track of the number of articles reporting and commenting on the book. It generated hundreds of thousands of responses in English language newspapers; some in praise, many in condemnation of her thesis and parenting techniques. There was a raft of talk show appearances. It was even serialized and read out loud on BBC Radio Four.

A *Wall Street Journal* article, with the title: “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior,” kind of sums up Chua’s thesis. That is to say, Chua, who along with her husband is a law professor at Yale University, asserts that when compared to American and non East Asian Canadian parents, Chinese children tend to be successful because they have “tiger mothers,” whereas Western parents are pussycats or worse. Ms. Chua’s daughters, she tells us, were never allowed to watch

television, play computer games, choose their own extracurricular activities, sleep over at a friend's home, or be in a school play. She demanded that they spend hours every day practicing the violin or piano and relentlessly supervised their hours of homework each night. No grade less than an A, no position in class except #1, were accepted. Instead of false praise, and focusing on self-esteem, she insisted on high standards and criticism. She once rejected a hastily scrawled birthday card that her then four year old daughter had made for her. "This is garbage," she said. "I will not accept this. You can do better."

Part of the phenomenal attention generated by Chua's book, is due, no doubt, to current fears about the so-called decline of the West and China's ascendance. As well, the terror of losing ground, of generational decline, is a nightmare driving force in a lot of middle-and upper middle class Canadian and American families. Actually, when I look around, read parenting advice columns, and observe the tight, obsessive scheduling of children's activities by parents that make it impossible for kids to even attend Sunday school, I think that Amy Chua isn't really rebelling against American/Canadian style of parenting; she's the logical, extreme extension of prevailing parental practices of a lot of the middle-and upper middle class; she's just hard core and up front about it.

However, I think that she and those of us relentlessly organizing and driving our kids' lives are missing something, something picked up by the philosopher Peter Singer and David Brooks of the *New York Times*. Singer and Brooks think that this kind of parenting is actually protecting children from the "most intellectually [and morally] demanding" of human activities—activities like sleepovers for fourteen year old girls. "Managing status rivalries," writes David Brooks, "negotiating social norms, navigating the distinction between the self and group—these

and other social tests impose cognitive demands that blow away any intense tutoring session or a class” at the Yale School of Law.

“To take part in a school play,” writes Peter Singer, “is to contribute to a community good....And all children whose parents bar them from such activities miss the opportunity to develop social skills that are just as demanding—and just as demanding to master—as those that monopolize Ms. Chua’s attention. We should aim for our children to be good people,” he writes, “and to live ethical lives that manifest concern for others as well as for themselves.” And then he concludes with this: “Tigers lead solitary lives, except for mothers with their cubs. We, by contrast, are social animals. So are elephants, and elephant mothers don’t focus only on the well-being of their own offspring. Together, they take care of all the young in their herd, running a kind of daycare centre....When it comes to raising our children, we need fewer tigers and more elephants.” (Brooks, “Amy Chua is a wimp,” *NYT*, January 17, 2011; Singer, “The human race needs elephant mothers, not tiger mothers,” *Guardian*, February 13, 2011.)

Participating in groups, like a UU congregation or a crowd of teenage peers, can be really hard. It requires the ability to trust people outside your own kinship circle. Through arduous experience, not formal instruction, we learn how to read intonations and moods, to understand the psychological pieces each person brings to the room that can and cannot fit together. We pick up these and a million other skills by the informal process of maturing, of growing up. They are not developed if formal learning and relentless scheduling monopolize our children’s thoughts, feelings and time.

I even want to say that it’s o.k. if our kids are bored. What I fear, frankly, is that we can be so uptight and anxious on their behalf and for their “success” that we don’t give them enough time and space to find themselves in that place where dreams and ideas are given free rein. I

want to thank the parent who said to me when I complained that I was bored, “Steven, there’s always a book to read.” I want to thank our parents who responded to bored and laggard minds and bodies on long evenings and endless summer days with the injunction to “go outside and play.” Unsupervised play without an adult in sight! It was a crazy paradise of kids—hordes of us were set loose to “hide and seek,” “kick the can,” choose up sides for “Red Rover, Red Rover,” and to re-enact the perils of the “Journey to the Centre of the Earth.”

In the countless books I read without a teacher or parent looming over my shoulder or a test looming at the end, in those wild gangs of children at play, I learned my first, indelible lessons of heartbreak and courage, mystery and fairness, disappointment and injustice. I want to thank the parents of my youth who had the nerve and wisdom to set us loose on the world with the words: Read! Play! We’ll call you in when it’s time to eat, or time to go to bed and left us to our own devices.

I want to thank the parents who have the grit and good sense to sit together *every night* for dinner and conversation; who read out loud to children *every night* at bed time; who set up islands in their kitchens and dining rooms for play and art and writing—the cluttered domains of crayon, paper and scissors, and the flotsam and jetsam gathered here and there from long walks together—these are the raw materials for the whimsical, artful creation of worlds and selves.

I want to acknowledge that momentous event when we have the wisdom, when we realize the necessity of letting go and letting children lead. A poignant and funny example of this unsettling, but crucial experience was captured recently in a book written by Vancouver author Ryan Knighton, who’s both blind and a stay-at-home dad. Knighton writes in *C’mon Papa: Dispatches from a Dad in the Dark*, about such adventures as strapping on his baby and going

for a perilous walk on Commercial Drive. But more to the point, he shares the unexpected joy of coaxing his now three-year old daughter to stop bolting away from him as soon as he sets her on the sidewalk, by asking *her* to guide *him* on their walks together. He leans over now and holds *her* elbow—that small, but significant change in the authority dynamic pleased the little girl and she’s stopped running away. Many times now, it has been my children who have led their father out of the dark. May we discern when that time comes and let go, and bless them in their coming-of-age.

I have been fortunate in my life to be surrounded and mentored by loving, flawed, and thoughtful adult women and men. By a father, tormented by the ghosts of war and failure, who showed me by negative example the kind of parent I wanted to become. Grateful for a mother who, though I wanted sometimes to scream out of exasperation for her “hovering” when I was a teen, yet showed me generous, encouraging, unconditional love—the kind of generative love that sends a child out confidently into the “project” that became his life.

I want to thank the adults of my formative religious community who, through their company and care, revealed to me the vision and power of congregational generativity—for their audacity to call a confused and wild young fourteen-year old boy to be the teacher of their Adult Sunday School class; abiding respect and appreciation for adults in the congregation of my childhood and youth who believed deeply enough in their faith community to *tithe to it* in order to ensure its well-being, relevance, and future. And to that same host of adult men and women who welcomed and mentored me into the field of shared sacrifice, labour and mythic imagination, I express my gratitude.

I was parented by example by all these adults; my own parents, my neighbours, my fellow congregants; parented by sweat, service, unsupervised reading and play, and by our modern day myth-making. With the exception of my own parents, I wasn't their kid, or grandkid. But believe me, all those folks were my "parents." They helped to bring and lead me forward. I don't share their doctrine any more, but because of them, I remain committed to the power of parenting at home and to the generative power of congregational parenting.

We possess the potential of powerful, life-changing, generative parenting in abundance! Think of the things we've witnessed and done, the stories we can tell, the mature adult behavior we can model, and the patient, inclusive listening we can perform—perform, all of these, in order to lead out and contribute to something which is not yet, into full flourishing being. May what we parent forth be mature, healthy adult women and men. And may we look at ourselves and at those around us, young and old, for opportunities for stewardship, mentoring, and role-modeling, for those quiet and quite glorious moments when we too, each and all, can be "parents."