

COMMENTARY

Understanding a father's love

There are lots of good fathers in the world, and too many bad ones.

Becoming a father brings permanent, life-changing responsibilities. Yet the biological act that leads to becoming a father can be a thoughtless accident. Some good fathers have no biological children. In some families, women are good fathers.

Fathers receive no formal training. We learn to be fathers from our experiences with our own fathers, by trial and error, and from advice here and there.

Being a father is bewildering. Even in my 14th year as a father, I often feel that I am moving through fog without a compass. Most fathers aim to do better when we fall short. But we know there are no real next times in the unique lives our children live.

The word "father" (Latin and Greek "pater") goes back to a root meaning "protect" — the ancient Greek word for "shepherd" comes from the same root. A father's role, etymologically, is to respond to and look out for children within families. Children ask of fathers today what they have asked of them for thousands of years — that we be with them and care for them.

Our oldest cultural myths explore this basic father-child relationship. In Genesis, God asks Abraham to do the worst thing a father can do: kill his only son Isaac. Abraham may fail as a father because he is so willing to obey God. Freud saw in the ancient Greek myth of Oedipus and his father Laius the key to understanding our psyches. Modern storytellers shed light on the mysteries of fatherhood, too.

I sat down in Threadgill's recently with Austin singer-songwriter Jimmy LaFave to discuss his work celebrating the musical genius of Woody Guthrie. What struck me most was the gentle fatherly attention LaFave constantly paid to his 5-year-old son, Jackson.

LaFave's hero Guthrie felt such awe about becoming a father for the fourth time that he filled pages of his date book in 1942 with thoughts written to his child-to-be. His daughter Cathy would inspire Guthrie's album of children's songs, "Songs to Grow On: Nursery Days." LaFave's deep feelings about his son are found in his beautiful song "Lucky Man" on his latest CD "Cimarron Manifesto": "Here you come



THOMAS G. PALAIMA

again / And I realize / What a lucky man / I must be / What a lucky man / To have you here with me."

William Faulkner explored the mysteries of fatherhood, too. In his short story "Tomorrow," he tells us about a rural Mississippi farmer, Stonewall Jackson Fentry, a "little, worn, dried-out hill man." Fentry was so poor all his life that he could never even think of having a wife and children. Fate brings a "gaunted," despondent pregnant woman into his care. Before dying, she gives birth to a boy. Fentry cares for his accidental son, whom he names Jackson and Longstreet Fentry, with a fierce all-consuming devotion. The boy is taken away from Fentry at age 2. He grows up to be a kinless, drunken, foul-mouthed petty criminal. He is killed one night by a farmer protecting his daughter.

Fentry's actions at the ensuing trial reveal his enduring paternal love. As Faulkner explains, Fentry, as a father, could still recognize, after 20 years, the innocent boy hidden within the young adult Jackson and Longstreet's "debased and brutalized flesh."

Lastly, this year's Liberal Arts convocation speaker at the University of Texas at Austin, Bill Watkins, spoke poignantly of his father loving the son he had rather than the son he wanted. Conversely, if you wanted a different father than the one you had, read Tobias Wolff's short story "Deep Kiss." In an odd moment of revelation, a 45-year-old man finally realizes how much "unguarded benevolence" and patient love he received from his father.

If you have a good father, thank him on Father's Day by sharing your own stories with him.

Palaima (tpalaima@sbcglobal.net) thanks his wife, Carolyn, and son James for making him a father.