

In the Name of the Father
By Halbert Katzen

You only get out of it what you put into it.

Choosing a name to reflect our relationship to and understanding of God provides an opportunity to express our core values and beliefs. Naturally, people tend to use a variety of names for different contexts and in order to refer to the various qualities that are attributed to God. Sometimes we want to emphasize our relationship to God as our Creator. At other times we may want to call attention to God as a being who is just, merciful, powerful, universal, infinite, or eternal.

This essay is about evolving and uplifting the use of the word *Father* for God.

Though many people are personally comfortable with using the word *Father* for God, collectively, we still have issues to address. On an individual level, we may “get over it.” But this does not leave us in a position where we can express ourselves openly without offending others. For some people, this term carries negative connotations; it comes off as a term that perpetuates the religious enshrinement of historic sexism. There is no love in having a dismissive attitude towards those who have a problem with this term. Defining the issue as someone else’s problem only exacerbates the social tensions. People have reasonable concerns that are based in wanting to have healthy and loving relationships with others.

Those of us who like to use the word *Father* for God and are willing to look past the negative connotations that torment other people have an opportunity to get beyond the “get over it” attitude. Developing a sound philosophic foundation for the use of the word *Father* for God can liberate us from coming off as sexist or merely traditional. As well, a sound philosophic foundation also enhances our own experience of God.

Here is *one* approach. It is based on the following three beliefs:

- 1) We are in spirit God’s children,
- 2) We share with God the quality of being persons and,
- 3) We share with God what makes love possible and real—freewill.

This essay explores how the implications of these three beliefs logically lead to using the word *Father* for God.

The value in incorporating these three connotations into a word for God is that they define the fundamental nature of our relationship to God and others, along with affirming that we have freewill and can be loving persons.

Taking a philosophical view of this issue liberates us from our individual experience by calling upon us to develop an appreciation for what is common to everyone’s parent-child relationship. In order to develop sound philosophy, we need to look beyond experiences that are more unique or particular to our individuality and focus on family ideals and values that tend to be universally shared and are generally expressed powerfully, even if not ideally.

We Are Children Of God

Choosing a parental name for God serves two purposes. First, it glorifies the parent-child relationship as a supreme expression of love and, second, it makes all persons equal before God.

In general and ideally, the greatest expressions of love are found in the parent-child relationship. The family always has been and continues to be the arena where human beings exhibit extraordinary levels of care and concern. A word for God that carries a parental connotation allows us to tap into our idealization of the parent-child relationship.

Parental love is primarily expressed through generosity and mercy. These expressions of love are appropriate because of the hierarchical relationship between parents and children. The parent-child relationship leads to the experience of siblinghood with other children of God. In contrast to the parent-child relationship, fraternal love is fundamentally expressed through fairness and justice. These expressions of love reflect the equality of status between siblings. Using a word for God that has family connotations not only glorifies the values of generosity, mercy, fairness, and justice but also structures them with respect to our interpersonal relationships.

There are various words that can be used for God that have a parental connotation. Examples include: Parent, Father, Mother, and Father-Mother. Other possibilities exist. Naming them all is not important; this is a process of narrowing them down.

We Are Persons With God

Using a personal word for God helps to get us in touch with God on an emotional level. *Faith is not merely the willingness to believe a good idea. More importantly, it is the willingness to love God and love God's children.*

The wide variety of ways in which the word *love* is used is unfortunate. We love ice cream. We love our dogs. We love a good argument or good joke, and we love it when our team wins. This word must also find a place in the expression of our highest values and most cherished relationships. The chameleon quality of the word *love* makes choosing a word for God that has a personal connotation all the more important. By doing so, we glorify the personal quality of our relationship with God.

The way the mammalian life cycle generally works is simple and universal, notwithstanding that with technology our personal relationship to it has become increasingly complex and individualistic. Fortunately, the philosophical approach focuses on what is simple and universal. (The philosophical approach also encouraged me to look for a way to avoid using words like "natural," "genetically," "naturally evolved," etc.)

Mammals have two parents. Choosing to emphasize both a parental and personal relationship to God narrows down to the options to two: Mother or Father.

We Have Freewill

Love is predicated upon freewill; believing in freewill makes love possible.

Even though men and women equally share the quality of freewill on a spiritual level, men and women are not free to make the same kinds of choices on a material level. *Generally speaking*, fathers choose to be fathers in ways that mothers do not choose to be mothers. Simply put, a father can be a father and not know it. This is all too common even in “civilized” cultures. In contrast, generally speaking, a mother always knows if she gave birth.

That men know and *want to know* that they are fathers is the mark of civilization. It reflects making progressive moral choices. It is in this sense that the experience of fatherhood is more a matter of freewill choice than it is for mothers. Uncivilized mothers still know whether they are mothers.

Complementing this freewill choice uniquely available to fathers in their relationship to children is the fact that children must exercise freewill in order to *experience* their father *as* their father. Even though we can teach children to say "daddy" at a very young age, an understanding of the father's role as a co-creator is beyond their comprehension. Some time after learning to use a specific word to address their father, children develop the level of sophistication necessary to appreciate the role that fathers play in procreation. Then, based upon the *willingness to believe*, children are able to appreciate their father as a co-creator. It is only through the willingness to believe that children begin to relate to their father as a co-creator.

In contrast and in general, all children have a direct experience of their mother, even before they learn to speak or understand what it takes to make a baby. The whole process of gestation and nursing creates a continuous connection from the very beginning. The life cycle is set up to work this way. Children and mothers are meant to have an especially intimate and unbroken physical connection from the very beginning.

Comparing our relationship with our biological father to our spiritual father is a logical association, if the goal is to glorify freewill. And it works in both directions.

The willingness to believe is fundamental for fathers who want to know their children. By analogy, this aspect of fatherhood emphasizes that God chooses to create and be in relationship with us. As well, human beings do not enjoy a connection to fathers on the level that we have with mothers. Our willingness to believe that our father truly is our biological parent takes a degree of sophistication. This parallels our relationship with God, which also comes through belief after a requisite degree of intellectual growth has developed.

By redefining *Father* in this way—as an honoring of human spiritual freewill—we can liberate the word from the critique that its use is sexist, arbitrary, or traditional. Liberation of the word *Father* from its masculine connotations is not only in harmony with, but also is encouraged by, the feminist critique of language. Because freewill is no more a masculine quality than a feminine quality, using *Father* to connote freewill does not need to *always* carry the connotation of masculine attributes.

In similar ways, we recognize qualities of motherhood that are not necessarily feminine. For instance, if a father raises a child alone, he is not necessarily considered effeminate for assuming roles more commonly associated with motherhood. Understandably, masculine connotations will to a certain degree influence our appreciation of the word *Father* simply because men are fathers and there is not much history of redefining the term in this way (yet). But, by refusing to allow these unintended and unnecessary connotations to trump our use of *Father*, we exemplify commitment to the value of being nonsexist.