



## Narratives of Silence: Availability in a Spirituality of Fathering

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*The author takes a narrative approach to the spirituality of paternal availability. In all of the stories that are investigated, the theme of silence is prominent. Silence manifests itself through the modalities of restraint, loving action, and listening. These three modalities express quite comprehensively the Marcelian concept of personal availability. Marcel relates availability to both receptivity and belonging. Further, he identifies Christ as the ground of these commitments. Using these concepts, a Christian perspective on the spirituality of fatherhood is developed.*

The research that social scientists have carried out on fatherhood over the past thirty or more years has indicated a small but significant increase in paternal participation in the care and nurture of children. While this constitutes a positive development in fatherhood, it is important to recognize that there is a deeper level of paternal relationality than basic care for the needs of the child. "Caring for" a child is not necessarily the same as "caring about" her (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001, p. 392). When a father cares deeply about his children, there is a spiritual dimension in his relationship with them. The spirituality of fatherhood, I contend, is grounded in a father's capacity for a loving disposal of himself for the sake of his children. It is this disposability or availability that I am interested in here. In my view, the best treatment of the meaning of personal availability is provided by the French philosopher and Catholic Christian, Gabriel Marcel. In Marcel's (1964) approach, availability means both openness to the other and forming a covenant of belonging with her. This covenant of belonging, he contends, is ultimately grounded in the love of Christ. The aim of this paper is to explore the way in which fathers express their love for their children through these spiritual dynamics.

The method used in this attempt to gain an understanding of the spirituality of paternal availability is a narrative one. Psychologists, theologians, and moral philosophers who use this method are impressed by the fact that human persons think, feel, act, and exercise their moral imagination according to narrative structures. Story, they note, is highly significant in the human quest for meaning and self-understanding.

In carrying out a search for stories of fathers' caring relationships with their children, I was initially struck by the way in which Sarbin (2002) identified silence as a prominent theme in the narratives that are recorded in the book, *Between Fathers and Sons*. As I continued my search, I found myself drawn to this motif. Paternal

silence was most often presented in a negative light. There were a number of references in adult children's reports to suffering the "silence of absence," to receiving "the silent treatment" when father disapproved, and to the inability to communicate affection. Given that paternal parenting failures are a common topic both in the popular media and in academic publications, these are the kinds of reports that one might expect to find. What I was less prepared for was the finding that paternal silence was also reported in a positive light. Specifically, it was associated with paternal love and self-communication. It is this dimension of paternal silence that is pursued here. I have taken an account by a father and some stories from adult children (including one drawn from my personal experience) to present a portrait of the spirituality of paternal availability through silence. The way in which silence functions in these personal reports I have sought to capture through the following three modalities: *restraint*, *self-giving*, and *listening*. I discovered, first, that some fathers are wise enough to silence their inclination to dominate their children's learning. They know the value of restraint. Keeping quiet on occasion creates a space for the child to develop her natural sense of wonder. Through my research, second, I was also reminded that for children loving actions have a moral presence that is stronger than words. Paternal love is often powerfully expressed through a (largely) non-verbal self-communication. And finally, reflection on the experience of my own father's love brought to mind a story illustrative of his capacity to silence his intentions in order to attend to me. Dad was, and is, a good listener. He has the capacity to quickly still his own mental traffic in order to be fully present to others.

I have just indicated that the category of story is central in this attempt to grasp the "soul of fatherhood" (Garbarino, 2000). It is well to begin with a brief description of the narrative approach to understanding human thought and action.

### *Narrative and Life*

One of the significant recent developments in the intellectual view of human life and the world has been the turn to narrative. Quite a large number of social scientists, psychotherapists, philosophers, educators, political scientists, ethicists, and theologians have identified story as a fundamental category in their work (Cf. Kreiswirth, 2000). That life has a storied nature can easily be seen when one observes, first, that we all live out narratives in our daily activities, and, second, that we use narrative to help us understand what those activities mean (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 197). With this in mind, Sarbin (1986) proposes a "narrative principle." This principle is used to capture the fact "that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures" (Sarbin, 1986, p. 8).

While virtually everyone accepts that human beings use narrative as a way of imposing structure on human experience, some object that the category is assigned a more significant role in interpreting human thought and action than is warranted. They argue that a fundamental difference between what goes on in a literary work and in real life is that in the former case the author has complete control over the story and can therefore generate structure and order (see Crossley, 2000, p. 52). Life is not nearly as neat and orderly as a literary work. Chaos and contingency define the lives we lead. The fact that there is inevitably a "messiness" associated with our lives does not, however, rule out a narrative approach to human existence. This is so

because, like the author of a literary work, we are selective in the way that we approach our lives. That is to say, we are quite discriminating in the way we plot our lives (Crossley, 2000, p. 53). Certain options are set aside because they do not fit with the way we understand the story of our lives. That is, to some extent we direct the action in our personal narratives. It is also the case that we are selective in the way we tell and retell the central narratives in our experience of the world. In this way, we bring coherence and continuity to the chaos of our live reality. As we communicate to others (and to ourselves) who we are, there is an ordering of personal experience through a narrative process that has the function of producing meaning and a sense of identity (Sarbin, 2002). The self comes into being through story-telling. We know who we are and what our lives mean because of the stories we tell about ourselves.

In what follows, the focus is on stories that teach us important truths about the spirituality of a father's relationship with his children. Social scientific research is telling us that paternal involvement has been on the increase for some time now. In order to set the scene for the narrative study of paternal availability, we will turn to a brief survey of this research.

### *The Involvement of Fathers in Parenting*

Traditionally, fathers have been depicted as relatively uninvolved in the care of children. Their primary roles in this presentation are breadwinner and role model (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993; LaRossa, 1997; Palkovitz, 1996). Fathers exist to provide, first, material and moral support for their wives, and, second, a model of responsibility, commitment, and hard work for their children. But many claim that we are now witnessing a revolution in fatherhood. This is the era of the "new father." According to the new ideology, fathers should not only provide materially for their families, they should also be actively involved both physically and emotionally in the nurture of their children. The distant father of the traditional family is fading away as more and more dads are experiencing a change of heart. "[T]he hearts of men—and the face of parenting—are changing before our eyes. This is about fathers crying, cooking, being afraid, braiding hair, waiting with the children at the doctor's office, the principal's office, after school at the soccer field" (Gillenkirk, 2000, p. 20).

While there is no doubt that a significant change is in the air, talk of a revolution is probably exaggerated. It is more a case of a gradual evolution toward a new understanding of fatherhood (Parke, 1996, p. 3). Though it is true that fathers are now more involved in parenting, there is still a long way to go. There is clearly a gap between the rhetoric of the involved father and what fathers are actually doing (LaRossa, 1997, p. 5). Despite a certifiable increase in paternal participation (LaRossa, 1997; Parke, 1996; Wilcox, 2004), mothers continue to take most of the load in the care of children.

Whether it is revolution or evolution that we are talking about, social scientists have shown a high degree of interest in researching the involved father. Lamb (2000) identifies three dimensions in paternal involvement in the care of children, namely engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. Engagement refers to the time spent in one-to-one interaction through activities such as feeding the child, helping her with homework, and playing games with her. The term *accessibility* is

used to denote availability to the child rather than direct interaction. A father may be reading his newspaper, for example, while the child plays a short distance away. Responsibility, finally, is indicative of the extent to which the father acts as “primary manager” in the child’s day-to-day affairs. The common needs of a child include medical care, childcare and baby-sitting, clothing, and care and support when ill. Responsibility is a measure of the level of the father’s involvement in taking care of the arrangements associated with these, and other, needs.

While this increase in father involvement constitutes a very welcome development, it is important to recognize that there is a deeper level of paternal relationality than basic care for the needs of the child. As indicated above, “caring for” a child is not necessarily the same as “caring about” her. When a father cares deeply about his children, there is a spiritual dimension in his relationship with them. The spirituality of fatherhood is grounded in a father’s capacity for a loving disposal of himself for the sake of his children. Marcel (1950, 1964) refers to this loving disposal of self as *availability*. We turn now to a consideration of his insightful work.

### *Marcelian Availability: Basic Theory and Theological Reflections*

To describe a willingness to make the self available, Gabriel Marcel uses the word, *disponibilité*. It has a financial connotation and is linked to the notion of disposable assets. The available person is the one who is prepared to put all of her assets at the disposal of the other.

Marcel (1964) also interprets *disponibilité* in terms of receptivity. He develops the link between the two terms in an essay in *Creative Fidelity* entitled “Phenomenological Notes on Being in a Situation.” To exist with others, he observes, is to be exposed to influences. It is not possible to be human without to some extent being permeable to those influences. Permeability, in its broadest sense, is associated with a certain lack of cohesion or density. Thus, the fact of being exposed to external influences is linked with a kind of *in-cohesion*. I am “porous,” open to a reality that seeks to communicate with me. Marcel puts it this way:

I must somehow make room for the other in myself; if I am completely absorbed in myself, concentrated on my sensations, feelings, anxieties, it will obviously be impossible for me to receive, to incorporate in myself, the message of the other. What I called incohesion a moment ago here assumes the form of disposability. (Marcel, 1964, p. 88)

Disposability, then, is closely associated with receptivity. Receptivity involves a readiness to make available one’s personal center, one’s ownmost domain. We receive others in a room, in a house, or in a garden, but not on unknown ground or in the woods. Receptivity means that I invite the other *chez soi* (Marcel, 1950, p. 118). That is, I invite him to “be at home” with me. A home receives the imprint of one’s personality; something of myself is infused into the way my home-space is constructed. Contrast this with “the nameless sadness” associated with a hotel room; this is no-one’s home. To share one’s home-space is disposability or availability because “[t]o provide hospitality is truly to communicate something of oneself to the other” (Marcel, 1950, p. 91).

Over against this generosity of spirit sits a tendency to become absorbed in self. The only way to break out of self obsession, according to Marcel (1964), is by “submerging oneself suddenly in the life of another person and being forced to see things through his eyes” (p. 51). One cannot break out of this “inner inertia” on one’s own; it is through the presence of another person that this “miracle” is accomplished. The miracle does not, of course, happen automatically; one must be open, responsive, to the appeal of the other.

We are, however, still left with the questions: Why am I non-responsive to the suffering of the other? Why do I feel opaque, non-permeable? Marcel believes that non-availability is associated with the tendency to see one’s existence in terms of possession. I will treat myself as indisposable “just so far as I construe my life or being as a having which is somehow quantifiable, hence as something capable of being wasted, exhausted or dissipated” (Marcel, 1964, p. 54). In this attitude, I become like a person who knows that his small sum of money must last a very long time. I become afflicted with an anxiety and a concern that discourage self-giving. These negative affects are “reabsorbed into a state of inner inertia” (Marcel, 1964, p. 54).

But if we feel we really belong to another person, we do not count the cost of, or keep a score on, our self-communication. Marcel broadened his analysis of availability to include the idea of belonging. We seem to be on dangerous ground in speaking about belonging to another person. It seems as if I must disenfranchise myself in giving myself away. Do I not in this act give up my personal autonomy? Marcel (1964) is acutely aware of the pit-falls associated with conceiving of disposability in terms of belonging. He begins his analysis with the case of servanthood. If I assert, he says, of a servant “he belongs to me,” I treat him as a thing acquired, as something to be disposed of as I wish. Everything changes, though, if I declare to another person, “I belong to you.” “Jack, I belong to you,” means “I am opening an unlimited credit account in your name, you can do what you want with me, I give myself to you” (Marcel, 1964, p. 40).

The fact that I give myself to you does not mean that I am your slave. I establish my freedom in the very act of freely giving myself to you. “[T]he best use I can make of my freedom is to place it in your hands; it is as though I freely substituted your freedom for my own; or paradoxically, it is by that very substitution that I realize my freedom” (Marcel, 1964, p. 40). (Here I am reminded of Jesus’ teaching on gain through loss: In losing oneself for Christ one gains fullness of life. See, for example, Mk 8:35; Mk 9:35; Jn 12:24.)

Though Marcel can assert that to give oneself freely to the other is to be free indeed, he feels the need to establish how it is possible that one can substitute the freedom of another for one’s own without a disenfranchisement. In order to give of oneself freely, one must have some authority over the self that is given. That is to say, if I am to dispose of myself I must belong to myself. Belonging to myself means that I am responsible for myself. When one begins to think this way, it is possible to construct a relational triad in which mutual availability and personal autonomy can co-exist. The components in this triad are these: *I belong to you; you belong to me; I belong to myself* (Marcel, 1964, p. 42).

Though for the most part Marcel prefers to operate at the threshold of faith rather than engage directly with the Christian heritage, he does make some explicit

theological statements in relation to availability. It is interesting that the leading British theologian, Alistair McFadyen, develops a very similar approach to Marcel (McFadyen, 1990, ch. 5). Crucial to the formation of personhood is what McFadyen calls “being centered.” The centering of one’s experience in the self is what constitutes autonomy. Being centered is defined as the “achievement of organizing one’s life from an organizational locus within oneself; the ability to refer the features of the world to oneself and one’s own location, so that the possibilities for action may be focused on as they relate to oneself and so be self-ascribed” (McFadyen, 1990, p. 312). I refer my experience of the world to my personal center and thereby ensure that my actions are self-ascribed. This is another way of stating Marcel’s idea that “I belong to myself.” The normative pattern for dialogue, in McFadyen’s schema, is built on the understanding that “we are properly centered as persons only by being directed towards the true reality of other personal centers: we become truly ourselves when we are truly for others” (McFadyen, 1990, p. 151). In Marcel’s language, I avoid the self-constricting egoism potentially associated with the “I belong to myself” when I simultaneously assert that “I belong to you” and “You belong to me.”

McFadyen points to the fact that in a Christian understanding, mutual giving in a relationship is grounded in the presence and power of Christ. It is faith in Christ and the grace of his sustaining love which allows Christians to risk themselves with others:

The otherness of other people, including their brokenness, does not pose a threat of disintegration for those who live in the knowledge that they are upheld as integral beings in the presence of Christ, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and in the love and acceptance of God and/or others: who are, in other words, empowered by the Spirit, conformed to Christ and called into responsibility before God and others. (McFadyen, 1990, p. 157)

Marcel (1964) also claims that belonging to others is grounded in a belonging to Christ. He acknowledges that there may be an initial revolt against Christ’s claim that I belong to him. It seems as if Christ is exerting a tyranny over me. But, says Marcel, what frees this claim from any possibility of tyranny is the fact that, in a sense, Christ is not really someone else but “more internal to me than myself” (p. 100). His right is exercised not in terms of power but of love. If I can but overcome my unproductive resistance to what seems a tyrannical claim, says Marcel, I am set free from the strangulating grip of egoism.

I belong to myself; I belong to Christ; I belong to you; you belong to me. With these statements, Marcel (1964) seeks to offer an understanding of availability which holds together personal autonomy and freedom, on the one hand, and a genuine commitment to others that is grounded in Christ, on the other hand. Christ is the ground of the free act in which two persons in a loving relationship engage in a reciprocal substitution of freedom. Or to put it another way, in Christ the persons in relationship cease to belong to themselves as they transcend one another in the very heart of their love (Marcel, 1964, p. 99).

The stories of paternal availability that are offered below express both elements—openness and belonging—in *disponibilité*. We will reflect on the

experiences of fathers who open themselves fully to their children. They show a certain “porousness” to the important experiences in their children’s lives. All of the stories, secondly, speak to the experience of fathers expressing their deep sense of belonging to their children. They show us a paternal love grounded in the unspoken message, “I belong to you; I have opened an unlimited credit account on your behalf.”

The moral presence that is represented in these stories is not an explicitly Christian one. That is, none of the agents refer to faith in Christ as an inspiration. Nevertheless, Marcel would insist that in each of the acts of love that are referred to, Christ is present. For him, the disposal of oneself for the other is an expression of one’s true nature. And to express one’s true self is to express the grace of Christ. This is what Marcel means when he says that Christ is “more internal to me than myself.”

In the stories that are presented below, we will encounter fathers who express their bond of love with their children in quite beautiful ways. Like all of us who have the deep privilege and responsibility of being a father, they are not perfect. And yet, their intention is always to give of themselves for their children. What I find interesting in the stories of paternal availability that are offered is that they all involve the theme of silence.

#### *Silence as Expressive of Paternal Availability*

Silence is most often viewed negatively in relation to the availability of a father. We are all too aware, for instance, of the “silent treatment” that has such a potential for emotional wounding. When a child has erred in some way, a father may react by creating an emotional distance that serves to communicate his deep disapproval. In writing about this tendency in his father, Kenneth Gergen reflects that “[i]t was not an instructive disapproval, the kind that points to promising routes toward improvement; nor did it seem a charitable disapproval, the kind that otherwise suggests understanding and sympathy for the errant action. Rather, those silences seemed to bespeak a disgust; the depths of which I could not fathom” (Gergen, Gergen, & Martini, 2002, p. 126). Living with this withering silence is deeply painful.

Another common form of wounding paternal silence is absence. In looking back on their childhood, many people will comment on the fact that their fathers simply were not there. Work, other responsibilities, and personal passions were always calling them away. When this “silence in absence” (Gergen et al, 2002, p. 134) is compounded by failure to be fully present when actually at home the effect is quite devastating. Peter Garrett gives eloquent expression to the profound sense of loss associated with this experience when he writes:

The aching fact is that because my father wasn’t often at home—or when he was, he was unhappy and didn’t talk easily to his sons—I didn’t really get to know this person who in part made me. There are real gaps in this half-formed relationship that can’t be filled by photo albums and memories of maiden aunts. (Garrett, 1997, p. 252)

Paternal silence can be particularly toxic. What I want to explore here, however, is the way in which some paternal practices grounded in silence have just the opposite effect. Fathers can, and do, express their personal availability to their children

through silence. There are three practices that I want to concentrate on: *restraint*, *loving action*, and *listening*.

### *Restraint*

Loving fathers—and mothers—want the best for their children. They see the potential in their daughters and sons and want to do everything that they can to aid them in developing it. An important question that needs to be faced here is this: Along which particular line will the potential be developed? That is, will the child be given a certain amount of freedom in order to find her own way, or will the father succumb to the temptation to push her along the route that he has meticulously mapped for her? I use the phrase “a certain amount of freedom” advisedly. In an age when children are bombarded with unwholesome input from peers, the mass media, and the Internet, parents should not abdicate their responsibility for guiding and training their children. A *laissez-faire* approach to parenting is unhelpful and irresponsible.

Nevertheless, children do need space to be. Fathers express their commitment to their children through a loving restraint. They restrain their tendency to mold them into their own image. In holding back, they create a space that Nouwen (1975, p. 51)—referring to interpersonal relationships in general—calls a “friendly emptiness.” This is not a fearful emptiness, but rather an exciting one that provides room for the child to move. She is given the opportunity to explore herself and her potential. This exploration should be open, but not unbounded. There is a very big difference between pulling back and withdrawing altogether.

Pulling back is difficult for some. A father feels that he has so much to teach, so much wisdom to pass on. Words, sentences, and paragraphs tumble out of his mouth until all the holes in the learning space are filled. But it is the father that has done most of the filling. It may be that this is of relatively little concern to him. From his point of view, the important fact is that his child is learning and developing. She needed to be equipped to make her way in the world, and the requisite tools have been supplied.

There is a deeper paternal wisdom, however. There are those fathers who appreciate the value of silence. There is time to teach and a time to be quiet. Bruce Dawe is a teacher and a poet. He recalls that

[w]hen our first child, Brian, was trying out his first words for size, I had to keep on reminding myself that the parent who is a teacher (by profession that is, since all parents, like it or not, are teachers of one kind or another) must be ready to apply the brakes to his/her enthusiasm for correction of the younger generation. The young do have to learn many language lessons on their own. (Dawe, 1997, p. 275)

He captured this central paternal learning experience in a poem:

I have to be careful with my boy.  
When he says tree it comes out hazy  
very green and friendly and before I've got  
the meaning straight he's up there laughing in it,

or working on the word for aeroplane  
which is also a little above his head  
so that he has to stand on tiptoe to touch it  
--for him it does Immelmans to order,  
but when I try it becomes suddenly  
only a model in a museum with props that slowly turn  
when the button is pushed and a cutaway section  
to show the engine in action...

I have to be careful with my boy,  
that I don't crumple his immediate-delivery-genuine-fold-up-and-extensible  
world  
into correct English forever, petrify its wonder  
with the stony gaze of grammar, or turn him into  
a sort of Sunday visitor at the lakeside  
who brings bags of specially-prepared bread-crusts  
to feed to swans who arch their necks and hiss. (Dawe, 1997, pp. 275-276)

Dawe's metaphor of the petrification of wonder is especially instructive. A surplus of paternal teaching has the effect of filling the learning space. When this happens, there are no longer any openings for the child's inquisitive drive to push through. What began as wonder is metamorphosed through paternal over-involvement into a solid block of dead imagination.

Fathers want the best for their children. Most have accumulated a considerable amount of learning, wisdom, and experience. In their love for their children, they seek to make this available to them. Fathers do need to be teachers, but what Bruce Dawe's experience reminds us is that there is also a very important place for the "silence of restraint." Giving of self for one's child sometimes requires holding back one's teaching.

### *Loving Action*

Children want to hear that their fathers—and mothers—love them, but even more important to them are concrete demonstrations of love. While they can tolerate a certain level of slippage between word and deed, once it extends beyond a certain limit the language of love becomes tarnished. Actions are imbued with a higher degree of moral power than words simply because when it comes to parenting it is much easier to say it than it is to do it. Love is a form of work (Peck, 1990). Work is defined as an activity involving the expenditure of energy in order to achieve a defined goal. It requires physical, mental, and emotional energy to love a child. The fact that many of us who are parents have a tendency to laziness means that we are not always ready to expend the energy required to enact the commitment to our children that we have professed. If these failures become too frequent, the words of love that we utter begin to sound hollow to our children.

In reflecting on his relationship with his father, Donald Spence comments that "words of any kind always came second to actions; not only did these speak louder but they contained more of a moral presence. Language was cheap and often untrustworthy" (Spence, 2002, p. 58). What is most prominent in Spence's memory

of his father's (he always called him by his first name, Ralph) mode of parenting is its selflessness. He tells this story:

I was sick in bed, my mother was in the hospital, and Ralph was planning to go out for the evening and play bridge with some friends. I pleaded with him not to leave and, with almost no hesitation, he offered to invite the bridge group to our house. He didn't surround the offer with "maybes" or other conditionals; he simply said, "I'll invite them here" and that was that. I was overjoyed; not only would he not leave me, but I could go to sleep to the sound of laughter and merriment. Looking back on this moment, I can see the same kind of selflessness at work: you do it but you don't talk about it. Not only did he leave out the "maybes"; he also made no attempt to bargain with me or make a moral point. By doing and not saying, he showed me that actions can often speak much louder than words. (Spence, 2002, pp. 54-55)

Some readers may wonder at Spence's reference to his father's selflessness. Surely Ralph only did what any father with an ounce of decency would do. Be that as it may, this simple act of consideration had a lasting effect on Spence. He has treasured the memory all these years. It is both encouraging and humbling for those of us who are fathers to be reminded that even our small acts of kindness may be deeply valued by our children.

Our theme is silence, but words, it goes without saying, can be very powerful. They have the power to bind two people together. A secret shared, for example, creates a very strong bond. When intimate thoughts and feelings are shared and received with love and respect a deep sense of connection is established. It is also true that the bond of love can be firmly established without a word being spoken. In this story of a father trying to retrieve the "one that got away," the theme of selflessness is again in evidence. Mark Tappan recalls proudly pulling a trout out of the water.

But as my dad was trying to get the hook out of its mouth the fish got loose and fell, flopping, onto the bank. In a flash my dad reached for the fish and tried to get a hold of it again, but it flopped quickly into the shallow water. Without a pause my dad jumped into the water to catch it—clothes, shoes, and all!!—but the fish was quicker, and it was gone.

I was stunned. I was a little sad about losing the fish, but mostly I couldn't believe that my dad had just jumped into the water to try to catch that fish! My dad looked quite funny, flailing around in the water, and I know he felt bad about losing my fish. I don't remember being embarrassed; I just remember being amazed at what my dad had done, that he would do something like that for me—jumping into the water, getting his clothes wet, showing no concern for himself, only for me. (Tappan, 2002, p. 94)

In these ordinary actions fathers display their readiness to dispose of themselves for their children. The father-child bond of belonging is established through the offer and the reception of the gift of self. It is not what is said here that is significant, but

rather what is done. The paternal commitment is enacted in the silence above and beyond proclamations of love.

### *Listening*

High on the list of what children want from their fathers is to be acknowledged and validated through being seen, heard, and attended to. Osherson (1996) refers to the importance of a father becoming an attentive audience for his child. When the performance is being enacted an audience is a silent gathering. The onlookers find themselves fully engaged with what is going on up on the stage. They are receptive and ready for the experience that is offered to them. Or at least this is the case when the performance is both of a high quality and according to personal taste. When these conditions are not in place, the members of the audience may become restless and distracted. What makes listening attentively to a child challenging is the fact that often the “performance” is not especially riveting. If a father is to make himself available he needs to engage his powers of concentration. Nouwen (1972) takes this further when he says that good listening involves concentration without intention. Intentions refer to the random thoughts, pressing concerns, and pleasant musings that tear the listener away from his or her conversation partner. The silence required for good listening goes deeper than simply stopping oneself from interrupting. If a father is to attend to his child he needs to silence the intentions that are so distracting. This deeper silence is rooted in a spirituality of personal centering. “Anyone who wants to pay attention without intention has to be at home in his own house—that is, he has to discover the center of his life in his own heart” (Nouwen, 1972, p. 92).

The fact that my own father was such a good listener was enormously important to me. One memory that comes to mind just now is the times that he patiently listened to my explanations of how I managed to solve a particularly challenging calculus problem. In High School I really loved math and science. In fact, I was so enamored with these disciplines that I went on to study engineering at University. I would often be up late working on the calculus problems that we had been assigned in the first year of the course. If the problem was especially tough, when I finally found the solution I would be bursting with pleasure and pride. The elegance of the solution was a beautiful thing and I just had to have an audience to share my delight. My poor old Dad, very much engaged with his favorite TV program and not the slightest bit interested in calculus, was always the target. I remember very clearly his earnest attempts to follow each step. Of course he would usually get lost at some point. But that fact mattered little to me. What I really cared about was that he concentrated so hard. He knew how important this was to me, and he did his level best to attend closely to what I was telling him. Part of me knew that I was being silly burdening him with calculus problems that were of no interest to him. And yet I needed to share this important part of my life with him. That he listened so carefully and did his best to share in my excitement was enormously significant in the context of our relationship.

My father’s attentiveness expresses very well what is meant by the Marcelian concept of availability. Availability requires a certain “incohesion.” Spaces need to be created within the self into which the communications of the other can flow. It is exceedingly easy, as we all know only too well, to fill those spaces with one’s own

musings and concerns. The attentive father is the one who empties himself in the presence of his children. This emptiness is produced through a creating a stillpoint in one's personal center. When this is achieved, a father enters the silence that is the condition of the possibility of personal availability.

### *Conclusion*

We have taken a narrative approach to the spirituality of paternal availability. In all of the stories we have investigated, the theme of silence has been prominent. We saw it expressed through the modalities of restraint, self-giving, and listening. Some fathers are wise enough, first, to silence their inclination to dominate their children's learning. They know the value of restraint. Maintaining silence on occasion creates a space for the child to develop her natural sense of wonder. Through the fatherhood stories, second, we were reminded that for children loving actions have a moral presence that is stronger than words. And finally, we reflected on the importance in fatherhood of patient listening. This requires a capacity to silence one's intentions in order to attend fully to one's child.

These three modalities express quite comprehensively what Marcel means by personal availability. We saw that Marcel talks about availability in terms both of receptivity and belonging. Further, he considers that in these experiences of love and care, Christ is present. For Marcel, the disposal of oneself for the other is an expression of one's true nature. And to express one's true self is to express the grace of Christ.

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