

**The Art of Husbanding**  
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A few years ago I helped lead a conversation for men we called “What Kind of Man Are You?” We tried to tease out what it means to be a man at work, at play, in relationships, and we talked about where we had learned what we thought we knew about these things.

In the end we concluded that so-called “masculine qualities” are not unique to straight men, or to men at all, but that they *are* strongly reinforced in men by our families, our communities, and our culture. We agreed that to be a man means to acknowledge and engage the expectations, assumptions, and roles our society assigns to males—to understand them and to knowingly decide what we will accept, what we will reject, and what we will transform in the light of what our deepest self tells us about who and what we truly are.

Of course, our exploration was partly limited by the identities of the people in the room. All of us were straight, cis-male men—male-identifying people, born in male bodies. Our understanding of traditional gender roles has grown more complicated as we’ve realized that “man” can mean so many different things, as we continue to discover the fluidity of gender and the influence of sexual orientation. Yet the old ways tug hard.

Take just one of those traditional roles: Husband. What does it mean today, on this Father’s Day of 2016? Our popular social images of “husbands” were largely formed in a culture that only saw the straight stereotype in a binary world: There were men and women, and men who married became husbands.

You remember them. They’re still around: In comics pages, TV series, and movies, husbands are often the partner whose job is to make pronouncements and declarations that no one really pays much attention to. The husband proclaims, but of course when it comes to practical everyday life he’s kind of helpless. Everybody knows who’s *really* in charge.

Of course, in real life family decision-making processes are more nuanced and collaborative than that—or at least I hope they are. To be a husband doesn’t really mean to be blustering and irrelevant. Yet the exaggerated stereotype is tied to cultural messages that really do pop up in men’s heads—and in women’s, too: Men are supposed to be decisive, it’s masculine to be sure, strong men are take-charge kinds of guys. I know these messages, and how they grew out of my family of origin. If you doubt that they’re still playing in a lot of our heads, you haven’t been following politics recently.

We learn these things, and even if we know intellectually that there’s no good reason to believe them, they sneak up on us. Of course I know you don’t have to be cis-male, straight, or even partnered to be prone to the occasional bluntly expressed absolute truth—yet I myself do seem to have a lot of opinions, and I may have been known to make a grand pronouncement about one or another of them. Spouses and my children have over the years given me a special eye-roll that would, if I were paying attention, send me the message that I’m doing it again. Maybe you’ve

seen the look I'm talking about around your own house. Maybe you've given that look to someone you love.

A more positive cultural image of husbands is the caretaker, the person who fixes things, puts things together, and generally acts as the home infrastructure manager. I grew up with a father who sheetrocked, spackled, and painted; who kept the car serviced and cleaned; polished the shoes, tightened the leaky faucets, cleaned the gutters, and hung the pictures. I'm inclined to take projects of that kind on myself, although I can't really claim to always "take care of things." I'm always behind, and as often as not what really happens is that I insist I'm *going to do* something, so that no one else does it, and then it languishes for longer than I like to admit.

Again, we know reality is much more balanced. We've just celebrated the people who "take care of things" here in our congregation, and the balance is clear. And in truth, women are no less likely than men to swing a hammer, load a truck, or sling a paintbrush. One of the most competent small-scale contractors I've known has "The Handy Ma'am" painted on the sides of her truck. Yet for most men I've talked to about it, including trans and gay men I know, the call of this role is still strong: Admirable men are independent, skilled, and self-sufficient. If we don't measure up, it can make us uneasy.

But there's more to husbanding than proclaiming the big stuff and being Mr. Fixit. And it's not about gender identity or sexual orientation or relationship status, either.

I had a neighbor a long time ago who was a Vietnam vet. I met him one night outside between our houses. He was in the middle of what he called "checking the perimeter"—a systematic walk he took every single night, making sure the trash cans were snug, the gate latched, the car windows closed, the porch lights off, the nightlights on, the cat inside, the kids asleep. He couldn't go to sleep if he didn't make the walk.

Until then I'd never really thought about it, but I realized I was doing the same thing when I ran into my neighbor. Most nights, I still do some version of checking the perimeter before I go to sleep, especially if I'm the last one up in a group—and I usually am. I've asked many people about this, not just officially designated "husbands," and I can tell you that a lot of us do it.

It's not so much a security impulse, though it may have roots in ancient ancestors making sure the wolves couldn't get into the compound, or in some more recent experience like my neighbor's time at war. But as I experience it now, it's more a matter of attending to things we care about—not the parts of the house, but the life that happens inside. I'm making sure the domain I feel responsibility for is "all right," not because some thief or enemy might turn up, but because it's precious to me. It's my place, my people. I'm connected to it and to them by a deep bond.

In the oldest sense of the word, that's what a *husband* does.

Step into my dictionary for a moment. In the Old Norse language that the Vikings brought to England, a *husbonda* was the "master of a house;" *bonda* meant both a man who owns land and livestock, and one who dwells there and has responsibility for it. Here's the thing, though: in

that language and culture, the feminine counterpart to *husbonda* was *husbonde*, a woman who owns and has responsibility for land and livestock. The root words had to do not with gender or with marriage but with connection: to the land, to the house, and to the lives that were sustained there.

It took a century or so of cultural intermingling for the Old English word *wif*, which just meant “woman,” to replace the more egalitarian Old Norse word for the female partner in a household, and a few centuries more for “husband” to become the exclusively male word for “spouse.” If that shift of culture hadn’t happened, then today everyone who became partners in householding would be a husband. Maybe that would have helped with our advocacy for marriage equality for same-gender partners, and our flexibility in assigning roles based on a person’s location on the spectrum of gender identity.

The older sense of *husband* survived in the agricultural idea of *husbandry*, which started out meaning careful management and came in modern times to refer primarily to farming and ranching. In that context husbanding still means being connected to a place. It means being deeply aware of the rhythms, patterns, and interactions that influence the lives that are part of that place, including our own. This is the art of *husbanding* Sam Keen talks about, husbanding as partnership in a marriage between person and place. Whatever our gender may be, “We must come to know our dwelling place, to care for it, to tend it over the years in such tangible ways that. . . it will cease to be an “it” and become a “thou,” a living presence with which we live in an intimate relationship.”

We are husbands to our dwelling place when we take the time to love and understand it, when we know its needs, its events, and its interconnections.

But what is our dwelling place?

A dwelling place is the place from which we draw nurture and sustenance, the source of the resources that support our life and the lives of those we love.

It’s natural to think first of house and home, which was the “*hus*” in *husbond*. And there’s a lot of cultural support for keeping our attention focused firmly on our own literal hearth. From inside the well-secured perimeters of their own walled and gated housing compounds, prominent public voices encourage us to tend to our own nuclear family, our house, our yard, maybe our cul-de-sac, but no further out from ourselves than that.

But our house, our home, our immediate family are only our smallest dwelling places. We can draw wider circles. Neighborhood, town, city, and nation; geographical regions and communities of many kinds—we dwell in them all. We dwell in the human family, and the family of all living things.

The ministry that I love to share with you most is a ministry of husbanding this church community. Together with all of you, I seek to know and respect its rhythms and needs and deep resources so that it can sustain all of our spiritual lives, so that it can strengthen us, so that it can

engage and heal the world through the work of community and compassion we foster here, not just today but for as long into the future as any of us can foresee.

How our world—both our precious human family and the fragile Earth that sustains us—how badly it needs us to come to know it, to care for it, to tend it over the years so that it ceases to be an “it” and becomes a “thou,” a living presence. We live in a time of too much disconnection and disdain, when it has become all too easy for too many people to look at the world, to look at another human being and see not a “thou” but an “it”—an opponent, an enemy, an abomination, a threat, an object to be fought and conquered or killed.

How much this wounded world needs our husbanding. How urgent it is that we learn and teach the art of living in passionate connection with our dwelling place. That’s what we do here. Here and now, in this community of love, we *learn* how to be grounded in a sense of place that includes the people in it, deeply sensitive to the life and the rhythms of others as well as ourselves, bonded in love to all that is our home. It’s holy work, that learning. And it calls us to learn from and to share our learning with others.

In the words of the Rev. Rebecca Parker, let us choose to bless the world.