

Everything She Touches

May 8, 2011

Having never given birth but having once been born, I don't remember *nor* do I merely *imagine* the experience of my mother letting go of, bringing forth from within her, the 7 pounds and 14 ounces, the 21 inches of who I was the first time I gasped in air, confronted the light of the world, and found myself snipped from her--forevermore having, myself, to let go of that symbiotic connection, exchanging it for a sometimes easy, sometimes soothing, sometimes stormy, sometimes daily dance of two individuals. I don't remember, nor do I merely imagine.

There is something all of us *know*--subconsciously, intuitively, intellectually, viscerally--there is something all of us *know* about being someone's child. Whether we have been someone's child for a lifetime, or were taken from her at an early age, or she from us, there is something all of us know about wanting to hold on, and having to let go. There is something all of us know about touch and scent and warmth and longing to be wrapped in the most maternal arms of love.

Admittedly, rarely does that longing, that need, get met by our mothers with perfection. Rarely do we reflect upon our own mothers and

think to ourselves, “flawless.” Yes, our love may be unconditional, and we may come to the conclusion that, bumps along the road and all, our mothers have done the best they can. But rarely is there *nothing* we need to forgive.

For mothers, if my daughterly perspective is correct, must constantly negotiate where they end and their child begins, where comfort gets balanced with discipline, where their child’s constant growing and morphing into new ages confronts their own maternal desire for the baby, the toddler, the five year old to always remain right there. And if there is more than *one* child, mothers must dance as many dances as there are children, for one will need comfort while the other needs discipline, one will be going *into* kindergarten while the other one’s getting *out* of diapers, one will push while the other will pull, and so mothers will attempt and succeed, attempt and fail, attempt and think, “good enough--though it could have been better”--mothers will attempt to be mothers, and it is a journey of trial and error and trial again.

But right alongside that ongoing attempt to be mother, one important thing for *all of us* to remember is, before they ever were mothers, before they ever were nearly *mystical* co-creators and carriers and bearers and raisers of children, they were, well, not-mothers. That’s one word, or at

least two hyphenated words. Not-mothers. Otherwise known as individuals, or selves. Do you remember the first time you realized your own mother was an individual, that she had a name and identity other than Mom? Her name was Ann or Emily or Lila or Judy or Charlotte or Estelle. My mom, whose nickname was Neilie, had a best friend named Evy. One night, when I was in my early twenties, I was sitting with them, and Evy was telling a story about Mom, and as I listened I suddenly thought, "Oh My God! She's Neilie! She's a *person*. She's not just *my* person, she's not just *my mom*!" I don't know if I was late or early or right on schedule in my revelation, but I do know it was extraordinary to discover that there was a woman who had been there before she got pregnant and became a mother, and that that woman was *still* there! You know what I mean?

So my question is, when we celebrate Mother's Day, as we do today, I wonder, what, and who, and how, are we meant to celebrate? Are we celebrating we an individual, *Mom*, or are we celebrating a relationship, *my mom*? Are we celebrating celebrating a role, Cathy the Mom, or are we celebrating a self, *Cathy*, who is a mom? Or might it be that, when a woman becomes a mother, the two things--the role and the individual, the self and the relationship--become indistinguishable?

Well, I'm looking out into a congregation of how many mothers? and you all probably have all sorts of very insightful answers while I mostly just have questions. I'm tempted to relinquish the mic and have you all take it from here. We could call it Time for All Mothers. Or you could all deliver sermons.

But, as a daughter of a mother, as a human being with, at least for a few more years, childbearing and subsequently mothering potential, as one of millions who owe you mothers a Happy Mother's Day card or flowers or chocolates or at least a Mother's Day thank you, *and* as the assigned speaker today, I will do my best to stay right here and, if not to answer, at least hold up the complexity of, how we might celebrate Mother's Day.

One option--one I imagine people most quickly go to--is to treat Mother's Day as a one-day-a-year Sabbath for the mother of the household. "This is your day! You get to sleep in and eat slightly burnt toast in bed! And then after church, we're taking you to Luby's!" That's a nice option, and I'm sure it could and should be practiced at the very least alongside other options.

Alongside other options, because, really, is this one-day-a-year Sabbath option alone enough for a mother like the speaker in Langston Hughes' poem, "Mother to Son"? "Well, son, I'll tell you:/ Life for me ain't

been no crystal stair./ It's had tacks in it,/ And splinters,/ And boards torn up,/ And places with no carpet on the floor--/ Bare.” This woman, this mother, is a survivor. Her words are not a complaint but a testimony to perseverance. And she wants to pass that perseverance on to her son. “All the time I've been a-climbin' on,/ And reachin' landin's,/ and turnin' corners,/ And sometimes goin' in the dark/ Where there ain't been no light./ So boy,” she says, “don't you turn back./ Don't you set down on the steps 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard./ Don't you fall now--/ For I've still goin', honey,/ I've still climbin'....” Is one day of rest a year going to give this woman crystal stairs?

Yesterday morning, I attended a roundtable discussion of faith-based organizations in Austin working with refugees. Mothers and their families come to Austin fleeing war, violence and oppression from places as varied as Burma, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and Bhutan. And hearing their stories, I am reminded that Mother's Day in this country was started shortly after the American Civil War, and at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War, and that it was created to *protest* and try to bring an *end* to such violence as refugees coming here today have faced. Mother's Day wasn't a soft focus day of flowers and sleep-ins *for* mothers, it was a proclamation *by* mothers that war is not the answer.

Julia Ward Howe wrote in her proclamation of 1870, “Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.” The proclamation continues, “From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, ‘Disarm, Disarm!’”

As I honor my mother, as you honor yours, are any of us doing so by working for we human beings to stop killing our global sons and daughters? And what of our local sons and daughters? I am still stunned and sorrowed three weeks later by the murder of a local young lesbian woman and her mother, shot by the father of the young woman’s girlfriend. The young woman’s girlfriend herself, by the way, is a mother. Such violent deaths are a tragedy for *every* mother, every parent, *every* child involved. So can we, as a community of mothers, as a community of children, young and old, work to end violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people? Can the mothers and the children among us raise our voices against the bullying, particularly, though not exclusively, the homophobic bullying that is increasingly visible in our schools?

Think of that line from Julia Ward Howe: “We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained

to injure theirs.” What if we were to say, in addition to that, “We women of one socio-economic background,” or “we women of one religion” or “we women of one race” or “we women of one sexual orientation”? In other words, what if, by making Mother’s Day once more a day of proclamation against violence and war, we, this little Unitarian Universalist community in South Austin, were able to somehow prevent a murder such as the murder of the young lesbian woman and her mother--and before and beyond that, to *celebrate* their lives and the lives of those around them?

I think we can, and I think we must. Because every child, and every mother deserves to be witnessed as Walt Whitman once witnessed a mother and child: “I see the sleeping babe nestling the breast of its mother,/ The sleeping mother and babe--hush’d, I study them long and long.” While the mother and child are central here, it is not just the mother and child who are significant. For the witness himself, the bard of multi-versed poems, is hushed. There is a sense of respect, of reverence, perhaps even of awe. “Hush’d, I study them long and long.”

It takes respect, it takes reverence, and sometimes even awe to allow ourselves to stop and look long enough so that we are hush’d by the beauty--a mother and child--that is before us, and so that we “study them long and long.”

That's Emily Dickinson's experience in her poem, "Nature--the Gentlest Mother." Of Mother Nature, Dickinson writes, "With infinite Affection--/ and infiniter Care--/ her Golden finger on Her lip--/ [she] Wills silence--/ Everywhere--".

But with our historical and ongoing treatment of Mother Nature, of Mother Earth, it seems we human beings have willed *ourselves* to close our ears and eyes against her "infinite Affection--/ and infiniter Care--" So that now, even more so than 141 years ago when Julia Ward Howe first wrote the words, we are forced to see that "from the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, 'Disarm, Disarm!'" And the cry is not only to disarm ourselves of weapons of violence, but to disarm ourselves of weapons of materialism, weapons of *more*, weapons of out of sight, out of mind. For remember the Wisdom of Solomon: "I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepters and thrones, I accounted wealth as nothing in comparison to her.... All good things came to me along with her.... I rejoiced in them all, because wisdom leads them; but I did not know that she was their mother."

Might it be time that we come to understand, come to know, that the spirit of wisdom is mother to all good things? Might we then see Mother's Day as a day not only of brunches and bouquets and rest, but of listening

for the wisdom working to hush us long enough so that we may study the people around us and the earth we share “long and long”?

And really, you know, it's not *just* about study. Unitarian Universalists are good at studying. But while we may be good at studying, while we may *like* studying--perpetual students observing and critiquing the world--others, for better or for worse, are *acting*. As children of wisdom, as people who proclaim the inherent worth and dignity of every person, it is time we be led *into* the world *by* wisdom--led into relationship, led into kindness and compassion, led into justice. The opportunities--and the cries--are all around us. All we have to do is look. All we have to do is listen. All we have to do is act. For the sake of mothers and their children, young and grown, we can act by going to City Hall tomorrow and demanding the city reinstate Capitol IDEA, the long-term job training program, into its budget. For the sake of mothers and their children young and grown, we can act by participating in the democratic process of voting in next Saturday's local elections. For the sake of mothers and their children, young and grown, we can *act* on our statement of conscience, Standing on the Side of Love, passed last year almost unanimously, which states: “Wildflower Church, a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, in expression of its commitment to justice and compassion for all persons, declares its support for the

Standing on the Side of Love campaign and its commitment to publicly confront exclusion, oppression and violence based on identity.”

Having never given birth but having once been born, I don't remember *nor* do I merely *imagine* the power of a woman bringing a child into the world. I do know, however, the power of love, the power of holding on and letting go, holding on and letting go, and I know that no mother wants her child, or herself, to be excluded or oppressed, or violated because of who and what they are. So I ask you on this Mother's Day, to not only make a statement of conscience, or to remember that statement of conscience, but to live by that statement of conscience, and stand with me on the Side of Love. Not only stand with me. Walk with me. Work with me. Work for compassion, love, and justice with me. And in the spirit of Mother's Day, proclaiming love for all of humanity, so say with me,

Amen.