

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT

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Happy Mother's Day.

I have to admit, this is difficult holiday to write a sermon about. It's not hard because there's some cold reality or truth that I feel I must present you with and call you to action over. It's not hard because it takes months of research and reading, or because there are no good resources out there from which to draw inspiration.

It's hard because the relationships that people have with their mothers are complicated. Not all of your mothers were like mine: loving, attentive, supportive, nurturing, funny, talented, young... (Oh, wait—she's not here. I can stop.)

Some people here are left with deep scars from the wounds inflicted upon them by mothers—some who were trying their best, some who didn't or couldn't. There are those here who grew up without a mother—by design or accident, and some here who are survivors of abuse, inflicted or allowed by someone we called "mother."

It's hard to talk about Mother's Day because I know that this is, for some in this congregation, the first of many Mother's Days you will spend without your mother, or the latest reminder of the mother you lost years ago.

It's hard to do this holiday right—and tempting to talk about something else, something that doesn't turn a quick profit for card-makers and florists. Something easier.

At first, I thought I'd talk instead about children, about the spiritual nurture that being with young people gives us—the renewed sense of wonder when we see the world through curious eyes, the depth found in brief moments of tenderness shared with those who depend on us, and even the occasional (or frequent) reminders to question authority and lessons that life doesn't turn out the way we expect it to most of the time.

Those of you who have watched me over the last year know how much I cherish the time I get to spend with the children of this congregation. It is vital to me that they know they have someone to turn to when their lives get difficult. And, truth be told, I get as much out of that interaction as I put into it.

It was, in fact, with deep reservation that I agreed to share this time two weeks in a row.

There are many spiritual lessons to be learned by sharing our lives with children. But talking about that is difficult, too.

You see, there are those among us who long to have children in our lives (but who cannot), those among us with complicated and difficult relationships with our children, and those among us struggling with our calling to parenthood.

For me, reflecting on the gifts that children bring into our lives is even harder than reflecting on mothers, because for me it's a personal issue.

For me and Eric, having children be a part of the family we have created together is simultaneously something we both feel called to do and one of the greatest challenges we will face as a couple. Yes, we know that there are possibilities for bringing children into our lives: surrogate parents, adoption, kidnapping (just kidding—really!). And yet, all of those pathways have their obstacles, some looming so large that I hesitate to even venture forward.

Surrogacy is fraught with complications, not the least of which is that New York State doesn't recognize surrogate contracts as having legal standing. And if you know where I'm going to find the fifty to one hundred thousand dollars it costs, please let me know.

And adoption is hard for anyone, much less as a gay couple in a society where that family arrangement (though more and more normal every day) is still seen as less desirable than others.

Whatever route we take, we'll never have a child that is genetically related to both of us, no matter what scary science pops up in the next decade. But with adoption, the child will not share any of our genes. It will not have my eyes, or his nose, and if it manages to have my stubborn streak or his talent for writing, it will be because of nurture or accident, and not genes.

Letting go of having that be important has been a struggle (and, I'm sure, will continue to be one). One that it is likely this community will watch us go through over the coming years. Stay tuned.

So let's recap. Mothers: difficult. Children: difficult. What is a minister to do?

And then, I found this prayer, from my colleague the Rev. Victoria Weinstein. As usual, I think she got it right. Allow me to share it with you.

PRAYER FOR ALL WHO MOTHER

by the Rev. Victoria Weinstein

<http://www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/meditationsand/submissions/5827.shtml>

We reflect in thanksgiving this day for all those whose lives have nurtured ours.

The life-giving ones

Who heal with their presence

Who listen in sympathy

Who give wise advice ... but only when asked for it.

We are grateful for all those who have mothered us

Who have held us gently in times of sorrow

Who celebrated with us our triumphs -- no matter how small

Who noticed when we changed and grew,

who praised us for taking risks

*who took genuine pride in our success,
and who expressed genuine compassion when we did not succeed.
On this day that honors Mothers
let us honor all mothers
men and women alike
who from somewhere in their being
have freely and wholeheartedly given life, and sustenance, and vision to us.
Dear God, Mother-Father of us all,
grant us life-giving ways
strength for birthing,
and a nurturing spirit
that we may take attentive care of our world,
our communities, and those precious beings
entrusted to us by biology, or by destiny, or by friendship, fellowship or fate.
Give us the heart of a mother today. Amen*

Recognizing mothers is a difficult task in a community as complex as this one if we restrict motherhood to a particular person, to a particular role, to an idealized vision created by those who have never been a part of *our* family.

But we can all relate to the energy of mothering. I know—I've seen it here in this Fellowship. I've seen people care for one another, bring food to each others' families, make phone calls when someone is not feeling well. I've had people call me to express concern for another person here—someone they hadn't seen in a while, someone they knew was going through a rough patch. I've eaten the food many of you have cooked and bought in efforts to physically nurture others in this community.

I've even seen the parts of motherhood that we don't always celebrate come out here. Those things were pretty evident at our Passover Seder, when it became clear that we have lots of people used to organizing things—and doing that in their own way. What is created when a bunch of those people come together to do something should make us all sit back and chuckle at ourselves for being human.

The hymn we sang earlier captures the essence of this parenting energy: "I, who love you, shall be near you, all through the night," we sang.

Many here—whatever our relationships with actual mothers or fathers or children—have felt that closeness, the attentive, loving, calming presence that let us know that things would be OK.

Some define that closeness, that life-giving and –affirming energy that we ascribe to motherhood, as God (some, recognizing the feminine in this energy, as Goddess).

The Reverend Barbara Hamilton-Holway writes that “Mothering joins the human and the divine. Remarkable changes happen, most obviously in the body. Here is creation, transformation: A baby forms in the womb. A mother spends nine months turning bread and wine into the body and blood of new life. Milk rises in the breasts; this body gives and sustains life without losing life. The human body both mirrors and magnifies divine creativity; the spirit rejoices in creation.” (<http://www.uuworld.org/2004/03/feature2.html>)

It is possible to join the human and the divine without the physical connection there. It is possible to engage in creation and transformation every day. It is possible to give life, to sustain life, to mirror and magnify life.

As we celebrate Mother’s Day, let us celebrate mothering in all of its forms. Let us understand that it is in community, in relationship with one another, that we are connected to something greater than ourselves.

The Reverend Jane Rzepka, minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, our Association’s congregation for those without a physical one to call their spiritual home, writes of Mother’s Day:

“Mother’s Day is no time to romanticize parenthood; parenting is a down-to-earth process if ever there was one. So this Mother’s Day, let’s humanize Mom. Thank her for doing what she could, given all the dirty socks, thank her for loving you as well as she was able in spite of your three years in junior high, and then, let her thank you for the privilege of being your mother.” (“Humanizing Mom,” from Jane Rzepka, *A Small Heaven: A Meditation Manual*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989, 21.)

This Mother’s Day, let us share this sentiment with all those who have given us mother-energy, mother-attention, mother love. Be they male or female, related to us or not, let’s humanize those around us who have picked up our dirty socks (actual or metaphorical), who have brought us soup when we were sick, who have helped us through the rough patches in our life through constant and unfailing love.

Let us thank those who have nurtured us, who have fed us, who have joined our human lives with something greater—be that divine or not. And let us thank those who have given us the privilege of doing that for them, those who have allowed us to nurture, to express care and compassion and connection.

Whether the people we thank be alive or dead, near or far, still a part of our lives or long since estranged, let us be open to their response. We can hear their answer in the breath of this community, in the bright flowers of springtime gardens, and in the simple words “You’re welcome.”

You’re welcome.

Blessed be.