

Honoring the Mom in All of Us

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Something that I've been thinking about a lot lately is our tendency to overemphasize form at the expense of function. We tend to value things, people, institutions, ourselves, more for how they look, than what they do. What speaks to me in Katie Lee Crane's meditation is her emphasis on the function of mothering as opposed to the traditional form of motherhood. I don't in any way want to downplay or diminish the (to me unfathomable) biologic act of carrying a child and physically bringing it forth into this world as this certainly deserves to be honored and celebrated. What I am drawn to is a more expansive celebration. Motherhood does not end at birth. To me this day shouldn't just be about fertility, gestation, or the pains of labor. The feminist in me wants to liberate this day from simply the form of motherhood and celebrate the essence of mothering. Or if you will, expand today's celebration from mother the noun to include mother the verb and all those of all ages and genders who mother. The enormity of what mothers do is daunting, and in preparing for this talk today, I've felt that the subject warrants a much longer exploration, but for simplicity's sake, I'm going to focus on three aspects of mothering today: creation, protection, and nurturance.

Mother country and tongue, mother lode, Mother Nature, Mother Earth, the motherboard of a computer, the mother of invention. All of these imply that mothers are powerful sources and forces of creation. Bringing a child into the world has got to be one of the biggest acts of faith and hope. I was born in July of 1968, and I've often thought about the world my parents brought me into. JFK was assassinated during their senior year of high school. Watts exploded the next year. The escalation of the Vietnam War meant classmates and friends were fighting, dying, or returning with scars inside and out. As my Mom's belly grew, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and a month before I was born, Bobby Kennedy was cut down. Two powerful symbols of hope gone in instants. Then, shortly after my birth, they watched the Democratic National Convention in Chicago erupt into violence...

It is this ultimate act of creation, the bringing of new human life into the world with faith and hope in spite of contrary signs that I find so admirable and motherly. To mother is to foster hope and to

nurture optimism, not blindly or naively, but faithfully. While literal motherhood may be the ultimate creative act, again I feel we neglect to give credit to the motherly aspects of all the other types of creation happening around us. Organizations and movements are founded in spite of massive momentum in the opposite direction; houses are built despite the possibility of earthquake or fire; gardens and fields are sown each spring in the face of possible frost, drought, or nibbling deer. All those who take part in these creations and mother something into being deserve to be honored today. I am awed by the hope embodied in new life, and I'd urge all of us to be better mothers to today's creations by maintaining hope despite our tumultuous times.

What is created with love and hope is valued and protected. Mothers protect their young. "Never get between a Momma Bear and her cub," we are always told. My favorite story of motherly protection isn't as dramatic as some. It's my favorite because I know the characters and the setting and it makes me smile, and in telling it I can honor a friend's mother who is no longer living. The setting is my hometown of Ames Iowa, a hilltop baseball diamond in early summer. One of the things I miss about the Midwest is the surreal spookiness of summer storms: the way the sky really does turn green, and the calm that descends before the storm is so eerie it destroys the cliché; there is a palpable electricity in the air. It was one of those late afternoons when the energy of a full day of steamy heat was building toward release. My speedy friend Chad Greimmann was covering center field, and as the innings wore on, it was more than obvious that a storm was a comin'. Chad's mom, Jane (a force of nature herself) was watching in the stands and growing quite agitated as the sky grew ominous. She quite rightfully began haranguing the coaches and umpire to call the game. I'm not sure how long they put her off, but before long, she marched out onto the field, interrupting play and yelled, "Give me my son!" I'm sure you can imagine the look of horror on Chad's face as he watched this from the outfield, but to his credit (or perhaps the hair under his cap was tingling from the storm...), he knew better than to make a scene. His head dropped for a moment and then he jogged in and off the field ahead of his mother. Jane's voice of reason was finally heard; the game was called; everyone scurried for cover; the sky unloaded; and all were safe. I'm not sure if lives were saved that day, but a statement was made that the reckless and senseless endangerment of mothers' children would not be tolerated.

All those who mother possess this admirable ability to act with complete clarity of purpose when it really matters. And as Unitarian Universalists, we should be able to enlarge this net of motherly protection to encompass not just our own children, or those in our extended family or neighborhood, but also to those outside our tribe, outside our nation. Our covenant of seven

principles has several echoes from Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day Proclamation of 130 years ago. Truly respecting the interdependent web of existence, strongly affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, promoting compassion in human relations, and striving for a peaceful world community can all be seen as a reflection of a mother's unconditional love with a Unitarian Universalist's wide and inclusive lens that brings all existence under this protection. Considering the carnage of the last century and our apparent inability to learn from the past, perhaps reading and acting on Julia Ward Howe's Proclamation needs to be an annual (or more frequent) event.

To nurture is to nourish, feed, educate, train, to help grow, to cultivate. It comes from the Latin *nutrire* meaning to suckle. Regardless of whether we literally suckled at the breast of our mothers, we were all nourished in the womb of our mothers. No Brave New World has yet emerged replacing that biological fact.

At the right time the cord is cut, and all who suckle are at some point weaned. I imagine that this weaning, this cutting off, is one of the most difficult dances of parenthood: all the moments a parent must decide whether to intervene in the struggle or let the child struggle on his or her own. Throwing a child into the deep end to sink or swim on their own strikes me as excessive, but to suckle forever is to replace mothering with smothering. I don't think we can decide for one another the parameters of this dance, and like in so many things, I see the need for balance.

Disco may have been dead by the mid-80s, but I put my parents on this dance floor plenty during adolescence. Probably the toughest decision I put on them was to let me go away for the summer after my junior year of high school. I had had a rough year that culminated with me dropping out of school in April. A psychiatrist diagnosed me with depression and prescribed medication, maybe even hospitalization. It really traumatized my parents. I was desperate, but mostly desperate to get away from my hometown, not necessarily from my home. A high school counselor (one of those nice surrogates who appear from time to time in our lives) helped negotiate some home study to get me most of the credits from that semester, but more importantly, helped me realize that I could get away for the whole summer by returning as a worker to the YMCA camp I had attended as a camper. So my parents danced the letting go dance, and I drove ten hours north for ten weeks on my own, where I was mothered, fathered, siblinged, and befriended by a great group of people. I know the decision to let me fly the coop with broken wings was wrenching for my parents, but we all know in hindsight that that summer was one of the most important of my life.

Those are some of my thoughts and stories about motherhood. Too often we hear stories of our world enamored with destruction, but on this day let's celebrate the stories of hopeful creation, diligent protection, and loving, wise nurturance. We need a reminder of the value of the motherly, and images and stories of what it means to act with a mother's unconditional love. We need to acknowledge the worth and dignity of children everywhere and rededicate ourselves to peace at home and abroad on their behalf. We need to honor our ultimate Mother—Gaia, Nature, the Earth—from which every particle of our being is sprung and will eventually return. There is a part of this Mother in all of us.

I know you have your own stories, and as we begin our silent meditation, I'd encourage you to reflect on your birth mother, and also to think of all those who mothered you in some way, as well as those whom you have mothered. In this way we can honor not only the form of motherhood, but also the essence.