

Women Who Have Held Us

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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We gather this morning to celebrate the women who have held us, to honor mothers, but this is bittersweet because as we gather women in our nation are at risk of losing freedom. People of color, immigrants, the LGBT community, and others are under attack. Now women. I wonder who will be next?

Mother's Day is a perfect day for us religious liberals to reflect on mothering from our theological viewpoint. We know that motherhood and feminism are perfectly compatible. We know that same-sex couples can serve as both mothers and fathers to their children. We know that gender roles are far more fluid than the religious right admits. We know that love is a central value of our religion. Given all that, I'd like to reflect with you on what mothering means to us religious liberals.

I don't know about you, but I find that I have a pretty clear idea of the stereotypical perfect mother. I read something from my colleague the Rev. Dan Harper, a New England Unitarian minister. He wrote, "The perfect mother, according to the stereotype that I know best, is warm and welcoming; she is always dressed in an understated but attractive manner; she dispenses freshly-baked cookies at the drop of the proverbial hat; and she also dispenses kind and heartfelt wisdom whenever you need it. I suspect that my stereotype of the perfect mother comes pretty much directly from the television programs I used to watch as a child.

That is the stereotype of the perfect mother that I find lodged in my consciousness, but I know perfectly well that real mothers do not correspond to this stereotype. Take my mother, for example. My mother was a New England Yankee, and by the standards of Yankee culture she was within the norm of warm and welcoming, by any other standards she appeared cool and even a little standoffish; she was more on the prickly end of the mothering spectrum than the cuddly end of the spectrum. My mother was always sensibly dressed, but she did not dress like those mothers on the television, she dressed like the sensible New England Yankee that she was. She did bake cookies; but she was far more likely to dispense high ambitions for her children than to dispense cookies. As for dispensing kind and heartfelt wisdom, this was not something my mother did; her wisdom was thoughtful, stark, true, and often painful.

My mother was not the stereotypical television mother that we are all supposed to dream of. But then, whose mother is? Maybe some of us here this morning had stereotypical television mothers. Or maybe some of you here were in fact the perfect wise and warm cookie-baking mom, and maybe even borrow some of your warmth and wisdom. But every mother is first and foremost a unique human being. Some mothers might be able to be a stereotypical warm, welcoming, cookie-baking mom. But all mothers are first and foremost their own selves, unique individuals with unique personal and cultural characteristics that may or may not allow them to fit into the stereotype of the perfect mom.

It seems to me that real-life mothers rarely fit the idealized stereotype. I sometimes find real people who seem to fit most of the characteristics of the idealized stereotypical mom, but not quite all those characteristics. I know someone who has five kids, all adopted from difficult settings, and all the kids are dearly loved and go off to school and come home, and he's there to fix them a snack and help them with homework. Yes, I said "he's there to fix them a snack," because this is a family with two dads. He's far closer to the ideal of the stereotypical mom than my own mother was. Or let me give you another example: I used to work with a guy named Larry, and his mother died when he was quite small. Larry's father realized that he was "a one-woman man" (those were his terms, according to Larry), and so he raised Larry and Larry's brothers and sisters all by himself, serving as both mother and father to the children. Mothering and fathering blended together in that family; for Larry, his father was really the only mother he remembered. I was raised by my paternal grandmother, not necessarily my birth mother. My grandmother was my mother. There are lots of women who loved us and held us that were not our mothers.

Maybe we can begin to come up with a better definition of "mothering." Maybe we want to say something like this: "Mothering" is a human activity where a caring adult makes sure you're going to survive until adulthood, and while most mothers are women, there are plenty of men who serve as mothers too. Of course we know that under a strict technical definition, motherhood is a biological fact related to human beings who can bear children, but remember that some biological women are not able to bear children, yet they too can be mothers. Mothering is a human activity that transcends the biological equipment that an individual may happen to have. So we can say this about mothering as a human activity: Mothering is when a caring adult makes sure a child survives until adulthood. Mothering is most often done by women, but it can be done by men. Mothering and fathering may blend together at times. And there are very few people who are perfect at mothering; even those moms we see on television make mistakes sometimes.

In recent years, I have begun to realize that mothering is not limited to adults who have children in their immediate family. I began to realize that every once in a while I got mothered by people to whom I was not related. For example, I was at some political meeting, and I got mothered by someone who is no relation to me. This woman, who is both a mother and a grandmother, greeted me with a big hug, welcomed me, made sure I was comfortable, and then went on to mother someone else. Human beings are essentially social, tribal animals. Under the leadership of the religious conservatives, contemporary American society tries to tell us that the nuclear family, with a mom and dad and 2.5 children, is the only place where "real" mothering can take place, but of course that's complete nonsense. There are many other family structures where good mothering takes place: extended families where several generations live together; blended families; families with two dads or two moms; and so on. And indeed, because we are social, tribal animals, mothering can go on in other human institutions, not just in families. I already told you how I got mothered at a political meeting. But what I'd particularly like to talk about is how good mothering can go on in churches.

When I was the Director of Religious Education for a Unitarian congregation the minister there, a woman, decided to hold a Sunday evening vespers service, and she got me to help out, and we held these vespers service for the next year and a half, until we both left that church to go on to other churches. If you attended one of the vespers services, the first thing you would notice when you walked in was that all the chairs were in a circle. Once the vespers service started, you

would find that it seemed very much like the worship services we have here on Sunday mornings: listening to readings, and singing hymns, and lighting a chalice, and sharing candles of joy and sorrow, and so on. The main difference would be that the sermon might be a sermon, or it might be a short play; or there might be an activity to go along with the sermon, such as drawing with crayons or listening to jazz.

If you were very observant, you might notice some other important things. There was always food at these vespers services. She was a great believer in what she called her “ministry of food,” so she always brought lots of delightful and comforting food. The food was right next to the circle of chairs, and if you arrived early you could have something to eat and drink during the worship service. As a mom and as a feminist, she knew that you have to take care of people’s bodies at the same time you take care of their spirits.

There was always a place for children at these worship services. As the religious educator, I would make sure there was a big rug included in the circle of chairs, with quiet toys and games and crayons and paper. That way, if you wanted to bring your children to the vespers service, they could play quietly on the carpet while you sat next to them. This, too, was an idea that came out of her experience as a mom and as a feminist. As a feminist, she knew that many Unitarian Universalist churches have been influenced by the dominant patriarchal culture to think that children are bad, so she fought that by making sure that children were welcomed and seen as good. And as a mom, she wanted to have a worship service that her five-year-old son could attend.

With all the mothering that went on in these vespers services, she was tapping into an old line of Unitarian thought. Back in the 1870s, a group of women Unitarian ministers, mostly based in the Midwest, built vibrant congregations around the idea of the church being like a home. These women, who are often called the Prophetic Sisterhood, felt that when you come into a Unitarian church, it should feel like you’re coming into someone’s house, where you are greeted, and welcomed, where your physical needs are acknowledged, where you can have some cookies. Here in our own church, where we have absolutely no historical connection to the Prophetic Sisterhood, we still live out these ideals. Even here in this room, which is a far more formal architectural space than that used by the Prophetic Sisterhood, we live out these feminist ideals. We acknowledge that people have physical needs: you may notice that lots of people come in late to the worship service, and we don’t mind because we know the reality is that life is complex for many of us, and we get here when we can get here.

What I think is most important about churches and mothering, though, is that churches can be places that support mothers (and support fathers for that matter). Being a parent is the hardest thing a human being can do. Parents need support. The nuclear family, so beloved of the religious right, does not provide adequate support, and I am not surprised when I hear that the divorce rate among the religious right is higher than among us: they have placed all their eggs in the nuclear family basket, and it’s a pretty fragile basket. Perhaps if you have absolutely the perfect nuclear family with superhumanly talented parents, perhaps then the nuclear family works. But speaking as a pastor, I don’t know of any nuclear families like that; all the nuclear families that I know need far more support than that. We all need lots of other people in our lives.

To me, this is the most important function of our liberal churches today. We exist as religious communities in order to support families — both families with children, and all other families as well. As liberal churches, we do not place restrictions on who is allowed in our religious community — you are welcome no matter what your theology, gender, sexual orientation, family status, gender identity, race or ethnicity, physical or mental ability. We try to live out our highest ideal, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and we do this without shoving dogma and creeds down your throat. You can come into a liberal church, bringing your whole self, and feel at home. Yes, you may be challenged at times; yes, we have internal fights; yes we make many mistakes. But our ideal is that you can be a part of this community and not have to check part of yourself at the door.

So we welcome all mothers, all those who are engaged in the difficult human activity of mothering. We welcome mothers and their children here. We provide support beyond the overstressed nuclear family. If you're a relatively new mother, this is a community where you can be supported by, and learn from, more experienced mothers and grandmothers (some of whom, by the way, might be men). We welcome children, and we provide a safe place for children, hopefully while giving mothers (and fathers) time to take care of their spiritual needs. With ongoing vigilance, we make this congregation an emotionally and physically safe place for children, with many safe and appropriate adult role models.

These represent our bedrock moral values. We value all those involved in mothering. We value all those who mother children; and yes, we also value those people who manage to mother adults too. In closing, my highest priority for a church is that it should be a place that supports mothering. Freedom of conscience and all that is all very well, but mothering is where it's at. When I say mothering, I do not mean what the fundamentalists mean. For me, mothering is not restricted by assigned gender, not restricted by sexual orientation, not restricted by traditional gender identity: there are gay men who are good at mothering, and there are men who do not fit into standard gender identity who are good at mothering; similarly, there are women who are better at fathering than at mothering. Nor do I have a stereotyped understanding of mothering: mothering does not need to be cuddly. And given who I am, my sense of mothering is very ambitious for the people being mothered.

May it be so.