

The Courage of Mothering

5/2/10 Sermon, Brockport Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Reading: part of a poem by Philip Appleman, “Birthday Card to My Mother”

You have come through
the years of wheelchairs, loneliness—
a generation of pain
knotting the joints like ancient apple trees;
you always knew
this was no world to be weak in:
where best friends wither to old
phone numbers in far-off towns;
where the sting of children is always
sharper than serpents’ teeth;
where love itself goes shifting
and slipping away to shadows.

You have survived it all,
come through wreckage and triumph hard
at the center but spreading gentleness around you—nowhere
by your bright hearth has the dust
of bitterness lain unswept;
today, thinking back, thinking ahead
to other birthdays, I
lean upon your courage
and sign this card, as always,
with love.

Sermon

In the book *Small Wonder*, by one of my favorite authors, Barbara Kingsolver, there is an essay called “Letter to My Mother.” Here’s how it starts:

I imagine you putting on your glasses to read this letter. *Oh, Lord, what now?* You tilt your head back and hold the page away from you, your left hand flat on your chest, protecting your heart. “Dear Mom” at the top of a long, typed letter from me has so often meant trouble. Happy, uncomplicated things—these I could always toss you easily over the phone. . . . The hard things went into letters. I started sending them from college, the kind of self-absorbed epistles that usually began as diary entries and should have stayed there. During those years I wore black boots from an army surplus store and a five-dollar haircut from a

barbershop and went to some trouble to fill you in on the great freedom women could experience if only they would throw off the bondage of housewifely servitude. ... In my heart I believed that these letters—in which I tried to tell you how I'd become someone entirely different from the child you'd known—would somehow make us friends. But instead they only bought me a few quick gulps of air while I paced out the distance between us [Kingsolver, 2002, 160-161].

Kingsolver goes on to say that this time is different. This time she wants to bridge the distance. She then describes a number of incidents from their life together in which she had previously named and magnified their differences, but now sees their similarities and connections. Here's one such passage:

... here I am, thrilled to the edge of all my senses to be starting college. You and Dad have driven 300 miles in our VW bus, which was packed like a tackle box with my important, ridiculous stuff, and now you have patiently unloaded it without questioning my judgment on a single cherished object. ... You're sitting on my new bed while Dad carries in the last box. To you this bed must look sadly institutional compared with the furniture lovingly lathed for us from red cherrywood by your father before he died. To me the new metal bed frame looks just fine. ... I am arranging my plants in the windowsill while you tell me you're proud of the scholarship I won, you know I'll do well here and be happy, I should call if I need anything, call even if I don't. 'I won't need anything,' I tell you. ... [Suddenly] I understand we are using up the very last minutes of something neither of us can call, outright, my childhood. I can't wait for you to leave, and then you do. I close the door and stand watching through my window ... as you and Dad climb into the VW and drive away without looking back. And because no one can see me I wipe my slippery face with the back of my hand. My nose runs and I choke on tears, so many I'm afraid I will drown. ... I feel more alone than I've ever felt in my life [165-166].

Today is not Mother's Day—that's next Sunday—but with courage as our worship theme for the month I wanted to talk about the special kind of courage that mothering takes. I'm not sure how many mothers get thanked for their courage, or how often we think of the two things together. When Mother's Day comes around, we're more apt to think of flowers and cards and gifts. But here's what I'm thinking: it may not be about courage at the beginning, but it's sure going to be about courage before you're done!

One of the most interesting things I learned this week, while I was working on this sermon, was that the Jack-in-the-pulpit has both male and female flowers, and it can change from one to the other and back. In case anyone isn't familiar with the Jack-in-the-pulpit, it's a wildflower that grows in moist woods and has a sort of leaf-like pouch covered by a little hood with a slender, green flower stalk inside that looks something like a preacher standing in an old-fashioned pulpit. A friend of mine who lives in the Adirondacks told me that when the Jack-in-the-Pulpit is threatened, when its habitat is stressed, the plant turns female. I thought, "Yes, go ladies; that fits

perfectly with my sermon about the courage of mothering!” But when I went to check my facts, I found out that just the opposite is true. When the plant is young, the flowers are mostly or all male, and as the plant matures, it produces more female flowers, and when the habitat is good and there are plenty of nutrients available, the plant turns more quickly from male to female, and when the plant is stressed, it reverts to its male form. The male flowers help in reproduction, since they produce pollen, but it is the female flowers, when the conditions are good, that produce seeds and fruit [www.psu.edu/dept/nkbiology].

So now I’m thinking, yes, reproduction is *expensive*; it takes a lot of energy. Conditions have to be good in order to successfully produce the next generation, and nature does well to protect that process. But human beings don’t change so easily from one sex to another, and nature doesn’t stop us from procreating when the conditions aren’t just right. For the most part, girls become women and women often become mothers whether they’re ready or not. It’s true that fathers are spending more time with their children these days, and doing more of the work of raising them [4/19/10 *Newsweek*, p. 24], but still fathering—the way our culture sees it right now, anyway—is more about begetting, founding, and originating; and mothering is more about bearing, nurturing, watching over, and protecting. I want to be inclusive, and I would argue that fathers do mothering. Sometimes words get in our way. But if we can use the word mothering to mean nurturing, watching over, and protecting life, I think we can agree that mothering takes a lot of energy and work, and for human beings, for whom nature doesn’t guarantee good conditions like it does for the Jack-in-the-pulpit, mothering takes more than energy and work. Mothering takes courage.

For some, it takes intentional courage to bring a new life into this world. For all, it takes bravery and endurance to do what has to be done, to stand firm, to try again, to listen, to love and to let go, in a thousand ways, whether it’s the first day you put that child on a school bus or the first time you hear them say—whether our loud or not—that they don’t need you or don’t want to be like you. Mary Oliver has a poem about loving and letting go. I’d always thought of it as having to do with the grief related to the death of a loved one, but it applies very well to mothering in general. The poem is called “In Blackwater Woods,” and the first part of the poem is about the trees in the woods near her home, turning colors of light and fire in autumn. Then she writes, “Every year // everything I have ever learned // in my lifetime leads back to this: // the fires and the black river of loss // whose other side // is salvation, whose meaning // none of us will ever know. // To live in this world // you must be able to do three things: // to love what is mortal; // to hold it // against your bones knowing // your own life depends on it; // and, when the time comes to let it go, // to let it go.” She is trying to get at the mystery of love and loss and giving and wholeness, and what better description could there be of mothering than this: to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it, and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

It’s interesting that the word courage comes from the French word “coeur,” which means heart, and before that from an Indo-European word “kerd” meaning heart. Originally it referred to all sorts of emotions—gentle, violent, even sexual—but over time those various meanings fell away, leaving us with the meaning of bravery and endurance. But all emotions were thought to originate in the heart, and we still talk as if we believe that, even though it’s pretty clear that what

the heart does is pump blood. We speak of expressing what's in our hearts, and we put our hands over our hearts when we want to protect our feelings, or when we're expressing deep feelings, or when we pledge allegiance. And so we retain the idea that courage and the heart are connected. Take heart, people say. Take courage.

I believe that courage comes from love, that courage follows love. I know that when I love something, or someone, I can be very strong in defense of it, and very brave in pursuit of it. And I think my own courage in life has also come from being loved well enough so that I could love myself and others. And so it all comes full circle. Mothering takes courage, and that courage is born of love already received. Of course, the reverse is also true, unfortunately. There are mothers and fathers who do not have courage and do not love well, perhaps because they were not loved well to begin with. And so, as some of us may know from experience, there are children who are not well mothered. But *good* mothering, with love and courage, is next to godliness. In fact, some of the most beautiful depictions of God in the Hebrew scriptures are of God as a mother giving birth, suckling her children, and comforting and protecting them.

Here's another interesting thing about Mother's Day. It didn't start out as a day for paying tribute to mothers. It started as a call for women to stand for world peace. It was the idea of Julia Ward Howe, best known for writing the words to The Battle Hymn of the Republic, which by the way was an anti-slavery song. Julia Ward Howe was a Unitarian, a writer, an abolitionist, a supporter of the Union during the Civil War, then a pacifist, when war broke out again almost immediately in Europe, and a founder of the women's movement. She was a woman of courage, both as a reformist and as a woman in a time when a woman's place was thought to be only in the home. And one of the earliest calls to celebrate Mother's Day in the United States was her Mother's Day Proclamation in 1870. She called for an international women's peace congress in which women could together learn how the whole human family could live in peace, and she called for all women to rise up against war. "Arise, all women who have hearts," she wrote. "Say firmly: 'We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies, Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. 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, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs" [www.wagingpeace.org]. Tenderness, she was lifting up. "We will be too tender." The tenderness that is the backbone of courage. She believed that women had a responsibility to shape society in a way consistent with mothering—a way of tenderness, love, and courage.

There is one mother in particular that I want to honor here this morning. She's special to the Brockport UU Fellowship because ... [note: this section removed for the family's privacy].

In honoring this one mother, we honor all those who raise children, all who foster and nurture life, all who choose love over fear, all who have learned to love and to let go, and to just keep loving. Their influence is felt from generation to generation. In honoring them we remind ourselves to choose love and courage, as they did. We remind ourselves to just keep on loving. And we say thank you for your courage.