

“Lullaby”
May 11, 2014 – Mother’s Day
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading
Betsy Tabor, Intern Minister

READINGS:

“The Talk,” by Sharon Olds

In the sunless wooden room at noon
the mother had a talk with her daughter.
The rudeness could not go on, the meanness
to her little brother, the selfishness.
The eight-year-old sat on the bed
in the corner of the room, her irises distilled as
the last drops of something, her firm
face melting, reddening,
silver flashes in her eyes like distant
bodies of water glimpsed through woods.
She took it and took it and broke, crying out

I HATE BEING A PERSON! diving
into the mother
as if
into
a deep pond—and she cannot swim,
the child cannot swim.

“The Tao of Touch” by Marge Piercy (adapted)

What magic does touch create
that we crave it so. That babies
do not thrive without it. That
the nurse who cuts tough nails
and sands calluses on the elderly
tells me sometimes men weep
as she rubs lotion on their feet.

Yet the touch of a stranger
the bumping or predatory thrust
in the subway is like a slap.

We long for the familiar, the open
palm of love, its tender fingers.
It is our hands that tamed cats
into pets, not our food.

The widow looks in the mirror
 thinking, no one will ever touch
 me again, never. Not hold me....
 Do I still live
 if no one knows my body?

We touch each other so many
 ways, in curiosity, in anger,
 to command attention, to soothe,
 to quiet, to rouse, to cure.
 Touch is our first language
 and often, our last as the breath
 ebbs and a hand closes our eyes.

SERMON:

“Lullaby”

“I’m a believer, too,” said my friend Deborah. “I love Mary.”

My dear friend was in trouble. At fifty-eight, her memory had begun to unravel. Brilliant, creative and vivacious, a respected Hollywood executive, Deborah was now repeating herself, arriving at meetings sometimes hours late, her car newly dented...and after long conversations on the phone with old friends, she would call us back not even a half minute after hanging up, not remembering the conversation we’d just had.

It turned out that she had a devastating, terminal form of early-onset dementia. Now, she no longer recognized her world or the life she had made for herself. Instead, for her everything had become unfamiliar, confusing, chaotic and scary.

We’d not talked much about religion when we worked together in the 1980s, but in these rambling phone calls, when I’d tell her yet again about going to divinity school, the relief in her voice was palpable. “I’m a believer, too,” she would whisper, as if she—always a proud pragmatist—were letting me in on a long-time secret....

“A believer,” I’d say. “Tell me what you mean by that.”

“I love Mary...” would come her reply.

Mary. The mother of Jesus of Nazareth. The most revered, most painted, most sculpted mother figure of all times. Who was the Mary that Deborah loved? I wish I’d asked. I imagine she was calm. Gentle. Quiet. Draped in a soft pale blue shawl—her smile serene, love in her eyes? Mary, the iconic mother. As peaceful as the night sky. When Deborah found herself struggling in a life she no longer recognized as her own, the myth of Mary seems to have brought her comfort.

When I say myth, I mean no disrespect. But how realistic is Mary's timeless picture of motherhood? Would Mary ever break down in frustration and lose it? Would she yell back at the crying baby Jesus and thrust him into Joseph's arms the minute he got home from work, in tears?! Probably not. Would Mary fall to pieces when he was a naughty toddler? That's hard to picture! How many serene smiling mothers do you know, moms who are always calm and gentle and as peaceful as the night sky? Cynics say that the Church portrayed Mary as perfect, smiling and silent as the model woman, an example for all women to follow—what better way to keep us in our place for ever and ever? If true, that didn't work out so well, did it?

But let's not rule out Mary's embrace, because, for every one of us, being held was the first good thing that happened in our lives.

Compared with the warm fluid darkness of the womb that first held us, imagine how our entry into this world must have jarred our entire being beyond belief! The cold air on our wet skin, the loud noises, the bright lights, the scratchy clothing, tight and dry. Imagine seeing this complicated world for the first time, every single sight new! Having been unceremoniously thrust into this overwhelming, alarming place, imagine...or can we remember—the sweet relief of being held...Our first experience of comfort was just that—being cradled in the arms of our mother, for most of us. It's no wonder we crave comfort. Perhaps we've been looking to be held ever since!

We seek comfort all the time and want it whenever life upsets our equilibrium. Even when we come down with a cold, or our knee goes funky, or when spring won't come and life feels forever cold and gray, we want to feel better. We want comfort when life disappoints us. We need it when life shatters us and changes our landscape into a place we do not recognize. We pray for comfort after a bad accident, a grim diagnosis, the death of a loved one...or a betrayal by someone we trusted. We pray for comfort when an awful disease like Deborah's shakes our very foundations. "I love Mary," she would whisper—the comfort of Mary, the embrace of Mary, the mother in Mary.

For some of us, Mother's Day is joyous, full of love and gratitude, homemade cards, maybe breakfast in bed. For others, Mother's Day can be mixed. Mixed for mothers and children with complicated histories. Mixed for the mother trying to live up to some crazy expectation of motherhood and feeling she's not cutting it. Mixed for children trying to live up to crazy expectations—imagined or real—and falling short or rebelling against them. This day can be difficult for mothers and children who have strained relationships or who live with old hurts and unresolved problems. It's quite a dance mothers and children do. Even after one's mother has died, conversations with her continue, and the ever-evolving relationship can bring up tender emotions.

Mother's Day can feel disquieting for people who may not have known their mothers. Many people who are adopted wonder all their lives about their birth mothers—their questions never answered. Some associate this holiday with loss, like the mother who outlives her child; or like my dad, whose mom died young. He just couldn't handle Mother's Day. It must have been too painful for him. And so, even on Mother's Day, some of us seek comfort.

How many of us associate our mothers with comfort? How many of our children associate us with comfort? I wonder. Mothers hold children and comfort little ones when they can, but life with small children is pretty full, and moms tend to keep moving. Mothers do the best they can with what they are given. And somehow, despite their best efforts, sons and daughters—perhaps everyone—grows up longing for comfort. Longing to just be held and assured that all will be well.

If Mary, the iconic mother figure, represents the softness and gentleness and safety we crave in an uncertain world, then perhaps we need that kind of holding, that kind of mothering in our lives right now. Thankfully, we are mothered in many ways.

People have more than one mother. We grow up with birth mothers and step-mothers and mother figures. We have fantasy mothers. Hovering mothers. Absent mothers. Mothers who have died. Then there are our friends' mothers. My friends liked my mother, and I seemed to like theirs! Getting along with someone else's mom is so simple, so easy—no expectations, no rules!

As a girl, I loved hanging out at Mrs. Wright's house down the street. She had turned the big old-fashioned bathroom just inside the back door into a gigantic terrarium. It had spotted newts and turtles, pools and heat lamps. It was the best! (That never would have happened in my house.) In junior high, Mrs. Lewis was the mom I wanted to have—she was cheery and chatty, and she gave us as many cookies after school as we wanted! Much later, I would sit with smart, philosophical Mrs. Malcolm as she weeded her garden and talked about big ideas. I miss her.

Such different mothers, these. Who were your mothers? Who mothers you today? How does that help you feel held in this uncertain world?

My brother Bill lost his wife to cancer twelve years ago when the girls were six and nine. Bill is far and away the best mother I know. He has raised his daughters singlehandedly... he has been and he is their everything. Bill once suggested that, if I wanted to do something really nice for his younger daughter, now a senior in high school, she loved having the clothes scattered around her room folded. This sounded do-able, so when she left for school I headed upstairs. That girl's small bedroom was knee-deep in clothes! It took well over an hour to fold every tank top, sweater, T-shirt, scarf, sweatshirt, dress, all those gym shorts and jeans and socks! She was so happy....

But Eliza's favorite thing is when Bill, her dad, does this. They have a little ritual. Eliza sits on the bed, studying or reading, and Bill stands close by, folding and stacking her clothes in neat piles. They don't talk. He just picks up each item off the floor, one by one. He shakes it out, folds it and smooths out the wrinkles. This silent "I'll take care of you" ritual means the world to this girl. Bill's mothering assures her. It calms her. She knows she is not alone. She knows she is loved. She feels held.

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On this day when we remember the mothers in our lives, let us pause to notice where in our lives we feel mothered, where we feel held. Perhaps we feel held in this sanctuary...or held

in our Unitarian Universalist faith. Held in our towns and schools and places of work, where people know us and care about us.

Now zoom out and look at a bigger picture. There you are, you and your loved ones—family and friends who hold one another in so many ways. Your small group is connected to another and another...What holds everyone?

In this life that can feel jarring and uncertain, this life in which our well-being can change so fast, what helps us feel held?

- How does this planet where we live hold us?
- How do the earth's seasons and cycles feel like holding?
- How might the song of the spring peepers hold you?
- How does the sweep of civilization over time carry you?
- Or the pulse of evolution—that call forward?
- Or perhaps you feel held by something you can't put words to. Do you feel held by the river of all that is good and true that flows and eddies amongst us...held, as the Irish saying goes, in the palm of God's hand?

We each find comfort in different places. In what calms and steadies and holds us. This Mother's Day we may feel held by our own mother. She may miss the mark sometimes, but she holds us like no other. Or we may feel held by her memory, which we carry with us. Or, like my friend Deborah, we may feel held by a mythical mother we could never know but whom we somehow trust and love. "I love Mary," she'd say.

Deborah passed into the mysteries of death this winter. I pray that Mary's stillness and warmth and goodness comforted her until the end. I pray that Deborah was released into Mary's warm embrace and will rest in it for all of time. May we be so blessed.