



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Love Makes a Family”

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A sermon delivered May 12, 2013

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

The good, the true, the tender – these form the wealth of home. Sarah Josepha Hale

There's all kinds of mothers, so to use the label 'mother' and to think you really understood all that a human being is because she's a mother, is a mistake. Phylicia Rashad

I pray for a more friendly, more caring, and more understanding human family on this planet. To all who dislike suffering, who cherish lasting happiness, this is my heartfelt appeal. Dalai Lama

Sermon

Next year Mother's Day will enjoy its 100th anniversary of official recognition in America. Although it was suggested both as a day of peace and reconciliation after the Civil War and as a day to recognize the often unsung contributions of women and mothers, you can bet no one at that time thought a family might consist of two mothers. They probably didn't have in mind single mothers, grandmothers taking care of grandchildren, two fathers mothering their shared children, or any other description of a parental family unit outside the traditional idea of one mother, one father to a family. In today's world, just as the meaning of marriage has expanded, so has the meaning of family.

But one thing I don't want to change is the expectation and hope that a marriage is made by loving, committed adults. Nor do I want to change the idea that a family begins when love is present. I believe love is an essential ingredient for marriage and families.

On this 99th official Mother's Day, I give thanks to all those women and men who gave us the gift of life, for it is a gift even if life comes with challenge. I also give thanks to all those non birth-parent women and men who mothered us, in acknowledgement that not all birth mothers serve their children well, though most do well enough.

I used to worry that I didn't do well enough as a mother. My children were born in the 1980s when women were still questioning whether we could be both mother and career-woman in appropriate balance. Employers worried mothers were less committed to their jobs, fearing they

would run home at the tiniest snuffle. Employers thought male workers more committed to their jobs and less interested in parenting. Women worried we would miss our child's first steps, first tooth, or we just wouldn't get enough help at home to balance the demands of wife, mother, and career. I certainly worried.

I worked before my kids were born and I worked after they were born, except for a five-month maternity leave when I was only partially disengaged from work. When I returned to work full-time, my kids were shuttled off to a neighbor's house until they were two years old and able to go to pre-school. They stayed away from home each day for as long as I was at work, usually getting picked up before 6 pm. I felt guilty that they spent more waking hours with other caregivers than me or their father.

I felt guilty, fearful that I was short-changing my kids or my husband. I certainly was short-changing my housecleaning! But I knew I would not be happy if I quit an extremely fulfilling and creative job, and where I thought I was making a difference by sharing the world with readers. Being a mother and wife was rewarding and fulfilling, but they weren't enough to keep me happy.

Somehow, Paul and I found a rhythm that seemed to work for us and the kids. But I depended on my village of parents, sister, husband, and friends to help out. I also shared the care of my friend's kids, too, by taking turns driving places, chaperoning events, and participating in other activities. I found time to coach my youngest son's soccer team for years, while Paul coached basketball. My job was flexible enough that I could be at school events or stay home with a sick child when I needed to. I was not completely disengaged as a parent, but I also could never be called a helicopter parent, like some other parents I knew.

Even though I knew my sanity required me to work, it didn't stop me from a certain amount of self-flagellation for not being a better mother. If only I'd learned about American anthropologist, primatologist, and author Sarah Hrdy's work back when I was raising my kids, I could have saved myself a whole lot of guilt. Maybe I can save you some, now.

Hrdy's work in the last fifteen years has turned our understanding of mothering and motherhood upside down—or maybe right side up is more appropriate. Hrdy's research followed upon that of British psychologist John Bowlby who developed attachment theory. In the mid 20th century he recognized that every infant was born into the world ready to bond with others. He believed that infants and mothers who bonded and stayed together were more likely to survive. If a baby cries and someone, usually its birth mother, responds, then the baby is reassured and feels secure. If no one responds to the baby with comfort or connection, the baby will fail to thrive and might even die. Hrdy does not dispute this theory.

But Bowlby's work included the study of non-human primates, especially chimpanzees and orangutans because they epitomized attachment theory. Orang mothers, for example, are very possessive and develop strong bonds with their infants. So strong, they maintain skin-to-skin contact 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for the first six months, never letting another orangutan even hold their infant. And they nurse for up to seven years. Thank God I wasn't an orang mother!

Because of these possessive mothering models, Bowlby initially ignored the care human infants receive from others and the additional bonding that took place. In every society across the globe, human mothers willingly let others carry and care for their infants shortly after birth. Hrdy believes Bowlby should have looked at other primates to gain better insight on humans because we are more socialized than chimps and orangutans.

We share many behavioral and genetic traits with the great apes, but we are unique in our degree of pro-social behavior. Marmosets and tamarin monkeys act more like humans in how they care for their young. A telling trait for Hrdy is something unique to homo sapiens and these two smaller primates—we look into each other's eyes and do not mean it as a sign of aggression. A chimp will think you're challenging him or her. But for humans, we look at each other to communicate and connect. Our three species, marmoset, tamarin, and human, have what's called cooperative breeding. Sounds like we lead a swinging life, but it really means we share parenting responsibilities. We work together to care for our brood of children.

Hrdy believes humans did not develop as sole caregivers of our children. That means depending on others and leaving our children with others for a short while is normal! We don't need to be supermoms or dads who should spend every waking hour with their kids. Thank God!

You and I can kiss our guilt goodbye! You can blame your interest in being more than mom or dad on our good Unitarian ancestor, Charles Darwin. Of course, if you like being supermom or dad, go for it! Just know you're fighting against millions of years of evolution.

Hrdy believes cooperative parenting developed as a necessity because of the length of time a human child requires to mature. A prehistoric mother wouldn't have been able to provide for her child and herself without shared parenting. Early humans couldn't effectively fulfill their own caloric needs until well into their teen years. Complicating matters, before a human infant reaches self-sufficiency its mother may give birth to another child, one even more dependent on its parent. In contrast, a chimp's shorter childhood and longer birth interval makes exclusive mothering possible. Once a young chimp is weaned, he or she can independently forage for his or her own food.

Humans could not afford to be too possessive of their children if they were to survive. Evolutionary adaptation favored those able and willing to both take care of another's child and allow others to care of their own. Adoption today would not be possible if we couldn't bond with another mother's children. When adults watch happy, chuckling babies, even those not our own, we can't help but smile. Our bodies release chemicals to make us feel good. We're also biologically compelled to respond when a baby cries, even those not our own. We so hate to hear a child crying we get really annoyed, as anyone who's sat on a plane with a screaming infant can attest.

Lecture aside, let me offer a religious 'so what?' Hear me well, Moms and Dads. Give yourself a break. Let others help you raise your children—don't fight mother nature! You don't need to do everything and your child won't be harmed by spending time with others. If only I'd heard this message years ago.

In our child dedication ceremony, we asked if you would help raise three children. You may have thought that was a mere formality. Oh no! As members of this community, this UUFA family, we expect you will help nurture our children. For example, we hope you will volunteer to teach every few years. The Religious Education Committee makes that easy—just sign up at their table in the entryway.

Already many of you have volunteered to share the parenting. This year some of you volunteered to be mentors to our youth in the Coming of Age program. Some of you volunteered to be Mystery Friends. There are more ways you can share the care and carry our liberal religious values beyond your own lives. And serving the children benefits you, too. You create new, meaningful relationships with people of different ages. This is especially valuable if you are an adult without children or without grandchildren living nearby. We can be the larger family we all need.

Like families, we support one another in sickness and in health. Like families, we bring our best and sometimes our worst traits with us when we participate in congregational life. Like families, we suffer loss together and celebrate joys and milestones. Like families, we grow and change and we struggle together to adapt, even when we wish things wouldn't change. Like families, we can even walk out when we disagree or have tantrums. But like families, we hope our covenantal affirmations prevent us from disrespecting one another and we hope breakups are not made lightly. Like families, being together includes hard work, whether it's staying together in right relationship with other adults or sharing our values with youngsters.

May we be the mothers, fathers, and other caregivers this Fellowship needs.

May we strengthen and continue to share the care for all in this community.

Happy Mother's and Others Day.

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