



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Wisdom of Mothers”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

One generation plants the tree; another gets the shade. Chinese Proverb

To the highest leadership among women it is given to hold steadily in one hand the sacred vessels that hold the ancient sanctities of life, and in the other a flaming torch to light the way for oncoming generations. Anna Garlin Spencer

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see – or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read. Alice Walker

Reading

Billy Collins poem, “Fall to Your Knees and Thank God for Your Eyesight”

Sermon

Thank you, Choir, for your beautiful singing. You sang Bobby McFerrin’s re-imagined Psalm 23 which encompasses a mother’s love, for he understood God’s love to be both masculine and feminine. By dedicating this psalm to his mother it becomes a devotional to his mother and to all mothers. In the words of this song, McFerrin’s mother restores his soul, rights his wrongs, does not forsake him, and fills his heart with song. She is the ideal mother we all wish for.

In the poem by Billy Collins we heard earlier, Collins describes a very different kind of mother. His mother doesn’t comfort or console. She’s a realist who tells him to stop whining and recognize the blessings that he has, not the ones he wants. Yet despite being so unlike McFerrin’s mother, Collins admits at the end of his poem that he didn’t appreciate his mother enough, that he should have thanked her for his birth, for giving him eyes through which to see the world.

Clearly, there’s no single design for motherhood. Whether through birth, adoption, or other circumstance, those who become mothers vary in how they mother. Even their ability to love, care for, or be present for their children differs widely. And there’s no guarantee which one we’ll get.

If you wander down some store's greeting card aisle in search of the perfect Mother's Day card, you might be convinced that all mothers are perfectly wonderful. But the sweet sentiments described in poetic messages only make my teeth hurt. When I was buying cards I always headed to the humor section. They seemed more truthful. They seemed to recognize a mother's imperfections and the challenge of being a perfect mother.

The standard flowery cards, like the holiday itself, tends to idolize mothers, as does Father's Day imply every father is the epitome of perfection. No one sells cards for the absent mother, the alcoholic mother, the depressed mother, or the mother just too busy with her own life. That these cards don't exist denies a reality many of us grow up with. This reality makes celebrating Mother's Day more complex and more difficult. I cannot pretend that all mothers are wonderful.

I believe religious communities must acknowledge our many human imperfections. We cannot comfort, heal or make whole if we can't acknowledge the pain some lives contain. We must recognize all of what it means to be human – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Fortunately, families aren't all bad. Many of us have had perfectly adequate parents and many of us are good parents, too. My parents were good enough – not terrible and not terrific. If, like me, you wish your parents had been better somehow, even if they are no longer alive, you and I can still choose to forgive them. We can work at letting go of any anger or pain we may hold onto. We can acknowledge that our own identity need not be defined by their shortcomings.

And, we who are parents of living children, we can work to forgive them any of their imperfections. After all, we did have something to do with that. Relationships may be healed and begun anew if we try. But, regretfully, even after we've tried, sometimes we just need to let go of that hope. And no one can decide for us when that time has come.

But let's not forget, not only may our parents not be perfect, and our children may not be perfect, *we* are not perfect, either. Sometimes we need to forgive ourselves for our own shortcomings, our own parental mistakes. Sometimes we just need to vow to be better parents.

Despite all the complexities and challenges of family relationships, despite our family members' issues and our own stuff, fortunately, most of us are good enough human beings. We should 'fall to our knees and thank God', the Spirit of Love, or the genetic material of our creators for being good enough.

I'm sure, whether your mothers are more revered or reviled, that they passed along to you some pearls of wisdom. A study in Britain not too long ago found that mothers deliver an average of 41 wisdom sayings to their children. Clinton's Cards, a store in the United Kingdom known for selling gifts and greeting cards, came to this conclusion after interviewing over 2,000 adults. Here are the two most commonly reported tips from moms, or mums as the Brits would say: "Always try your best," and "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

By your reaction I can tell these ring true for you. I know my mother said these gems and I'm pretty sure I've said them to my kids.

Other sage remarks noted in the study included, "Never take sweets from strangers," "Eat with your mouth closed," and "Treat others how you wish to be treated." Of course, this is the Golden Rule. My mother simply said, "Be nice."

Further down the wisdom list was one of my mom's favorites, "Always wear clean underwear." Except she always added, "because you never know when you'll get in an accident." I took from this teaching that she, or I, would be embarrassed to be discovered in dirty undies.

Call me crazy, but if I was taken to an emergency room, stripped down, and discovered to be wearing dirty, torn, or otherwise unsightly underwear, I doubt the doctor would refuse to treat me or tell tales about me afterwards. Nevertheless, I do what my mother told me to do. Feel free to fall to your knees and thank her because I put on clean underwear every Sunday morning.

Besides dispensing these verbal pearls of wisdom, my mother also taught me by example. One I want to highlight this morning. She taught me how to be a church lady.

It may come as no surprise that my mother was a classic church lady. She volunteered her time and talent at every Unitarian Universalist congregation we belonged to. She helped run the annual Christmas craft bazaar at one church. At another, she served as president of the Alliance of Unitarian Women, an organization formed in 1890. At the time of the 1963 consolidation, it joined with the Association of Universalist Women. That group was founded in 1869 and is believed to be the first organization of lay women in the United States. Its purpose was to directly serve congregations. The Alliance is now known as the UU Women's Federation and its purpose is to advance justice for women and girls and to promote their spiritual growth.

In the 50s and 60s when post-war women like my mom helped create the baby-boom, there weren't too many women in the workplace. So religious communities and public schools became the primary place they volunteered at. The Women's Alliance gave my mother a place to gain leadership and organizational skills, skills she might have received had she had gone to college and had a professional career. Instead, her church involvement gave her meaning, purpose, and lasting friendships. It also meant my sister and I hung out at church a lot.

My family moved around every 6 years or so, and everywhere we went my mother made sure we lived near a UU congregation. And she quickly joined activities in each to meet like-minded people.

Since I came to the Fellowship five years ago, many of you have shared similar stories with me. Some of you have gone even farther than my mom. I know some of you wouldn't even make the move until you had attended a service. You wanted to be sure our Fellowship would welcome you and provide opportunities for your own added meaning, growth, and friendships. I hope this Fellowship has met your hopes and expectations.

Places where all ages mix and get to know each other are rare in our culture. Congregations remain one of the last places this occurs. So even if life has given you no children or your children have moved away, you can still be a parent-like figure to some young person. We are like an extended family. We need Fellowship ladies and gents like yourselves, not only for your leadership and shared talents, but for your relational generosity.

On this Mother's Day, be generous. Make friends with a child and share some wisdom with them. But better keep that pearl about wearing clean underwear to yourself.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What wisdom has your mother or mother-figure handed down to you? Share a time you did or did not followed this wisdom.
2. What wisdom do you wish a parent had shared with you, and why?
3. What wisdom do children and youth today need most from the adults in their lives?