



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Are You My Mother?”

© by Rev. Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts:

My mother had a great deal of trouble with me but I think she enjoyed it. Mark Twain

It is not what you do for your children, but what you have taught them to do for themselves that will make them successful human beings. Ann Landers

*How simple a thing it seems to me that to know ourselves as we are,
we must know our mothers' names.* Alice Walker

But behind all your stories is your mother's story, for hers is where yours begins.
Mitch Albom

Reflection:

Although my two boys are grown and I'm now a grandmother, when my kids were young my husband, Paul, and I happily read to them as part of their bedtime ritual. One of the many books we read was *Are You My Mother?*, by P.D. Eastman.

If you don't know this book, Eastman's story features a baby bird that, after cracking out of its shell, discovers its mother's absence from the nest. The reader knows she's gone to get worms to feed her young, but the baby bird doesn't know this. So it decides to leave the nest to go in search of her.

The baby bird approaches several different animals, asking, “Are you my mother?” Various, each replies, “No.” Finally, the bird approaches a large yellow excavator truck, and repeats its question. With a snort-like noise, the excavator shovel scoops up the baby bird and returns it to its nest high up in the tree, just as its mother returns with a worm in her beak.

Since the mother and her adventurous baby bird arrive home safe, this tale can comfort young children worried about becoming lost or separated from a parent. But with the hindsight that comes with having watched my own children grow up and leave the nest, when I reread the story recently I had to laugh. It reminded me of how, when parents are away or not paying attention, teenagers may sneak out of the house, have their own adventures, then return home with parents none the wiser. I have some familiarity with how that works.

Eastman's story came to mind as I considered a message for today's service. As I read various quotes about how wonderful or goddess-like mothers are, or how some daughters have such great relationships with their mothers, I realized these sentiments didn't ring true for me. I didn't have a terrible mother, but neither did I worship her or think of her as my best friend. As I thought more about my mother, I realized I didn't really know her. I felt like the baby bird, and so I began my own search for my mother.

I didn't find her.

My mother died almost nine years ago, so I can't ask her questions that might help me know her as Virginia, rather than Mom. I'd like to ask: What were her greatest joys in life? Deepest regrets? What did she love most about my father? Would she make different decisions if she could live her life over? What was her relationship with her own mother?

When I meet with families to plan memorial services, I ask similar questions about the one who has died so that I can write their eulogy. Sometimes they can answer, often they cannot. That's when they speak their own regrets over not knowing.

What about you? Do you know your mother or father? Whether they still live or not, can you see either of them for themselves, apart from their role as parent?

If you say no, don't feel too guilty. I think a few common reasons prevent us from knowing our parents. 1) We're too busy creating our own lives and don't give those who gave us life much thought or time. 2) We're intentionally separating ourselves from our parents in order to become our own persons in our own right. And/or 3) We're just too close to them, perhaps even blinded by their mothering or fathering, to be able to see fully their whole unique personhood. Additionally, if you are adopted, donor-conceived, or even a step-child, you may never have had a chance to know one or both biological parents.

As infants, we're dependent on our parents for everything, but it doesn't take long for us to push our parents away. The behavior of a terrible two-year-old toddler epitomizes the conflicting need to be close and to be separate. During our maturing teen years, we make new families with friends, and we try out different identities for ourselves. Getting a driver's license furthers our independence from parents. Going off to college or getting a job enables us to set up our own home. Eventually, we may start our own families, or at least lead thoroughly independent lives apart from our parents. To then return to our parents takes effort, and sometimes it only happens when we become their caregivers.

So why should we know our parents as people with dreams and disappointments, loves and losses?

I believe, belatedly, that knowing our parents is important, and not just because we want to appropriately eulogize them. Knowing who our parents are tells us something about who *we* are. We learn about how to be in relationship, how to love, how to parent, how to pick ourselves up when we fall, and so much more from our parents.

Family systems theory tells us that our families are emotional units and that we're intensely connected to each other, in fact, we are interdependent in more ways than we may fully

realize. Who we are, among other things, is influenced by our birth order, our role within the family unit, and how we cope with emotional issues in the family. We're also likely to repeat the patterns we experience as children in the families we establish as adults. Knowing our parents better opens windows into knowing ourselves, and it presents an opportunity to change the patterns we inherit.

A week ago I visited my father and my sister up north. I shared with my sister some of my thoughts about this service. When asked, she couldn't tell me who our mother was any better than I. We shared some stories and memories, but we agreed an opportunity to know her had been lost.

We've also lost a chance to know my father. Although he emerged from my mother's shadow after she died, and I was able to get to know him in a way I hadn't before, this didn't last. My sister and I realized my mother had been compensating for his mental decline. We soon found our parent-child roles reversed as we began to arrange for his medical care and daily needs for living. He's still alive, but now at nearly 96, his memories are gone. He barely knows who I am. If I ask about his life, he shrugs his shoulders and says he doesn't know. All the experiences of his life that formed Arnold Wilbur are forever lost to him, to my sister, and to me.

Unless we take the time to get to know them and see them as something beyond their specific role, we'll never know our parents, our spouses, our children, or even our closest friends. But if we take the time to share and truly listen to each other's stories, then we can say, "I know you."

If you do know, or knew, your parents well, I commend you for that.

If not, perhaps it's not too late if they're still alive, with minds and memories intact. Perhaps getting to know them will offer you an opportunity for healing any old wounds you may have, or offer forgiveness for transgressions you may have experienced. Or, perhaps, it will offer you an opportunity to express your gratitude for their sacrifices and how well they nurtured you.

If you have children who are alive and well, it's not too late to share something with them of who you are outside of your parent role. And, perhaps you can get to know them for who they have become.

If neither parents nor children exist in your life, do your friends truly know you, and will you remedy that?

My charge to you on this Mother's Day – do not have regrets. Tell those who matter to you who you are. Share your hopes and dreams and disappointments. Share what's important to you, what gives you joy and happiness, and how you manage sorrows or setbacks. Between today and next month's Father's Day, share it or write it down. Share it with me, if you like. You matter to me, and I want to know who you are.

At the back of the sanctuary on the entrance table, I've put together a sheet of sample questions you might ask your parents, your friends, or even of yourself. Take it as your prompt or reminder.

Since we focus this month on growth, I encourage you to grow in your relationships. Be grateful for your gift of life. Show your appreciation for those who make a difference in your life.

May love call us to grow, and may we do so together.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Do you feel you know your parents or the significant person/s who raised you? If not, what would you like to know about them? What do you wish they knew about you?
2. How has your relationship with your parents or parental figure/s changed over time? If so, how? Are you satisfied with that relationship, and why or why not?
3. In what ways are you similar to your parents? Different?

