



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Maternal Voices”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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Centering Thoughts

In a child's lunch basket, a mother's thoughts. Japanese proverb

*“You are the caretaker of the generations, you are the birth giver,” the sun told the woman.
“You will be the carrier of this universe.”* Brule Sioux, Sun creation Myth

*“Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown?
What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing.”* Toni Morrison, ‘Beloved’

*What could be more astonishing to witness than the growth of her own children from infant
enigmas to their complex and definite, yet ever-changing selves.* Elizabeth Cunningham

Sermon

Ancient and modern mothers have called their children to their breast, sung to them with love, laughed with them in joy, and cried over them in anguish. Some say mothering is not the oldest profession, but I disagree. We humans are brought into the world by mothers who care for us until we're able to care for ourselves. Males of course provide some essential part of the equation, but with rare exception in the animal world, it is females who suffer the gestation and labor. Besides, Father's will have their day next month. Today is Mother's Day.

To walk down the greeting card aisles and to see advertisements showing happy mothers being loved by their families, one would think that every mother is perfect and every family is perfectly happy. Many are, and many are not.

We might also think every woman who wants to can become a mother. We might forget that some who would be mothers found it necessary to end their pregnancy. That some who would be mothers had their pregnancy end in miscarriage or other misfortune. And that some mothers gave up a child for adoption, while other mothers buried a child too soon. I don't see cards designed for these mothers. Nor do I see cards for abusive or inattentive mothers, nor the mothers of children who forget them. For these women, this day may not be one to celebrate.

Because Mother's Day elicits a variety of emotions and I can't honestly observe the holiday by pretending every mother fits one perfect mold, let us honor all women who conceived, bore, reared, or lost children. Let us honor all women who let go, made difficult choices, or struggled with raising children. Let us honor all loving mothers who reared their children well. Let us also honor people of any gender who mother, nurture, and love children. We respect and value all these mothers.

On this Mother's Day weekend I can't imagine the horror the mothers of over 270 kidnapped girls in Nigeria are feeling right now. You may know they were taken by Islamic extremists to be sold as slaves or for marriage. The prophet Muhammad must be rolling in his grave at this act of violence in God's name. I can't imagine the suffering the girls must be experiencing. I can't imagine the anguish their parents must feel. I applaud the world community, including the US, for finally responding with help to recover the girls.

As these atrocities take place I am reminded of the Unitarian Julia Ward Howe who, in 1872 began advocating for a Mother's Day for Peace to be held on June 2 each year. She suggested this as a way to heal the country after the Civil War. Howe proclaimed, "The sword of murder is not the balance of justice! Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession...Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace." Counsel, not violent means to peace.

Wise words which, for more than a decade, Bostonians celebrated, but by the turn of the century it lost momentum. Mother's Day as we know it was the idea of Anna Jarvis, a Methodist who campaigned for it in 1907. Seven years later, 100 years ago, President Woodrow Wilson signed a congressional resolution establishing Mother's Day in the US. In time, Jarvis became troubled by the commercialization of the holiday. She particularly regretted the greeting card as a poor excuse to share one's feelings about mothers. No card could be written to wish nearly 300 Nigerian women a Happy Mother's Day.

Kidnapping girls is rare in our country, though not unheard of. Last year three abducted Cleveland girls found freedom from their captor, giving hope that other girls and boys who've been taken from their families may be found alive. I hope the girls in Nigeria will be safely reunited with their parents, too.

Fortunately, not all the news about mothers and children is so horrible. Mothers received a huge lift in this country this past week when NBA basketball star Kevin Durant accepted the Most Valuable Player award. In his acceptance remarks, he recalled how his mom sacrificed for him and his brother, even going to bed hungry so that her boys would get enough food. He described his mother as a loving task-master who helped make his basketball dreams come true. Amidst tears, he named her the Most Valuable Player.

Most mothers don't see their children take public stage and announce how much they love or appreciate them. Most mothers would be happy just to get a private expression of love and appreciation from their children.

Though I have not been a perfect mother, I guess I did well enough because my two adult boys do let me know I am loved. I am grateful for their hugs and voiced appreciation, which I don't take that for granted. But in case they're listening, I expect a phone call this evening!

I remember a time when I was a struggling new mother. I felt unqualified for this responsibility and wondered if becoming a parent ought to require getting a license, like driving a car requires proof of competency. In the most trying of times, like in the middle of the night when Paul and I couldn't get our newborn to stop crying after what seemed like hours of wailing and rocking—his and ours—I thought not everyone should become a parent. Maybe not me. I wished I had been prepared better, and not required so much 'on the job' training.

Some of you may know my older son will be married in September. Since he is the first to get hitched, I am trying to create a new role for myself — that of mother-in-law.

In this country mothers-in-law suffer from a bad reputation. Just slightly better than step-mothers, they are considered nags, hags, and wicked harridans. One comedian joked that he can always tell when his mother-in-law comes to visit— rather than be in the same house with her, mice begin throwing themselves at his traps. There's even a slightly poisonous plant called mother-in-law's tongue. Named for its long, tongue-like lashing shape, it indicates that mother-in-laws speak mean, hurtful words. This role is not one I'm prepared to embrace.

Just like mothering my two sons occurred without a manual, I've received no manual for how to be a mother-in-law. I'm walking carefully into this new role.

Adding to my cautiousness is the fact that I've never been mother to a daughter. It's too late to play dolls with her, comb or braid her hair, or talk about first crushes. My soon to be daughter-in-law arrives fully grown, fully formed. I'm just beginning to get to know her and discover what we may have in common, besides loving my son. Someday, I hope she'll be my daughter, not just someone else's daughter who married my son.

Although I am a mother, on Mother's Day I can't forget my own mother. She died four and a half years ago so I can only say "Thank you" to her in my heart and prayers. She wasn't a perfect mother, either, but then I wasn't a perfect child. Half joking, she once told me if I'd been first there might not have been a second. Even so, I knew she loved me and did her best to raise me well.

The Japanese proverb, "In a child's lunch basket, a mother's thoughts," reminds me of my mother. She didn't leave actual notes for me in my lunch box, but she carefully packed my lunch each morning with homemade sandwiches and cookies, along with cold milk in a thermos bottle that fit snugly in a pink Barbie doll lunch box under a holding wire. If I could rewrite the proverb it would say, "In a child's lunch box, a mother's love." Food was how my mother showed her love.

She loved to cook and tried out new recipes all the time. She embraced the idea of being a gourmet cook from early TV chef Graham Kerr, the Galloping Gourmet. My mom taught me to

cook and I still prepare many dishes she once made for me, my sister, and father. My own kids now use these recipes. Mom lives on.

She also lives on in me. When I look in the mirror I now see her reflection. I am becoming my mother and my grandmother. Genes can't be denied.

It is too late for me to thank my mother in her lifetime for all that she did for me. I like to think that as I sat beside her bedside, alone, while she took her last breath that she knew I loved her. Regretfully, I didn't say it often enough.

I've shared some of my story of motherhood with you, but it's a universal story. I'm sure pieces echo your own. I hope you'll share your stories with me and others in this community. In this way we make stronger connections, learn how to support each other, and create a larger family, though it is no more perfect than any other family.

As you enjoy the rest of this day, I hope you'll take time to be grateful for those who gave you life or nurtured you, even when they did so imperfectly. If you can't fully forgive their imperfections, maybe even abuse, at least try to let go of some anger or sadness you may carry. Just like parents need to let children go when they grow up, children need to let parents go when they or their memories no longer serve well.

Together, let us recommit to being good nurturers to our families, our Fellowship, and our larger world. The girls in Nigeria and children everywhere need our love. I know we have enough love to share.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What memories of your mother haunt or stay with you, influencing the person you are now?
2. Share a time you nurtured a child and how that affected you. If there hasn't been a time, please share those feelings.
3. What message might you put in a child's lunch box? What message might you like to receive?