

A Larger Hope

Unity Church
May 9th, 2010

Mother's Day has always seemed to me to be a fine opportunity to revisit the dynamic tension between nature and nurture. Hard wired as we are much of whom and how we are is genetically determined. But at the same time it's clear as day that early bonding and the subliminal messages we receive from our mothers in our first few years have a profound impact on our emotional and spiritual health. All our lives there is a child "still standing somewhere inside (us), watching to see how it's done." Our confidence in life itself, that larger hope that wakes us up on every morning and teaches us to greet the day is a direct reflection of a mother's love. It's no wonder then that mothers and fathers as well, feel so utterly responsible for our children's well-being.

Mircea Eliade, the most important comparative religion scholar of the 20th century asserts that "if we define religion as the systematic expression of the interplay between traditional faith and transforming hope, then hope is of the essence of religion." Understood in this way hope becomes far more than a sentimental construct it becomes, in fact, an essential stance which makes progress possible both for persons and for the communities we form. Hope is not inherited, it's learned. Hope is therefore first among the gifts our mothers give us. At our best we learn from those whom Lincoln called "our angel mothers" the larger hope that leads us home to love.

I borrowed the concept of our larger hope from Russell Miller's The Larger Hope, which is an organizational history of the Universalist Church in America. Here at Unity Church we rarely explore the Universalist side of our heritage. We are an historic Unitarian congregation still quietly struggling to come to grips with the fact that the Unitarian and the Universalist denominations merged in 1961, thus tainting our previously pure Unitarian assertion of the Unity of God with god forbid, the Universalist assertion of universal salvation. It's all well and good to set aside the concept of the trinity but the Universalist corrective which denies the possibility of eternal damnation undermines an essential and lucrative claim of mainstream Christian doctrine. It's a dangerous, unsettling notion. The old adage goes that the Universalist believe God is too good to damn them, but that the Unitarians, ah yes, we Unitarians believe we are too good to be damned.

We calves "cross the stream just by listening to the lowing of (our) mothers. (We) trust (our) mothers and, anticipating the safety of reunion, follow their voices and cross the stream." Making use of a story attributed to the Buddha, Dharma teacher, Sharon Salzberg, provides us with a lovely way to understand how mother love can give us the strength to cross over.

By now I know that some of you are thinking, "Not my Mom." By now some of you are feeling deprived of the very love I'm trying to describe. I've been there. Like many others I've suffered through the superficiality of Mother's Day trying to be nice while making lists in my mind of all the ways in which my mother failed me. Stop it. I have. Our mothers and fathers

are real life flesh and blood human beings. Most did and do the very best they can. Like you and me they are subject to the flaws and failings inherent in simply being human.

Once, at our previous congregation, I preached a sermon in which I suggested rather forcefully that one could not be a spiritually mature person unless and until one had forgiven ones parents. A general uproar ensued led by a therapist in the congregation who felt that I had undermined the healing process by recommending forgiveness to those not yet ready to forgive. I've taken some fairly controversial stands in my day but none has been as powerfully condemned as was my insistence that forgiving ones parents is a good idea. I don't mean to make light of this process. There is far too much genuine abuse for anyone to be glib about forgiveness. It can take many years of excruciatingly difficult work to recover from an abusive childhood. That said I still believe that in the end it is impossible to learn to love God without forgiving first the little gods and goddesses we worshipped as young children.

It may help to think about how some traditions include icons in their spiritual practice. Among the Hindus and the Buddhists, as well as both Roman and Orthodox Catholics icons serve a very particular purpose. The image of the god or goddess, the portrait of the saint is intended to convey a set of attributes and powers which are worthy of contemplation. Jews and Moslems (and many Unitarian Universalists as well) are extremely wary of these sacred images. As early as the Book of Exodus God instructs the people through Moses that *"You shall not make a carved image of yourself nor any likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, to in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous god."* This is an admonition against idolatry. To engage in idolatry is to mistake the finite for the infinite; it is to worship not God who is the All-in-All but an image which conveys God only in part as though God could be captured and controlled, as though God's will could be bent to our purposes.

The truth is that a spiritually mature person who makes use of icons in her or his religious practice understands the essential difference between an image of the Holy and Holiness itself. The icon is a gate which opens to the Garden but will never be the garden in and of itself. When we are very small our mothers love for us is all that we can know of God. But as we come to full maturity, as we come to know our parents as real human beings then our love for them becomes a gate which opens toward the larger hope that leads us on to love.

You may be interested to know that the call to establish Mother's Day was first issued by Unitarian writer and activist, Julia Ward Howe, best known as the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Once the war was won and slavery abolished Howe turned her considerable organizing skills to trying to make sure the hard-won peace would be permanent. In 1870 she penned a Mother's Day proclamation attempting to enlist the mothers of America in pursuit of that permanent peace. Inspired no doubt by Aristophanes' great play Lysistrada, Howe's proclamation should be numbered among the manifestoes of early American feminism. It reads: *"Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies, our husbands shall not come to us reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We women of one country will be too tender to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, "Disarm, Disarm!" The word of murder is not the balance of justice! Blood*

does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plow and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left at home for a great and earnest day of counsel. Let them meet first as women to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as the means whereby the great human family can live in peace. And each bearing after her own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar but of God- In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality, May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient and the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace.

I'm sure you won't be surprised that neither President Grant nor Congress endorsed the proclamation. But over the years here and there across the Nation groups of women and sometimes even men began to gather to grieve those who had fallen in the War Between the States and to contemplate the possibilities of peace. Meanwhile in West Virginia, Anna Reeves Jarvis, an Appalachian housewife who had become deeply involved in organizing Mother's Work Days during the Civil War took up the task again. After her death, to honor her memory and to encourage families and neighbors still divided by the Civil War to work toward reconciliation, her daughter, also named Anna, continued the work.

The tide began to turn toward passage in 1906 when Philadelphia merchant John Wanamaker, an evangelical Christian and peace activist who made a fortune founding one of the first department stores in the country took up the cause. By 1912, 45 states had established some semblance of a Mother's Day. Finally in 1914 Woodrow Wilson declared that henceforth Mother's Day would be held on the second Sunday in May. But the Mother's Day that he declared asked that Americans take advantage of the day to express their gratitude for the role women play in the family and so did not reflect the radical feminist agenda for which Julia Ward Howe had been calling.

Now here we are almost a hundred years later. Mother Day's has been dumbed down into a sentimental nudge that suggesting that we use the day to do what we ought to do every day. Anna Jarvis, who had worked so hard to make the day an opportunity for reconciliation became increasingly concerned about the commercialization of the Day. She actively opposed the selling of flowers and also the use of greeting cards which she declared to constitute "a poor excuse for the letter you're too lazy to write." It's easy to see that the holiday falls far short of the aspirations of those who first conceived it. But I suggest we celebrate it anyway. There is always a need for reconciliation between mothers and their children, among families too long divided and far from home as well among the nations whose struggles for primacy and profit still so often leads to war.

Let us then pray for peace even as we practice gratitude for those who calmed our fears and dried our tears and taught us how to see beyond ourselves in the hope that our lives might lead us to the larger love which holds and heals and helps us on our way.

These things we promise. These things we pray. May it be so and amen.

A Bowl of Sugar

Allison Townsend

Tonight I prepare apples the way my mother once made them, slender wedges with a bowl of sugar beside them for dipping, grains of glitter clinging, the thinnest line of sweetness sparkling along the outer edge. I don't know why I crave this confection this evening, or why the treat returns, like seasons or the names of apples I ate when I was young—Winesap, Cortland, Northern Spy—except that it makes me a daughter once again in her absence, as if she stands in the kitchen beside me, the knife flashing, quick as my own long fingers that have grown so much like hers, slicing these near-translucent wafers I take between my lips, letting the grains of sugar dissolve in me slowly, melting against the wet-suede of my tongue, before I swallow and am alone again, the last crickets stitching their music across a cloth of dark that is sweet and unknown to me, yet familiar as sugar, as the girl still standing somewhere inside me, watching to see how it's done.

From "Faith"

Sharon Salzberg

The Buddha once told this story about faith: A herd of cows arrives at the bank of a wide stream. The mature ones see the stream and simply wade across it. The Buddha likened them to fully enlightened beings who have crossed the stream of ignorance and suffering. The younger cows, less mature in their wisdom, stumble apprehensively on the shore, but eventually they go forward and cross the stream. Last come the calves, trembling with fear, some just learning how to stand. But these vulnerable, tender calves also get to the other side, the Buddha said. They cross the stream just by listening to the lowing of their mothers. The calves trust their mothers and, anticipating the safety of reunion, follow their voices and cross the stream. That, the Buddha said, is the power of faith to call us forward.

In Memoriam M.K.H., 1911-1984

Seamus Heaney

I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like [solder](#) weeping off the [soldering iron](#):
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
[Gleaming](#) in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
When all the others were away at Mass
Went [hammer and tongs](#) at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives--
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.