

Mothers, Nurture, and Boundaries

Rev. Paul Beckel

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

WELCOME

Mother's Day brings a wide array
of feelings needs and memories,
aspiration grief regret,
gratitude and sentiment.
Love forgiveness sweet nostalgia,
and keen attention to the qualities
we might not mention from day to busy day.

We usually welcome you saying “welcome regardless of age race class and yada yada....”
Today I say regardless of your experiences around motherhood:
we won't say you oughta feel one way, but celebrate the complex—
whether your mother figure has been tall or fat, or either sex.
Whether you *are* one, or you *have* one—or two or three or more,
though birth or law, we welcome all who come in the spirit of goodwill.

Come to learn, or come to cry, or just sit still, and sigh.

GATHERING SONG

#91 *Mother of All*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Love You Forever, by Robert Munsch

KID'S CHOIR

Voice of a Child, by Ellen Hansen-Ellis

ERACISM MINUTE

Cat McIntyre

WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE

23rd Psalm (dedicated to my mother) by Bobby McFerrin

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

RESPONSIVE READING

Earth Dance, by Karen Loveland

Our mother, which art the earth,
Nurturing are thy ways.

*Thy web of life be woven
Thy way be found within, as it is all around.*

Thank you for our daily bread and sweat
and forgive us our misuse of you,

as we forgive others their misuse of us.

And lead us not into exploitation,

*But deliver us: from lording it over you,
And over each other,
And over all our other fellow creatures.*

For thine are the waters of life,

The hills, valleys and plains of home,
The breeding, seeding, feeding ground,
*For now, and for as close to forever
As we will ever come.*

MESSAGE

Let's consider today, in honor of the spirit of motherhood, in honor of that *perfect* (non-existent) goddess, let's consider the interplay of nurture and boundaries. This is not a conversation about *balance* or finding some *static place in between* nurture and boundaries. But rather about doing them both—nurture *and* boundaries. Doing both well, or, well-enough. Because whatever your past experience of motherhood, looking forward, we will all have additional opportunities to put our ideals into practice.

All year we've been exploring the broad theme of, "Relationship Matters: Within and Beyond these Walls." Well giving and receiving nurture, and setting healthy boundaries, certainly occurs within and beyond these walls.

We are nurtured, and we receive sustenance, from the earth and sky and time. And we're incessantly reminded by the earth and sky and time that we are limited. We're held close by their natural forces. And we suffer when we forget their boundaries.

And while the nurture and the boundaries of earth, sky, and time are very real, they are also very good as metaphors for our ideals of parenthood.

One parenting class I've experienced was called Love and Logic. Love and logic involves empathy for kids instead of answers. Helping them to *think* for themselves about the consequences of their choices, and allowing them to *experience* the consequences—not in a brutal way, not with a haughty I told you so ... or angry "now look what you've done"... or preachy "if you'd only..." but with love, and with the genuine sadness we feel when someone we love experiences the painful consequences of human limitation.

Sometimes we experience these limits because of choices we've made, sometimes they are with us as pre-existing conditions. The spirit of love and logic, or tough love, or nurture and boundaries ... reminds us that we can't always make another person's pain go away. We can be present, we can provide limited support, and if they ask, we can provide advice. But we cannot—or ought not try to—relieve them of the opportunity to learn about natural forces, poor choices, and the quirks of fate.

We need to take into account, of course, what is developmentally appropriate. For example, Jane and I are at that interesting moment in parenting when our role as nurturers is shifting (our youngest turned 21 yesterday). But we're not quite ready to say: we've loved you; goodbye; have a good life.

A couple friends of ours who took the love and logic classes began to implement its theories in their lively household of preschool twins and school age Sarah. But when they started to tone down their own exasperated pleading and shouting and began to address Sarah as if she had some responsibility for how things turned out at home, she said, "I want to go back to the way it was."

I attended a boys' boarding high school where in order to maintain loving discipline, we were given what was called a "report" whenever we were unruly. When we collected five reports we had earned

ourselves a “crew,” which was two hours of moderately hard labor. Or we’d earn an instant-crew for smarting off to a teacher or skipping daily mass. Naturally we came to develop a fairly sophisticated calculus—considering the value of sleeping through mass and then comparing that to the cost of Saturday afternoon labor.

A few years after I left the school I spoke to a classmate who had gone back to work there. I asked him, what’s it like to be the dreaded disciplinarian giving out reports and crews? Oh we don’t do that anymore, he said. When kids screw up now they have to come and sit and talk with us about why they did it. They hate this! It’s really cut down on misbehavior.

Similarly, I remember my kids being aggravated when I would respond to their questionable choices by asking, “How do you think that’s going to work out for you?” I recently ran across another great question like this which I wish I had thought of when my kids were teenagers. You might try this one out if you have your own teens or grand-teens; ask them, “If you do that, do you have enough money to pay for any possible damage?”

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In the 1700’s Unitarianism broke away from the establishment churches by rejecting authoritarianism, and emphasizing instead how the parameters of reason and science could guide our quest for truth. At about the same time, Universalism emerged by rejecting the punitive image of God and emphasizing instead the love of God as the source of all joy, and a model for our earthly relationships.

Just over 50 years ago, the Unitarian and Universalist movements became the UUA, and we’ve seen that, *together*, our love *and* logic, nurture *and* boundaries, can successfully reside in one body. But what’s interesting is that this one body is emphatically pluralistic. We identify ourselves by hearkening back to numerous ancestral traditions including Christianity, Buddhism, and Stoic agnosticism. But perhaps the two most influential sources of *today’s* Unitarian Universalism have emerged in the years since our merger. I’m talking about feminism and environmentalism, which have revolutionized us even while bringing us back to our first principles.

Theologically, feminism and environmentalism have warmed us to experiences of hope and joy not just in our heads, but in our bodies and in our relationships. In practical terms, feminism and environmentalism have empowered us to demand civil liberties for all, and a sustainable planet for the children of our children.

So what’s next? Empowered by feminine humanity and sustained by our mother earth, who knows yet what may come to birth?

SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COLLECTION

for the Maple Alley Inn nutrition program for the homeless

SENDING SONG

#348 *Guide My Feet*

BENEDICTION

May the laws of physics, and the Spirit of life
Hold us close, and to set us free.