

I am quickly learning, that preaching on Mother's Day, about *anything* related to mothers, is one of the more tricky things to do successfully. The Rev. Steve Eddington, who serves our UU Church in Nashua, NH, has said that over the years he's noticed something of a consensus exists among ministers when it comes to the category of "Sermon Topic Most Often Avoided." "Hands down," he writes, "the prize in that area goes to Mothers' Day."

At every turn, I can see there are pitfalls to be avoided; a too "sticky-sweet" account of motherhood that's all "love & roses;" sentimental only, at its worst.

And on the other hand, there's the truth among us, too, that some here are without positive, nurturing experiences of motherhood from our own mothers, and consequently, in this kind of sermon & service, end up feeling excluded or forgotten; reminded, intentionally or not, that they are somehow "less" than others by virtue of the lack of their good fortune in childhood.

It's in recognition of these pitfalls, and doomed from the start, so to speak, that I want to begin my remarks by asking for your patience & forgiveness if need be, because still, nevertheless, I choose to continue down this path on this Mother's Day Sunday Service, believing as I do, that good, bad or otherwise, there is something fundamental and necessary to our health and well-being that has to do with mothering; something we may have learned about from our mothers first, but then again, maybe not.

So what exactly do I mean by mothering? Who does it? And why? And what if they didn't? These are a few of the questions I've been thinking about, as I've looked for answers from my own experience, and that of other peoples' experiences; answers that are honest, and real and relevant in some way, I hope, to each of our lives, and answers, too, that speak to some of the work & service in the world that we are called to participate in, concerns beyond our own families, or clans that we ought try & address.

So, again, what do I mean by mothering? At least in my own mind, mothering is about choosing to live our lives in ways that reveal a depth & commitment of love for others. Mothering is something we do, when we cultivate relationships, and act in the world—in intimate circles & more public spaces—when we act in ways that nurture people, over time, into their own sense of power, and value and goodness.

Good mothering encourages people to care about others—to be deliberate about acting in their interest, as well as our own; to recognize at every turn, our relatedness; to be oriented to nudge & encourage others, and ourselves, in the direction of insuring, as Eileen put it in her remarks, "that [each of us] gets off to a good start" in this world.

In this way, mothering is not referring solely to some skill-set or natural inclination that only women or parents have, though they certainly need it and many of them, thank goodness do have it. Mothering is, and can be thought of as something inherently broader, a selfless quality of attention, care and

investment in the well-being of others that comes in many forms; it's a capacity that we can, and need to cultivate in ourselves.

Today we remember that courage and strength are also a part of mothering, something I was especially reminded of, just a few weeks ago.

I was way in the back, running a smaller, more manageable bucket of paint to two of the youth working on the scaffolding when I first heard it said. "Hey Momma! How you doin'?" Ms. Campbell, whose house we were painting, was the one being addressed. A black man on a bicycle, middle-aged, I'd guess, yelled it out to her as he passed by the house, one of his hands grasping the handle bar, the other one waving. "Hey Baby!" she said in reply back to him, and he nodded & smiled some more, at her, and at each of us, stationed at our respective places with paint brushes and caulk guns in hand, busy at work, painting her house on North Johnson Street in the Upper 9th Ward of New Orleans.

It's funny what one remembers from whole days of work and busyness and hearing stories, but for whatever reason, that memory of Ms. Campbell smiling at her neighbor, and his calling to her "Hey Momma!" has stayed with me, and speaks to me of a quality of mothering that's important to hold up today, of all days. There was something affectionate, and warm, and respectful about it—you could hear and feel that these two were related; that Ms. Campbell was a mother in the neighborhood not only to her own son, but to a whole lot of people; a wise woman with a sense of humor, and strength, a survivor with a big heart you felt immediately in her presence.

This is a picture of Ms. Campbell with Maria and Vincent, two of our youth who traveled with me and seven other teenagers from Belfast and Bangor over April vacation to be part of a Service Trip. Many of you helped us get there with your financial support, and I will always be grateful.

This is a picture of Ms. Campbell's 2-story house. Hurricane Katrina and the levees breaking meant that eight feet of water saturated her home for several days—a near, total loss, everything inside left moldy or otherwise destroyed. Ms. Campbell got out of New Orleans with her 26-year-old son who has special needs, and her 90-something year old mother a day before the storm hit. They landed in Houston where they ended up living for 2½ years before she could manage to get them back home and begin rebuilding. She must have told us five or six times that she always knew she'd get back home; that she was one of the lucky ones.

And then there's Mrs. Green, another woman we met in New Orleans, and what she told us about her experience that reminds me of the power of mothering; the courage and strength that's so often a part of that kind of love. Mrs. Green is the younger sister of Mr. Narcisse, whose yard we weeded as one of our last work details. His yard had actually been the house lot of his next-door neighbor until the storm & flooding ruined it, and she decided not to come back, and the house was demolished. Here's a picture of Mrs. Green and her brother, Mr. Narcisse in front of his house, and all of us around them.

Mrs. Green was visiting from Maryland when we were there, helping her brother out for a while, and as

we weeded the yard on our hands and knees, she put out sodas, and water, and little bags of chips and granola bars on a card table that she set up on the walkway, and she told us stories about her life, especially about when she was a little girl and something happened that she's never, ever forgotten.

Mrs. Green's family—her mother, and father and two older brothers—all lived on a plantation a few hours north of New Orleans. Her mother and father worked long hours in the sugarcane fields, and they all lived in the plantation housing, which must have been slave quarters at one time. Mrs. Green told us her mother made a decision that changed her life when she was little, just four or five years old: She decided she wanted her, and her brothers to get a better education than they could out there in the country, and so her mother made arrangements and sent them together to New Orleans to live with their aunt.

Mrs. Green said it was awful, devastating to leave her mother and father at that young age; that for a time when she was first in New Orleans with her Aunt's family, she'd sit and wait outside on the porch each afternoon, expecting to see her father come up the street, on his way home from the fields like he'd always done. It took a month or more of crying, and being consoled, and told that he wasn't going to be coming home there, for her to actually get it; to really believe it was true.

It was hard to imagine what that must have been like for her; hard to put ourselves in their shoes; hard to grasp how strong and determined her mother and father must have been to have made that decision, all because they wanted their kids to do better than they did; to never have to work in the fields, and to get a good education, to have a different life, a better and easier life than they'd ever known.

Before we left that day, Mrs. Green told us she did go to college, and that she'd just recently retired from a long career working for the federal government in Washington, D.C. And Mr. Narcisse, her brother, served in the Air Force after college, and he was stationed for a time in Bangor, ME, in the late 1960s—he thought he might have been the only black person in the whole state at that time. These many years later, it's clear that she and her brothers did do well for themselves, and for each of their families, too.

I am humbled & moved by having heard a story about that kind of love; a love that willingly endures such sacrifice; a love that means giving up, at least in some measure, some of one's own needs and desires, that another person might make out better in life; that another person might know opportunities once denied to some; that that person might be able to see and live in the world from a different, more hope-filled perspective, even if that did mean having to live with a broken heart, for a good long while.

There is something about motherhood, and mothering in general, that often requires or demands or insists on a willingness and capacity within us, to live with, and through such periods of heart-break; periods of caring so much about someone else that it's worth it; that whatever has to be endured, will be, so long as it means that the one, or ones we love, are going to be okay, a hope that we know we need to hang onto even though, of course, that isn't always true.

I first heard Billy Collins' poem *The Lanyard*, this past week at my monthly UU Minister's Meeting. Mark Worth, who served this congregation as minister for 15 or 16 years, led worship for us at that gathering, and he read it, choking back tears at certain lines. I was sitting in the circle of 6 or 7 of us, right next to him, at one point howling with laughter, and tears streaming down my cheeks.

In classic Billy Collins' form, I'd been reminded again of the innocence or naiveté of some childhoods; of what some are inclined to call the sheer ignorance we live with most days, about what so many of our mothers do for us; so often without thanks, or recognition, or our own “getting it,” until we're much older.

*Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied.
Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.*

I never actually made a lanyard at camp, but I'd guess some of you here, did? I did weave other things together and give them as gifts to my mother, too. Only as I get older do I see, as Collins put it, the archaic truth, that most of us can never repay our mothers nearly enough, or as much as we want to. And still, we can and we do repay them, and all the others in our lives who nurtured us, and cheered us on, in part by caring & loving other people enough to make hard, seemingly impossible decisions; to let go, even if we don't want to, and to hold open the doors we can, to encourage others to set out—whole people, flawed & imperfect like everyone else, of course, but people capable, too, we hope, of caring & loving others; of nurturing their own, and welcoming others in; to be stretched—mind & heart—generous and concerned.

In *this* religious community, we are called to the sacred work of mothering; mothering that teaches us, that real love is part and parcel of a mysterious life force which strengthens us to wrestle with challenges, to know wholeness in ourselves and others, to find the courage within to be dedicated, in word and deed, to that which we know in our bones is right-living and right-loving.

A woman in New Orleans cares about her neighbors, and in turn, they see her and feel that. She opens her home and her heart to welcome them in, and they know they are related.

A mother & father make the impossible decision to send their kids to other family, knowing, or at least hoping, they will have a better, easier life than they did.

Our President, after 3½ plus years in office, finally makes public his support of gay marriage, a risky action in this election year, but the right thing to do, nevertheless.

On this Mother's Day Sunday, we remember, we are called to do these things—to find ways to nurture

and care for others, mindful always to turn that same quality & depth of care and dedication outward.

As we prayed earlier together, let us pledge ourselves anew, to live lives of deeper love and wider service. To go out in the world, with hearts grateful and overflowing, that the prayers of our hearts for peace & well-being, might also become the work and service of our hands.

Happy & hope-filled Mother's Day and Mothering to all.

Amen and blessed be.