

Our Better Halves

Greg Gapsis
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Sermon

A funny thing happened on the way to this Sunday. And it partly explains why you do not have an expert but a mere student before you to present this service on Mothers Day. You see, while I was out of the room (out of state in fact on a college visit with my daughter) I GOT VOLUNTEERED for duty this week end by my fun loving peers on First U's Worship Ministry team.

When I got back, they assured me I could get any speaker available, had wide latitude in planning and organization, even suggested I might finesse getting another ministry team to handle today. But when I looked at the calendar, I noticed it was Mother's Day and, as a good son well-brought up by a stupendous mother, realized I had to bow to the event and try and make a good job of it.

Qualifications?

I've know a lot of mothers, I had a mother, I have a mother-in law, I had the good luck to be a Mr. Mom for several years when my children were infants (so I know what hard work and joy it is). Around this church I volunteer and work with many impressive and conscientious women who also are mothers, my life partner, Kathleen, I know and respect as an exceptional mother, together we have two daughters who may very well become mothers someday—hell, even some people have called me a mother, though they seemed to have had an odd glint in their eye when they said it.

For those who believe that a leopard cannot change its spots, yes, I admit I was raised in a patriarchal and sexist church, the Roman Church but have been trying to grow beyond it's narrow confines long before I had the good fortune to discover a Unitarian-Universalist congregation thirty years ago. I was an active CUUPS earth spiritualist in a get down city of New Orleans and took the UU's course in feminist theology, "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven", back in 1986.

So bear with me a while.

Besides, It's Mother's Day and if nothing else, part of the celebration includes your forbearance while men and children give you a day off, breakfast in bed or a nice brunch and something special that says "love". So sit back and relax. I'm going to take this on.

When I started brainstorming this little talk, obvious metaphors which came up and gave me pleasure were mother earth, the mother lode, a mother's love.

We know about mothers because they are who birth us into this incredible world, provide us with nurture and protection, love and succor, who probably imprint us with our

first set of values and ideas of society and fair play, and comfort us when some of those ideas might not have worked out so well on the school playground.

When our mothers die, it soon dawns on us what selfless giving, what sacrifice, what attention to detail and generous love were part of our life and who provided it while we in guileless innocence thought of tooth fairies and guardian angels.

I was also amused by the locutions, “the distaff side”, referring to the spindle on which wool or flax was wound before spinning, and how it has become an adjective representing the mother’s or wife’s perspective.

But what really seemed to hit the mark was the often joking query, “how’s your better half?”, referring to any partner in a relation.

And I became more aware of how necessary and important a skill it is for each of us to become a mother to ourselves--meaning able to both inspire and care take our selves in moments of stress, challenge or aloneness.

I recognize and admit Everything valuable I have learned, has been a gift I gathered from another, but perhaps the most important lessons I have learned from mothers have been those of:

- having patience,
- being not too quick to interfere
- appreciating the bounty and wonder of creation,
- recognizing all your relations are collaborations
- that value is not something you can always barter for in a marketplace but something you have to grasp and instill and make a hallmark of in your life, often without thanks or payment; and
- Making small, gradual, contributions of what you care about and believe in is a smart strategy because they will add up and make a difference

Along with Thomas Jefferson, I’ve got a lot of unresolved issues with a guy named Saul of Tarsus who hounded early followers of Jesus of Nazareth until, supposedly, he got hit by a lightning bolt and knocked off his horse on the way to Damascus. They started calling him Paul, and several of his post conversion letters to the Jesus followers are now part of the New Testament.

We’re familiar with how he helped change the spiritual insight and wisdom of a Jewish mystic and teacher into a concept system that would be accepted by the Hellenistic culture of the Roman empire—and how he terribly mangled what Jesus was trying to tell us in the process.

For example, It really chaffs my bottom to keep hearing fundamentalist Christians using words from Paul’s letter to the Romans--as if they were from Jesus himself--as an excuse to discriminate against and persecute gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people.

But when I read the lines from his letter to the Corinthians, I know that Saul had a mother and that he knew very well who and what and how she was—

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

I Corinthians 13

Those are words worth dwelling on.

They hit the chord of what we celebrate this day—all of the often unrecognized giving that we have experienced because of our mothers, and the challenge we face to emulate them and put into our lives the best of their example...

Patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

I am now wholly convinced of these few truisms, and let me quickly tell you why:

I have been in a more than twenty-year relationship with my life partner, Kathleen. We both are educated, literate, and able to attend to details. But I am just finding out something that I suspect she has known a much longer time.

The most important things that we share as friends, committed partners and lovers, despite our skills, we are still only able to communicate in a language like that of whales--strange calls, clicks and singing tones that reach across long distances and through often unclear depths.

Yes we speak over meals, keep a calendar on the refrigerator, try to balance our joys and concerns, are supremely capable of great rhetoric (which unfortunately comes out more over disagreements than items of consensus) but the heart of the life we share is something deeper and less susceptible of measurement.

Life and a good relationship are not like a novel or a thesis with clearly defined beginnings, middles and ends.

They are an acknowledgement of the immensity we inhabit, the special moment this short time is that we share, the freedom each has, and the awareness that no relationship can touch us on every boundary and be all and everything.

So we:

- share patience,
- are not too quick to interfere
- appreciate the bounty and wonder of creation,
- recognize our relation is a collaboration

But the Mother's Day, we now know, if you look it up, is an American invention.

The ancient Greeks who gave us so much, also recognized the deep magic and inspiration of mothers and kept a festival to Cybele (si-beh-li), the deified mountain mother from Anatolia to the north which joined the Greek earth mother Gaia as one of the mothers of Greek gods.

The ancient Romans, of course subsumed this cultural river and and it found expression in Mater Magna, the great mother, celebrated in the holiday of Matronalia, a day on which mothers were usually given gifts.

One of the first references you find is a news item in The New York Times on June 3, 1874, noting its inauguration, two years earlier in 1872, by Julia Ward Howe, and it's celebration the prior evening with a women's peace meeting.

The Mother's for Peace movement, born of the horror of the Civil War's killing and the Franco-Prussian war had an impact such that no less an august body than the United States Congress resolved only 36 years later, to have it observed as a holiday on the second Sunday of May.

it used to be a tradition on Mother's Day one hundred years ago, that if one's mother was alive you would wear a red carnation and a white one if she was dead.

Somewhere in the mix the florist associations figured they would have a good deal going if they tapped into this flower idea and we're all familiar with the result today—flowers are available for every awkward husband or child to present as a gesture of their appreciation and love.

Of course, if you finger through the advertising supplements during the last week, you quickly notice that perfume companies, jewelers, chocolate makers, and manufacturers of women's underwear are also trying to horn in on the act and become the go-to means of honoring

What's obvious, especially as we live in America's Imperial Age, is how far we've gotten away from Julia Ward Howe's original concept.

Mother's Day Proclamation:

She was a prominent abolitionist, suffragette, poet, and perhaps best known for composing the words to The Battle Hymn of the Republic, which became a Union anthem during the civil War.

Arise, then, women of this day!
Arise all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of fears!
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 of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.
From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with out own. It says, "Disarm, Disarm!"
The sword 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 of 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.”
--Julia Ward Howe

Ms. Howe called for an International Congress of Mothers that would mediate disputes without the bloody destruction that was all too typical of male heads of state.

The idea resonates deeply and still has merit. We have seen compelling examples from the mothers and wives of “the disappeared” under Pinochet in Chile; the victims of violence in Northern Ireland; and jailed political prisoners in Cuba, to mention only a few.

Take it to heart. Take it to heart.

Let us honor that which is best in us, which has been the best example to us, which is able to turn rationality on its head and both capture and correct us with love, that ever-patient, ever-giving spring which rises up in our hearts.

Attend to the details but also care about what matters most—the joy and nurture of life itself.

To all mothers with us today, humbled by your example, as we go forth let us be informed and heartened by Henry Meserve’s prayer which echos Julia Ward Howe’s exhortation:

From arrogance, pompousness, and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us.
For allowing ourselves to ridicule the faith of others, may we be forgiven.
From making war and calling it peace, special privilege and calling it justice, indifference and calling it tolerance, pollution and calling it progress, may we be cured.
From telling ourselves and others that evil is inevitable while good is impossible, may we stand corrected.
God of our mixed up, tragic, aspiring, doubting, and insurgent lives, help us to be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be.
Amen.