

M O T H E R T A L K

A Service/Sermon by Barbara W. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church — October 8, 2006

CALL TO WORSHIP [BWtH]:

The act of greeting another is a profoundly religious one. I love that line from the song “What a Wonderful World” where Louis Armstrong’s sings:

I see friends shakin’ hands, sayin’ “How do you do?” They're really saying “I love you.”

(Song by George Weiss / Bob Thiele)

In our busy world we often neglect the opportunity to really notice the people with whom we engage. Even when I walk around friendly Greenbelt, where I live, I rarely catch someone’s eye to say hello.

But learning to acknowledge the preciousness, one might even say the holiness of our neighbors is a deeply spiritual process. Taking time to say “Namaste,” as many of us did on Friday night during our church retreat (with that theme), can lead to powerful connections. For Namaste means “I greet the holy one in you even as I acknowledge the same spirit in myself.”

This morning, let us worship with that spirit in mind. We are all one. Everyone, from our mothers and fathers to the stranger in a far away country who speaks a language unknown to us, is connected. And when we remember this, we stand a chance of trusting that all of us are somebody – and this song from our new hymnal supplement speaks to this. Hymn #1007: *There’s a River Flowing in My Soul...*

FLAMING CHALICE DEDICATION [by Bruce Baker, workshop associate]:

“Tell me whom you love and I will tell you who you are.” These words from the French author Arsene Houssaye, point to how important relationships are in defining who we are. It seems to me that no relationship has more impact on individual’s sense of self than that of the parent and child.

All of us who had dutiful parents owe a great debt for the many acts of love and caring that we have received from them. But parents are human, and even the children of good parents know their parents weaknesses.

My father is a good man. He is kind, patient, and loyal. But I also see him as conservative and dogmatic. My father is an economist and in my youth he gave me lessons on the virtues of free

markets and the evils of government regulation. Although I enjoyed these lessons, I grew to question and challenge them. Ultimately I rejected conservative neo-classical economics and other “dogmas” to which my father was loyal. Instead I embraced principles of open inquiry and argument that led me to challenge all prepackaged beliefs. I resolved not to embrace any idea that could not stand the test of a good argument.

As the years passed I had children of my own. I raised them in the light of open inquiry and argument with no dogmas to bind them.

I think it must have hurt my father to see me reject his political and intellectual loyalties. But as he got older he didn't seem to mind, so much. I like to think that as he matured he arrived at some level of acceptance and appreciation of my arguments. But there may have been another reason, one identified by Doug Larson when he said, “Few things are more satisfying than seeing your own children have teenagers of their own.”

For even as I have come into my own. My teenage son and daughter seem to have their own ideas. It seems to them that the whole idea of learning by argument goes nowhere. My daughter is into creative experiential learning, and my son enjoys the rigors of scientific and technical knowledge. Neither of them have much use, and in fact, a disdain for, argument. I found that my argumentativeness was actually harming my relationships with them.

This has been a hard lesson for me to learn. It isn't just that I like a good argument. But it is that there is more of my father in me than I had realized. Things I had disliked about my father were still within me, much more than I had realized. My dogma was running over my karma. This helps me to appreciate what Evelyn Waugh said, “Don't hold your parents up to contempt. After all, you are their son [or daughter], and it is just possible that you may take after them.”

This realization also leads me to embrace the third principle of Unitarian Universalism, which is acceptance of one another and encouragement to growth. With experience, I find myself to be more forgiving and accepting of my father, and more appreciative of my children for the “growth” opportunities they offer me.

I believe acceptance is essential to healing, growth, and a sense of personal worth. As Virginia Satir says, “Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible—the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family.”

I dedicate the lighting of this chalice to acceptance of our parents, acceptance of our children, and the creation of nurturing families.

CHORAL ANTHEM

Ah from a little child

from *Proud Music of the Storm*

Words: Walt Whitman; Music: Carlyle Sharpe

Ah from a little child,
Thou knowest soul how to me all sounds became music,
My mother's voice in lullaby or hymn,
(The voice, O tender voices, memory's loving voices,
Last miracle of all, O dearest mother's, sister's voices;)
The rain, the growing corn, the breeze among the long-leav'd corn,
The measur'd sea-surf beating on the sand,
The twittering bird, the hawk's sharp scream,
The wild-fowl's notes at night as flying low migrating north or south,
The psalm in the country church or mid the clustering trees, the open air camp meeting,
The fiddler in the tavern, the glee, the long-strung sailor-song,
The lowing cattle, bleating sheep, the crowing cock at dawn.
All songs of current lands come sounding round me...

SERMON: *Mothertalk*

Barbara ten Hove [10/8/06]

Walt Whitman's words, set to Carlyle Sharp's gorgeous tune, sing of the music found in everyday sounds—crowing roosters, rain and the breeze in the corn. But it is the sound of his mother's voice that becomes a hymn. "Memory's loving voices" turn his mother's speech to music.

Poets have wonderful ways of speaking to the heart. So we continue our service with another poet's words. Kathleen will be the voice of many women today. She begins with a poem titled *Mothers* by Nikki Giovanni.

*the last time I was home
to see my mother we kissed
exchanged pleasantries
and unpleasantries pulled a warm
comforting silence around
us and read separate books*

i remember the first time

*i consciously saw her
we were living in a three room
apartment on burns avenue*

*mommy always sat in the dark
i don't know how I knew that but she did*

*that night I stumbled into the kitchen
maybe because I've always been a night person
or perhaps because I had wet
the bed
she was sitting on a chair
the room was bathed in moonlight diffused through
those thousands of panes landlords who rented
to people with children were prone to put in windows*

*she may have been smoking but maybe not
her hair was three-quarters her height
which made me a strong believer in the samson myth
and very black*

*i'm sure I just hung there by the door
i remember thinking: what a beautiful lady*

*she was very deliberately waiting
perhaps for my father to come home
from his night job or maybe for a dream
that had promised to come by
"come here" she said "I'll teach you
a poem: i see the moon
the moon sees me
god bless the moon
and god bless me"*

*i taught it to my son
who recited it for her
just to say we must learn
to bear the pleasures
as we have borne the pains*

We must learn to bear the pleasures as we have born the pains. Nikki Giovanni's poem shows, in a few brief and evocative words, the powerful complexity of the mother/daughter relationship. A relationship shaped by memory of childhood experiences and complicated by growth and change. In these few lines an old story emerges: life flows from mother to daughter then on to the next generation. We cannot help but carry our mothers with us wherever we go.

I am not a mother. I share that with a number of you in this room, I am sure. But I am a daughter and a sister. I have danced the mother daughter dance and know its steps well. As many of you know, I am the youngest of four daughters. Interestingly, at least to me, I am the only one of my sisters that my mother really hoped would be a girl. My oldest sister was expected to be a boy. The second one to arrive was not the hoped for boy (one of each!), but another girl. The third came over five years later—of course this one would add the boy to the family! But by the time I came along my mother, at least, hoped for another girl. She thought a brother would not want three older sisters! And girl I was.

Today, my mother gives thanks for all her daughters and wouldn't trade us in for a dozen sons. My father grew accustomed to his feminine household and used to joke, "It's a woman's world and I've done my best to keep it that way!" I grew up in a world full of women and my life shaped itself around this reality.

I also grew up in a world where women were allowed to find their place in new ways. My mother had to quit her job as a teacher when she got pregnant in 1950 because as a mother she was expected to stay at home. By the time I came around, in 1960, the culture was slowly shifting and my mother worked full-time during much of my childhood. Mom and I like to say we became feminists together in the 1970s—I as a young teenager, she as a woman in her forties.

Like all women everywhere, my mother shaped me just as she was shaped by her mother. Mothers with daughters give birth to creatures so like them that it is sometimes hard to know where one begins and the other ends. And this closeness brings both pleasure and pain.

This morning I have been asked, as part of the annual "buy a sermon at the church auction" to reflect on a book that Carol Carter Walker invited me to read. It's called, *You're Wearing That?* by the author and linguist Deborah Tannen. You may recall Tannen from her more famous work, *You Just Don't Understand*, about women and men in conversation. The book I studied looks at how mothers and daughters communicate, particularly once the daughters are grown.

I've wrestled a lot over the past few weeks about what I would say to you this morning. Today is not Mother's Day, an obvious Sunday to talk about mothers and daughters. And as interesting

as Deborah Tannen's book was for me (and for Carol as well) I was not immediately clear about what it had to say to us today, as a part of a service of worship. What, I asked myself, is religious about this book?

The answer was slow in coming but it gradually emerged. Our relationship with our mother is one of the most important cauldrons in which we learn how to be human. And it is through our human experience that we learn what it means to be religious. As Tannen writes,

The contradictory aspects of human relationships—the ways they are enriching and the ways they are limiting, the struggle to maintain connection without giving up control or losing yourself—are amplified in the mother-daughter relationship, the fundamental constellation that sets the stage for all those that come after [YWT, p. 191].

Carol asked me to talk about this perhaps because she has a daughter who has a daughter and Carol, like many of us, struggles in these significant relationships. But before I go on to this topic, I must acknowledge the presence of men among us. I invite the men around me not to close your ears and eyes to today's service. Just as the women here have listened when Jaco has spoken to men's issues from this pulpit, I invite you to listen to me speak about women.

I also know that our culture has narrowly limited our understanding of gender to two—men and women. In other cultures gender is more fluid and I am working to understand the liquid nature of gender boundaries. Our topic this morning may seem to be primarily about mothers and daughters but it is my hope that all of us, whatever our understanding of gender, can find our way into this theme.

So let's begin at the beginning. Birth. Birth is not the sole criteria for motherhood. People become mothers in a number of ways. But the act of mothering, however one enters into it, changes one forever.

Raising children is absolutely primal. Humans have been giving birth and raising young since before we were human. When human babies are born they are extremely needy. I recently watched a show on PBS about animals and how so many of them are born almost fully-grown. A wildebeest has to be able to run faster than a hyena within minutes of its birth. Human babies, on the other hand, take years to fully develop, years when someone needs to take care of them. Most of the time, that someone is mother.

But raising children is very hard—on mothers and fathers and their children. Mothers, because they are the ones who have the most responsibility for childbearing and childrearing, often carry the brunt of it. And how a mother was mothered will likely show up in how she raises her own

children. This next poem, by Gail Todd, written to her four-year-old daughter, speaks of the deep connections that emerge even in the midst of struggle.

*I lost my temper twice today,
Once when you ordered me around like a maid,
And once when you picked all the unripe plums from our tree.
You said I yelled so much it made you sleepy,
Popped in your thumb and drifted away.
Then, imagining you sad, I felt guilty.
You, my firstborn child, my beautiful girl.
Remember when your ear hurt and we rocked all night.
How many hours, awake, I stared in your face
Seeing prongs that reach
Deep in your childhood, deep in mine.*

Mothers are often ambivalent about mothering for it is a difficult job. Children will order their mothers around and destroy things a mother loves. Daughters also bring much joy to their mothers. But it is a rare mother who does not feel the presence of her own mother and her own childhood, in her children. And I have never met a mother who does not acknowledge the powerful pull of their mother on their understanding of mothering. Even those who grew up without mothers will often talk about how their lack of a mother shaped them as much as those of us with mothers were shaped by ours. But this close bond between mothers and daughters is fraught with challenges.

When children are small, parents are like gods, with enormous power over their little ones' lives. As children grow, the role of parents changes with them. Most parents understand that letting go is part of the process of parenting. But for some mothers this can be very hard, particularly when it comes to their daughters. Daughters come into this world bearing the mark of sameness with their mothers. This can lead to a deep bond that can be profoundly satisfying to both. But women can also resent this sameness. Deborah Tannen writes,

Women I talked to mentioned that they were either like or unlike their daughters or their mothers to explain either harmony or discord. One woman, in telling me why she and her daughter got along well, said, "Maybe it's because she is like me, I've been told we walk alike and sound the same on the telephone. We even wear the same size clothes." But another woman said, in explaining why she and her daughter did not get along, "My daughter and I often lock horns because she's like me—complicated" [YWT].

We don't know how we will react to being alike or different from our mothers. But it is certain that daughters are deeply impacted by how their mothers perceive this sameness and its twin,

difference. I know a slender mother who just can't understand her daughter's tendency to gain weight. She does not mean to criticize but it strikes her as so crazy that her daughter can't be just like her. Another mother watches her daughter discipline her children in the firm way she did and wishes she wouldn't.

Once daughters grow up, this strange and wonderful bond we share with our mothers can be both blessing and curse. Many mothers, it seems, have a hard time allowing their girl children to become adults. They can't seem to help treating their girls as if they were forever young.

Deborah Tannen reflects on this caretaking role in her book. She tells a lot of stories of women whose mothers drive them crazy with constant advice. The book's title—*You're wearing that!?*—is based on Tannen's own experience with her mother's constant criticism of her clothes, even after Deborah is grown up and able to make her own decisions. Many women experience this from their mothers. It's as if mothers can never stop mothering even after their daughters are grown.

My mother tells the story of staying up late one night with her sister at my grandmother's house. Mom and my aunt Peggy were both in their forties, my grandmother nearing 80. Around midnight my grandmother comes out onto the porch and, wagging her finger at her two daughters exclaims, "Aren't you ever going to bed!?" My mom said she and her sister guiltily looked at their mother—and then they all burst out laughing at the absurdity of it all. Even though her daughters had already put their own children to bed, my grandma couldn't stop mothering.

It is this constant reality of mothers continuing to mother long past adulthood that is more common for daughters than for sons. Mothers of daughters often do have a hard time letting their daughters grow up, even as they blithely allow their sons the freedom to do so. Perhaps this is because sons are so different from their mothers, or perhaps because, culturally, women have traditionally been held closer to home than men. This can have a significant impact on a woman who longs for independence. I expect we can all tell stories of daughters who have fought their mothers long and hard for freedom. And it is true that far too often mothers do have a double standard when it comes to girls.

Sadly, mothers can carry this double standard to cruel heights. I feel quite lucky that my mother was generally healthy and happy during my primary growing up years. But it is important to acknowledge that for some, the mothering they received was more harmful than loving. Because mother plays such a large and primary role in most children's upbringing, if mother is cruel, real harm can be done. While it is impossible to generalize, I believe many mothers are destructive towards their daughters because their culture teaches them to be so.

In some cultures, the birth of a girl is cause for mourning. This disturbs me deeply. And it breaks my heart even more to know how many mothers begin the keening cry when a girl child first appears. It seems a strange thing to me that a mother would reject her daughter but when women are raised to believe they are inferior to men it is far too common for mothers to share this sense of inferiority with their daughters. A legacy of self-hatred can be passed from mother to daughter across generations. And such self-hatred can be turned into violence between mothers and daughters.

Deborah Tannen learned about this from radio personality Diane Rehm's experience.

“Rehm was beaten with ‘a belt, a metal pancake turner, a large wooden spoon or a hard-soled shoe,’ all weapons readily available in the home. Rehm kept these beatings secret because she felt she ‘deserved to be treated badly because [she’d] disappointed her parents.’ After many years of therapy Rehm learned to turn off the angry mother’s voice in her mind telling her she was a failure. But because it was her mother’s voice, it hurt at a profound level” [YWT, pp.185-86].

Stories such as these remind me that the stereotypes of women as nurturing angels who would make the world a better place if only we were in charge is not really true. Women can be terribly cruel, particularly to each other. That said, I can't help but think some of this is placed on us by religions and cultures that have made women into evil creatures.

I know enough about all three “Abrahamic religions” (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) to know that at their heart they are not anti-woman. But in practice, all three are, in far too many ways. In the name of religion women are forced to be ashamed of and hide their bodies, marry against their will, submit to their husbands and teach their children, both boys and girls, that men are superior while women are inferior. This impacts everyone in negative ways.

It is why so many in our faith communities are turning to other ways of viewing the sacred. One of the leaders in this has been the writer and modern pagan, Starhawk. Starhawk invites women and men to move beyond a masculine image of God to one that includes the feminine—the Goddess. These are her words:

*The importance of the Goddess symbol for women cannot be overstressed. The image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy, our aggression as healthy, our anger as purifying, and our power to nurture and create, but also to limit and destroy when necessary, as the very force that sustains all life. Through the Goddess, we can discover our strength, enlighten our minds, own our bodies and celebrate our emotions. We can move beyond narrow, constricting roles and become whole [in *Cries of the Spirit*, Marilyn Sewell, ed].*

The narrow constricting gender roles that are placed on all of us in this culture can harm everyone. Learning to become whole starts with acceptance of ourselves and those around us. Mothering that takes into account the complex ways humans relate to each other can go a long way toward creating stronger people of all genders.

Learning to become whole starts, in my opinion, with balance. One of the hardest challenges for mothers, I have been told, is finding a balance between protecting their children and teaching them to be adults in a dangerous world. As children age the balance shifts. Hopefully, most mothers are able to let go of their children gracefully but no one says it is easy. And for mothers of grown daughters, it can be highly tempting to keep mothering in ways that don't work as well for adults as they might for kids.

Deborah Tannen sees this in her research but she also challenges mothers and daughters to have compassion for each other as they navigate the path into adulthood. Mothers must learn to let their daughters grow up. But daughters have a task, too. We can allow our mothers to grow in new ways as well. And we can have compassion for the challenges women face as they age. It can be devastating for daughters (and sons, too) when they have to take care of their mothers instead of the other way around. But it can also be powerfully meaningful. Our next poem, from Siv Cedaring Fox, addresses this.

*Remember when I draped
the ruffled cotton cape
around your shoulders,
turned off the lights
and stood behind your chair,
brushing, brushing your hair.*

*The friction of the brush
in the dry air
of that small inland town
created stars that flew
as if God himself was there
in the small space
between my hand and your hair.*

*Now we live on separate coasts
of a foreign country.
A continent stretches between us.
You write of your illness,
your fear of blindness.
You say you wake afraid
to open your eyes.*

*Mother, if some morning
you open your eyes to see
daylight as a dark room around you,
I will drape a ruffled cotton cape
around your shoulders
and stand behind your chair,
brushing the stars out of your hair.*

This poem moves me because it, like the Nikki Giovanni poem that began this sermon, shows the deep ties that move between mother and daughter over time. Both poems tell stories from childhood that seared into a daughter the memory of a mother who loved her. Both speak of the

complex challenges that emerge with aging. And both give voice to powerful ties that bind mothers to daughters across time.

We do learn to be human from those who nurture us into adulthood. Often that person is our mother. Our mothers may challenge us, coddle us, care for us, even be cruel to us—all that is true. But from these earliest experiences we discover things about ourselves—our strength, our compassion, our frailties and our gifts. And if we work to find the balance, we may truly become whole. And that, dear ones, is an extremely religious task.

CLOSING WORDS [for four voices]

There is a river of peace flowing in my soul
There is a river of love flowing in my heart
There is a river of joy flowing in my mind
Telling us we are whole

We are mothers.
We are daughters.
We are sons.
We are one.

I honor the God within you.
I honor the Goddess within you.
I honor the Spirit of Life within you.
We honor the holy in all.

Namaste.
Namaste.
Namaste.
Namaste.