

Mother's Day

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I had a hard time birthing this sermon.

I wrote a sermon about those extraordinary women of the *Middle Ages* who broke open new paths for women in the world, but it was too long for this service. There were too many important things to say and fit them into this day of celebration. We'll do it another time.

Then I was writing and organizing some thoughts about Julia Ward Howe, the Unitarian woman who actually began the celebration of *Mother's Day* by organizing *Mothers for Peace* during the build-up of the Franco-Prussian war, but when I mentioned it to Susan Walker-O'Brien, she told me that you had that sermon about her last year.

Oh my!

Meanwhile, I have been so excited about our new members and investing time in trying to meet with everyone that my writing has been on the back burner. This has been a season of joy in the Fellowship. So much is going well.

Monday night I dreamed that I came to the service and put on my robes and remembered *then* that I forgot to prepare anything for the service. I suppose that fits into the category of anxiety dreams.

And I do want to say something about mothers.

For most of us this is a day of honoring and remembering and celebrating. For each of us, it is being reminded of one of the two most critical relationships of our lives. Even if we never even knew our mother, our story about who she was has formed us. And for adopted kids like me, both mothers play huge and dramatic roles in our lives.

Hallmark only scratches the surface of our emotions.

We have feelings that range from great love to distrust and fear. Even in healthy families, learning to connect and then learning to separate are the great tasks of growing up and the work is plenty hard. My hope is that ultimately, at the end of our days, what remains, no matter how our mothers welcomed us into the world or failed to, finally, we are left with gratitude.

We owe to our mothers appreciation for having life at all.

As we wrestle with our own understanding of what it is to be human and alive, may we come to see one thing as inevitably true. They gave us the best that they had to give. Without exception. Our mothers each gave us the best that they could.

Think about whatever challenges you have with your mom through that lens, and you will surely touch gratitude.

Hallmark, and the general culture, idealize the idea of Mother. And push us to deny all of the shadows and ambiguities of our history. It takes a whole lot of growing up to begin to see our mother as an individual with the same needs and wants and glories and flaws as the rest of us. In fact, when we first glimpse our parents as other people with all the same kind of stuff to deal with as we ourselves, when we come to see them as humans in process, we are suddenly, from that moment, free from childhood. Free to love our parents in a less idealized and more genuine way and free to be in charge of our own lives.

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On the other hand, we are never completely free from our internalized mother's influence. My mom died in 1976. Hardly a day goes by that I don't have some conversation with her. I

ask her to notice that I am using her favorite bowl. I tell her that I see I did something backwards and upside down, and yes, if I had done it the way she told me to, it would have gone better. I still argue my decisions for her benefit.

I was divorced about twenty years ago. When my ex-husband married a woman my kids were crazy about, I had more than one moment of feeling afraid and displaced. One of my friends told me to buck up. "Honey," she said, "it is your voice they will hear in their heads for the rest of their lives." It's true of course.

I hope that they hear on that internal tape that loops forever how much they are loved. What treasures they are. How I understand that all of this life is challenging and I don't even want them to be flawless. If I had to choose for them "perfection" or "joyfulness," I would absolutely choose for them joy.

Childhood is neither all innocent nor is adulthood about arriving at maturity. Integrating all of our colors and textures into a whole takes at least a lifetime. How hard we all try. How often we miss the mark. How easy it can be to feel tenderness when we notice someone else is really making an effort. Or, perhaps we soften when we notice how fragile they have become . . . until the next time some annoyance wells up, which can be in the very next moment.

Let me share a few non-Hallmark quotes I found for this day:

"At some point, you pardon the people in your family for being stuck together in all their weirdness, and when you do that, you can learn to pardon anyone. Even yourself, eventually."

—Annie Lamott

"Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing." —Toni Morrison

"There was never a child so lovely but his mother was glad to get him to sleep." —Ralph Waldo Emerson

"An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy." —Spanish proverb

"One of the very few reasons I had any respect for my mother when I was thirteen was because she would reach into the sink with her bare hands - *bare hands* - and pick up that lethal gunk and drop it into the garbage. To top that, I saw her reach into the wet garbage bag and fish around in there looking for a lost teaspoon. *Bare hands* - a kind of mad courage."
—Robert Fulghum

"With my poems, I finally won even my mother. The longest wooing of my life." —Marge Piercy

"I love my daughter. She and I shared my body. There is a part of her mind that is a part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since." —Amy Tan

"Being asked to decide between your passion for work and your passion for children was like being asked by your doctor whether you preferred him to remove your brain or your heart."
—Mary Kay Blakely

"If a mother respects both herself and her child from his first day onward, she will never need to teach him respect for others." —Alice Miller

"No matter how old a mother is, she watches her middle-aged children for signs of improvement." —Florida Scott Maxwell

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Even though we probably have card manufacturers to thank for the modern Mother's Day celebration, it is a good thing to have a day of remembering and saying "thank you." It is good to take some time and think about our mothers: remembering them as they were in their best moments; trying, again, to build the kind of connection that we want, and celebrating, truly and honestly, the gifts of our complicated and rich and enduring relationships.

Happy Mother's Day