

***What Would You Have Been?***  
*--a service for Mother's Day Weekend--*  
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines  
Rev. Mark Stringer  
May 9 and 10, 2009

"I thank my parents for somehow raising me to have confidence that is disproportionate to my looks and abilities. Well done. That is what parents should do." –Tina Fey

Our **first reading** is a poem by Wendell Berry entitled "To My Mother"

I was your rebellious son,  
do you remember? Sometimes  
I wonder if you do remember,  
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been  
I wonder sometimes if it did not  
precede my wrong, and I erred,  
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,  
or my bed at night, so that almost  
I should forgive you, who perhaps  
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,  
causing me to smile now, looking back,  
to see how paltry was my worst,  
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,  
is the vision of that Heaven of which  
we have heard, where those who love  
each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,  
the light a music in the air,  
and all is unentangled,  
and all is undismayed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Good Poems*, selected and introduced by Garrison Keillor (New York: Penguin, 2002), pp. 371-72

Our **second reading** is an excerpt from a sermon by UU minister Lynn Ungar:

Having a child...is a great deal like having Goldilocks break into your home, only without the option of scaring her off at the end of the story. This small, imperious being moves in and takes up residence, and there is no way that the parental role will ever be just right. Only the baby gets to be perfect. In any given situation your response as a parent will be too hard or too soft, too warm or too cold. ... There is, as far as I can tell, no way to do it right, nor any way to tell whether at any given moment you have made the right choice. ... There are no perfect parents, no single right way. But there is that ongoing miracle—whether through birth or adoption, as mothers or fathers—people do choose, all the time, to invite Goldilocks into the house. We make up the bed and fix the chair and adjust the porridge until it is just right. We say to this mysterious stranger, this person who is, at essence, always unknown to us, “My house is your house. My heart is your heart. For now and for always.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Sermon**

When you lead religious services for a living, when you are expected to find words from week to week to celebrate and savor this life we share in all its horrible glory and exquisite pain, it doesn't take long to realize the assignment is nearly impossible. No matter how devoutly you approach this work, no matter how dedicated you are to leaving space for everyone, to acknowledging the diversity of experience present, to honoring the individual journeys that have carried the congregation to the service any given week, you will inevitably miss the mark, as having to rely in large part on your own limited perspectives will lead you to breeze past the hard truths of someone's life story, or overplay the joys of another's.

When you first make this discovery, it can be devastating. You have chosen this path of ministry (or perhaps it has chosen you) because of your love...or at least your desire to love. You want your life's work to have meaning, to be useful, to lead to growth and health and, well...love! And then, inevitably it seems, you screw it up. You come across as insensitive to those toward whom you want to be most tender. You appear to insult those you most want to inspire. You seem to disrespect those you most want to embrace. And, the most

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<sup>2</sup> From “The Second Bear: Reflections on Motherhood”, published in *Quest* Vol. LXIV, No. 5, May 2009 (Boston: Church of the Larger Fellowship Unitarian Universalist), pp. 1-2.

devastating part of all, you must acknowledge that, no matter how carefully you were trying to do otherwise, in your offending moments, you probably were being insensitive, insulting or disrespectful.

It's a lot like being a parent.

Think about it, those of you who have been parents or those of you willing to imagine what it must have been like for your own parents.

You have chosen this path of ministry (or perhaps it has chosen you) because of your love...or at least your desire to love. You want your life's work to have meaning, to be useful, to lead to growth and health and, well...love! And then you screw it up. You come across as insensitive to those toward whom you want to be most tender. You appear to insult those you most want to inspire. You disrespect those you most want to embrace. And, the most devastating part of it all, is when you acknowledge that, no matter how carefully you were trying to do otherwise, you probably were, in your offending moments, being insensitive, insulting or disrespectful.

The opportunities for missing the mark from the pulpit or as a parent are perhaps more abundant during a Mother's Day service than any other service of the year, for no matter who we are or what we have experienced in our lives, each of us is likely to have a visceral reaction to Mother's Day by virtue of our very humanity.

Our relationships with our mothers (and our fathers, for that matter) (known or unknown, alive or dead, biological or adoptive) are as unique as our fingerprints and theirs. In our parental memory banks, each one of us carries a collection of images crafted with brush strokes of every emotional hue imaginable...and then some. And those of us who have parented children, have additional collections of memories, just as complicated in their variety.

So, with all this diversity of experience and desire, there is simply no way for any single person to address or even acknowledge in a service—or in a family—every given need on any given day...especially on Mother's Day.

And yet, I for one, feel like I should. My love asks me to.

Not very wise, is it? To set the bar so high. To expect so much. To want to meet all the needs present in the room, including my own, only to know that I won't...that I can't.

But I try anyway, or feel guilty about not trying. As a minister, and as a parent. And I'm thinking so do many of you, in your ministries as parents. And we definitely can expect that perfection from our own parents, too, now and then, right?

So what to do with all of this heavy-duty expectation, all of this yearning for things to be just right, all of this sorrow when we know they aren't "just right" and probably never will be, or at least, won't be forever?

We forgive.

*We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.*

The other night I was doing the dishes while my 5-year old daughter Leah was watching tv in the next room. For some reason, my attention was drawn to a McDonald's ad I could over-hear. "The most important ingredient in a Happy Meal" the commercial proclaimed, "is you!"

Ugh, I thought to myself. That's really sad. I started thinking about that nasty McDonald's food that Leah and I both have occasionally eaten, and of how little happiness their happy meals have brought. Then, of course, my mind instantly went to the television guilt trip monologue: "Mark, why do you have that television on anyway? Why does Leah need to see that kind of stuff?" You parents know the monologue I'm talking about. I had it happen again yesterday, when Leah, out of the blue, told me with great excitement, "Hey Dad, did you know when we run out of change we can turn in our gold jewelry for cash?"

Ugh.

Anyway, as I stood there at the sink, dismayed by a McDonald's commercial, Leah called out, "Hey Dad. Do you know what the most important ingredient in a Happy Meal is?"

"No, what?" I called back.

"You" she responded without any inflection.

"What do you think that means?" I asked.

"I think it means McDonalds wants you to eat all of your food."

"Anything else?"

"I think it means McDonalds wants you to buy more happy meals."

Soon I left for a meeting, but this fast-food, koan-like wisdom stayed with me. "What is the most important ingredient in happiness?" and the answer kept coming back, "You."

What is the most important ingredient in a happy Mother's Day?

"You."

The most important ingredient is not what our mothers or our children did or did not do, no matter how long either list might be. It's not in ignoring difficulties we may have had conceiving children of our own or in pushing away the grief that comes as we inhabit the empty spaces of mothers and children who are no longer here to love.

The most important ingredient in a happy Mother's Day, even in less than happy circumstances, is ourselves and our choices to live, even in pain, to love, through our heartbreak and disappointment, and to forgive despite all the reasons not to.

*We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.*

A while back, I caught a portion of an interview with actress Meryl Streep. After she was asked how she got her start, she responded by telling of how her mother had taken her to New York as a youth to see all the Broadway musicals. The interviewer then asked, "Did your mother want you to become an actress." "No," Meryl responded with a laugh. "She would have loved to have to be an actress...." Meryl said. "[in fact] I asked her once," she continued, "'What would you have been if you had not been...you know...*my mother?*' and she said, 'A lounge singer.'"

But Meryl Streep's mother was not a lounge singer. Nor will she ever be one. Just as our parents found themselves traveling different roads as parents than they would have had they not been.

What has been sacrificed along the way? What has been gained? Impossible to know, for sure. Nevertheless, "What would you have

been?" remains a provocative Mother's Day question for all of us.

First, we can ask our parents who they would have been had they not been our parents.

Only one answer is certain: Different people than they were because they were our parents. Different in some ways they would have chosen, and different in some ways they would not have chosen. Definitely different either way. Their sacrifices, therefore, imperfect though they may have been, are worthy of our gratitude.

Second, each of us can ask ourselves who we would have been had our parents not been our parents. The answer is clear. We would have been nothing at all. Difficult not to be grateful for our parents, then, considering the alternative.

Perhaps that's why I believe Mother's Day, even amidst all its inherent complexity, is a holy day, a day of memory, celebration, and thanksgiving for all that was and even all that was not. A day to remind us that not only is gratitude at the heart of all true abundance, but that forgiveness is the discipline that can lead us back to gratitude.

In his recent book *Love & Death*, my colleague Forrest Church offers a poignant reminder to appreciate and celebrate the love that so many of us might too quickly look past in our Goldilocks-style yearning for the "just right" parents, a reminder that is of particular importance to Church as he is in his final days of living with terminal cancer. He writes:

"Since all our love is imperfect, honor...[your parents'] imperfect love. So much of what they felt or feel toward you and about you, you will never know. You will never know this unless and until, perchance, you too feel it in turn, perhaps toward children of your own, surmising then what your parents may have felt. Their amazement at your birth. The way they cradled you, helpless, wholly dependent, in their arms. Their unconditional love, however imperfectly expressed. How they sacrificed for you. You never really knew. You couldn't know. How they suffered when you burned with a fever as a baby. How much your pains in growing hurt them. How they wished they might suffer for you, protect you, make you safe from others and yourself, even from them, from all the inherited and acquired quirks and flaws that they brought to hearth and table. But they couldn't. And they probably knew they couldn't. They knew that

nothing in their power, no amount of caring, even were they to do the impossible and get everything right, could protect you finally, either from life or from death. They also knew or know that you will never ever realize how deeply they loved you, not only because of their own failures as parents or people, but also because children, even grown children, cannot know these things, not really, not fully. Yet when they die, if they let you and you let them, their love, perfected of all blemish and confusion, lives on. It lives on in your heart."<sup>3</sup>

Or put another way, the most important ingredient in a Happy Mother's Day is you.

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<sup>3</sup> Forrest Church, *Love & Death* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), pp. 73-74.