

“The Archetypal Mother and the Human Mother”
Mother’s Day Sunday, May 8, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Mother’s Day Sunday morning.
Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember those we love and who have loved us from the beginning of time.

Here we come to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

We light our chalice this Mothers’ Day
With deep gratitude for those who have given us our very lives,
Who have nurtured and nourished us, cared for and loved us,
Who have passed their light on to us.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: For the holiness of every place where light is found, for the healing of nature and the understanding of fellow humans, for the insights of toil, and for the sanctities of birth and death:

CONGREGATION: For the ennobling graces of life we offer praise.

MINISTER: For this place and hour, where we leave behind old cares and pleasures, and where all things meet and change and are renewed:

CONGREGATION: For temples, tabernacles, sanctuaries, and their celebrations, we give thanks.

MINISTER: For the revival of zest in living, for tides of life about us and within, for present happiness and strong desire, and for the songs of our ascending way:

CONGREGATION: For all that renews and strengthens our spirits we are grateful.

MINISTER: For the bright procession of memory and new images of hope, for our relationships of privilege and duty, for those long gone and for those near whose virtues bless us, for school and church and state, and for all worthful concerns of our days and years:

CONGREGATION: For history past, and for this history in which we live, we give our thanks.

MINISTER: For the urgency in us to do and dare, to alter and effect, and for deep impulses of

heart and hand, to work in the earth and recreate ourselves and our common life after patterns of righteousness beheld in mounts of vision:

CONGREGATION: For the dreams that arise in us, and for ever-renewing purposes and prophecies: our works and our dedications speak our gratitude.

Reading

My reading on this Mother's Day Sunday is a poem by Billy Collins, a recent Poet Laureate of the United States. The poem is titled, "The Lanyard," a lanyard being a braided rope or cord used on a ship for fastenings riggings or worn around the neck by sailors and used for attaching a knife.

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly –
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

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.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift – not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

Meditation

Let us be together in a few moments of silence reflecting upon the gifts from our own mothers.

“THE ARCHETYPAL MOTHER AND THE HUMAN MOTHER”

Introduction

This Sunday I had planned to speak on some of the ideas that have received attention in George Lakoff’s book, Don’t Think of an Elephant!, a New York Times bestseller, and a book on which QUUF member Jim Oakland has recently led a four-week discussion.

George Lakoff, who will be speaking at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in Fort Worth this coming June 26, has identified some of the polarization in our country, the conflict between progressives and conservatives, as being related to different family models: progressives identifying with what he calls a “nurturant parent model,” gender neutral, and conservatives identifying with what he calls a “strict father model,” in which the father is the authority figure and head of the household.

The differing moral visions between progressives and conservatives, says Lakoff, are largely related to and perhaps arise out of these differing family models. And voting in elections is related as much or more to one’s identification with one of these family models as it is to the particular issues. Lakoff contends that one votes one’s identity even more than one’s self-interest.

I say I had planned to speak on this subject, which would relate to my recent sermon series on “How do we live in the midst of the deep polarization in our country?”, but in the end I decided that this is Mother’s Day, and how could I talk about political and social polarization on Mother’s Day?

I could do it, I suppose, because obviously the political and social conditions in which we live deeply affect all mothers, as well as all the offspring of mothers. Indeed, Mother’s Day itself, in its origin, was related to a call to the mothers of the world to arise and not allow their sons to be

trained to injure the sons of other mothers from other countries – this in 1870 by Julia Ward Howe, a Unitarian. In part she said:

Arise then...women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts!
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!
Say firmly: . . .
“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, the 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 voice of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with
Our own. It says: “Disarm! Disarm!”

But, for better or worse, Mother’s Day has become something quite different – personal and family oriented, not socially and politically oriented. I suspect it would spoil many a Mother’s Day celebration were Julia Ward Howe’s original proclamation to be read at the Mother’s Day dinner table – though, in other cases, reading it might enhance a Mother’s Day celebration.

At any rate, let me make the following bridge between Lakoff’s ideas and Julia Ward Howe’s ideas in this way:

Lakoff is talking about the power of images and the power of identifying with images – how these images frame the political and social debates in our country. And he is talking about becoming conscious of our use of images.

And so I also will talk this morning about images and their power, in particular the image of the Great Mother, the Mother archetype, and becoming conscious of this image.

The power of an image

To illustrate the power of images, let me draw from a book published last summer by reporter Bob Woodward of the Washington Post. The book, titled Plan of Attack, was one in which Woodward was given access to President Bush and to those at the highest level of his Administration.

In an interview with President Bush, he asked him whether he had consulted his father, the former President Bush, before leading our country into war with Iraq a second time. The son responded that he did not remember asking his father about this, and then added, “You know he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher father that I appeal to.” He was speaking, of course, about a heavenly Father.

There are many persons who believe that our current President is more cynical than sincere in his religious beliefs. I have been in conversation with some in this congregation who hold that opinion. I, however, am not among those that hold that opinion. I think our president is quite sincere, and that it is this felt connection to his image of a heavenly Father that is a primary

source of strength for him. I could nuance this in many ways, but that would lead me away from my subject, which is about images and their power.

And now to make my point about the power of images: Suppose that instead of seeking the strength and counsel of a heavenly Father, our President had available to him the image and concept of a heavenly or divine Mother. And suppose that Protestant Christianity had as its primary image of God an image of a Divine Mother rather than a Heavenly Father.

It's almost impossible to imagine Protestant Christianity without the father image of God as its primary image. And perhaps we can't say very exactly what Protestant Christianity would look like if the mother image of God were primary. But clearly it would be very different. And so might our current social and political situation be very different, if our President were calling upon and addressing a Divine Mother rather than a Heavenly Father.

The “mother” and “religion”

Thus, when I try to put “mother” and “religion” together, as I do on this Mother's Day Sunday, I think first of all, not of individual mothers, but of images of the Divine Mother, or the Great Mother, or the Archetypal Mother.

And I think of an undergirding, creative, nurturant power present in the universe and which finds expression in the images of the Great Mother or the Divine Mother. From time immemorial this power has been felt and recognized.

For example, in Egyptian iconography there are statues and images in which the Pharaoh sits on his throne ruling the land, ruling the people. But a detail in these statues that you might overlook is that the throne itself on which the Pharaoh sits *is* Isis. The throne itself is Isis, an image of the Great Mother.

And in Chartres, a city just southwest of Paris in France, when you stand before the western front of the great and famous cathedral there, built at a time when cathedrals honoring the Holy Mother were going up all over Europe, you will see over one of the entrances an image of the Christ-child blessing the world as its emperor. However, again, like the Pharaoh sitting on the throne of Isis, the Christ-child is sitting in the lap of the Madonna, who herself comprises the throne, an image that was mostly likely taken over from the earlier image of Isis.

Religion, as I approach it, has largely to do with relating us to the powers that be – those powers that are larger than we are and beyond us; powers that we did not create; powers out of which we have come, of which we are a part and in which we participate; powers which, to some degree, we may direct and control; but powers ultimately that are larger than our personal egos and our individual wills.

These larger powers can be thought of both outside of us and within us. And they can be thought of in a single image – as in a Heavenly Father or Divine Mother, or in multiple images.

Think, for example, of the Greek goddesses, who represent various aspects of the “feminine” power in the world. There is Demeter, the maternal goddess, the mother archetype. But there are also the other goddesses who represent other archetypal feminine powers:

Persephone, the daughter;
Hera, the wife;
Aphrodite, the lover;
Artemis, the sister and competitor;
Athena, the strategist;
and Hestia, the hearthkeeper.

(See Goddesses in Everywoman, Jean Shinoda Bolen, p. 14)

As Jean Shinoda Bolen has written, these are “goddesses in everywoman” – that is to say, universal human potentials or archetypal powers that are available to all women.

I suggest it is helpful to think of these potentials as very real. Also: to make some effort to identify these powers as they make themselves known in our lives. Helpful to develop a conscious relation with these powers. Helpful to determine which potential should be engaged at a given time. And helpful to understand that the images that these potentials give rise to are not to be taken concretely or to be understood literally.

The Great Mother

And now to be specific with regard to the Mother archetype, the image of the Great Mother:

It's helpful, I believe, both as a mother and as an offspring of a mother, to think of yourself in relationship to a larger power than that of a given individual.

Thus, first, as an individual mother – or if not literally a mother but a woman embodying the instincts, the power, and the energy of a mother – to know that you are in relationship to an archetypal power, a power in the universe that you did not create but yet in which you participate.

Individual mothers, I suggest, receive their power as mothers from this larger, universal power. They partake of it; they embody it.

And perhaps as an individual woman there have been times when this power of the Great Mother has overtaken and surprised you – surged within you, shaken you to your very core, filled you to overflowing.

It may be helpful, then, to be aware that it's not just your strength and aptitude alone that is at work as a mother; but rather you are in relationship to the Great Mother, an energy field that was here long before you were and which will be here long after you are gone.

She, the Great Mother, is the creative, abundant, overflowing, life-giving, nurturant, protective, and self-sacrificing energy that has been present in Being from the very beginning, which has made its way through an unbelievable evolutionary process, and which is now here in you as an individual human mother.

And as an individual human mother, then, you are held, carried, and rocked in the lap of Her power. She is the lap, the seat, the throne of the world.

If you can relate to that Great Mother, you will be sustained and nourished as a human mother. She will give you the strength to love, to nurture, to nourish, and to protect.

Thus, you don't so much have to invent yourself as a mother, you simply have to develop and give expression to that which is already on your side and within you and which belongs to you.

Infant and Mother

You may also take comfort from the knowledge that your offspring, too, come into this world prepared to find their mother, who will be for them a representative of the Great Mother.

An infant in the womb is being prepared to meet and greet its Mother. Prior to birth it begins to long for its Mother. And at birth the infant will attach itself with its whole being to an individual human mother who the infant will then identify as the Great Mother, the Divine Mother.

To an infant and a child a mother is much more and much different than an individual human person. To an infant and a child the human mother *is* the Great Mother, the Divine Mother, the connecting link to this archetypal power of which I am speaking.

It's important, I think, to know that the child is initially relating to you as a representative, an embodiment, of something larger than your individual person.

And all you have to do as a human mother is to activate that potential for mother-awareness in your child. You don't have to be perfect; you just have to be good enough to activate the child's hunger and thirst for a mother. You don't have to drive yourself crazy trying to make a connection.

The problems of mother and child are not in making the initial connection; the problems arise because the connection is so intense, so strong – it goes so far beyond individual personality and individual events. We are often confused and shaken by the power of the relationship. How could an individual have so much power? Only, I am saying, as a represented of this greater power.

And, then finally, there's this: As the offspring of a mother – which, I assume, includes all of us – as the offspring of a mother, it's helpful, as you get older, to realize that you have been, and are, relating to more than your individual mother; you are relating to the Archetypal Mother through her.

As an adult, I think it's helpful to make this distinction between your individual mother, who has her own personality, beliefs, strengths and weaknesses, and the Archetypal or Divine Mother who is this undergirding, universal power.

It's helpful to make a distinction between this individual human person with whom you identified the power of the Divine Mother, and those aspects of yourself that longed to meet the Great Mother and were activated in meeting this particular human individual, this particular mother.

One my favorite sayings in this regard is from author Robert A. Johnson, who says, "As an adult,

you need to learn to deal with your mother-complex, not your particular mother.” That is, you need to deal with the image of the mother as it has taken shape and been constellated in you. “Deal with that,” he says, “deal with your mother-complex, deal with the Great Mother as it has become constellated in you, and leave the poor woman alone.”

So as an adult, it's not about your individual mother any more. She has her own life to lead, her own problems to solve. And so, I suspect, do you. So let each go about dealing with those problems.

Now, you will always be together, you and your mother. Your individual mother will always carry the imprint of the Archetypal Mother for you.

She will never be – nor should she ever be – just another ordinary human mortal to you. She will always be called “Mother” by you.

Nevertheless, know that she has been the carrier of a power for you that is far beyond her own individual human power.

As an adult, I suggest, it is wise to try to relate to that larger power. In so doing, you may find that your relationship with your own human mother can be enlarged, deepened, and sweetened.

Today, on Mother's Day Sunday, I would celebrate this creative, abundant, overflowing, life-giving, nurturant, fiercely protective, and self-sacrificing energy that is present in our world.

And I would honor and pay tribute to those in whom this energy comes to us most directly – namely, in and through our own individual human mothers.

Benediction

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
and the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms,
and the larger circle of lovers, whose hands are joined in a dance,
and the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life,
who move also in a dance,
to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it except in fragments.

(Wendell Berry)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Mother's Day Sunday, May 8, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)