

“Blessing”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
“Mother’s Day Sunday,” May 11, 2008
Bruce A. Bode

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

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

Opening Words

This is a resplendent new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.

And let us then be especially grateful on this Mother’s Day for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Introduction to Mother’s Day Reading
Prepared and given by JoEllen Thompson

Many may believe that Mother’s Day was developed by Hallmark, florists, or other marketing “gurus” to sell products. Indeed, today, it is a large commercial holiday. Others may believe it's a day solely to celebrate the women, wives and mothers of our homes. The truth behind the origin of Mother’s Day is much more exciting.

The story of modern Mother's Day actually began in the peace movement and its original concept was as a day recognizing women's social actions and contributions to peace.

In 1870 Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910), a Boston writer, pacifist, suffragist, and author of the words to the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, wrote the "Mother's Day Proclamation". It was based on her experiences as a wife and mother throughout her suppressive marriage and the atrocities she witnessed while living through the Civil War. As a result, she suggested a national Mothers' Day in 1872. She saw it as a day dedicated to peace.

Although her version of Mothers' Day never really caught on, Howe went on to head the American branch of the Woman's International Peace Association, which observed a day dedicated to peace. Her Mother's Day Proclamation truly tells the story of why Mother's Day was created.

However, the official observance of Mother's Day in its present form is credited to Anna Jarvis (1864-1948) of Philadelphia, PA. She wanted to honor the memory of her mother, Mrs. Ann Marie Reeves Jarvis. Her mother, Mrs. Ann Marie Reeves Jarvis had organized several "Mothers Day Work Clubs" in the 1850s in the West Virginia area. She had lost eight out of twelve children under the age of seven and wanted to combat the conditions that contributed to the high mortality rate of children. Her clubs provided medicine for the poor, nursing care for the sick, and arranged help and proper medical care for those ill with tuberculosis.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Mrs. Jarvis asked the members of her women's clubs to make a pledge that friendship and goodwill would cross the boundaries of north and south. The members of these Clubs nursed soldiers from both sides and saved many lives.

After the Civil War, Mrs. Jarvis worked as a peacemaker encouraging families to set aside differences created by the polarization of the war. In 1868, she organized a "Mothers Friendship Day" to bring together families that had been divided by the conflict.

Mrs. Jarvis died in 1905. In 1907 her daughter Anna announced the idea of a national day to honor mothers. She suggested that it be on the anniversary of her mother's death, the second Sunday of May. It was to be a day to honor all mothers, and also a day to remember the work of peacemaking, reconciliation, and social action against poverty by women.

She encouraged women to see government as being "enlarged housekeeping" and use their nurturing skills to improve it. This definition

gave women a moral responsibility outside their immediate home. Women who participated in civil rights and welfare reform saw this work as essentially maternal in nature. Women worked to ease social ills; they became scholars and scientists; they fought for the rights of various groups of people; and they raised their voices to have the right to vote.

Anna and her supporters tirelessly wrote to ministers, business people, and politicians in their quest to establish a national Mother's Day. By 1911, Mother's Day was celebrated in almost every state. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson made it official: Mother's Day would be a national holiday held each year on the second Sunday in May.

It was Anna Jarvis who also began the custom of wearing a carnation on Mother's Day. Carnations were her mother's favorite flower and Anna felt that they symbolized a mother's pure love.

Mother's Day Proclamation
Written by Julia Ward Howe ~ 1870

Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of tears! 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, 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 bosom of a devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says "Disarm, Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice." Blood does not wipe our 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 to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after their own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

Introduction to Reading

One of the most striking and poignant stories to me in all of biblical literature is the story of one who missed out on a blessing. It's the story from the Hebrew scriptures of the twin brothers Esau and Jacob, and how Esau lost his rightful blessing through the trickery and deceit of his brother, Jacob, and their mother, Rebekah, who favored her younger son over the older one.

And whereas this story is largely about the history and politics of the people of Israel, it also weaves together the universal human themes of family and sibling rivalry, and shows the powerful need to receive the blessing of the parents. I read from the book of Genesis 27:1-38 in the Jerusalem translation.

“BLESSING”

Introduction

A number of years ago I attended a seminar by author, psychologist, and theologian, Dr. Robert Moore, who spoke about “blessing” in our lives – the importance and value of ourselves having received the blessing of others, particularly that of our parents, and the importance and value of ourselves being able to bless others, particularly our children.

His presentation gave new meaning to the concept of “blessing” for me, and so I thought on this Mother’s Day Sunday I would explore with you the role and function of “blessing” in our lives – looking backward in our lives to where we have received or missed “blessing,” and looking forward in our lives to both receiving and giving “blessing.”

First, I will say a little about what “blessing” is, and then look at four areas of our lives in terms of “blessing.”

The good king and the good queen

In his presentation, Dr. Moore used the images of the “good king” and the “good queen” to get at his idea of “blessing.”

Though kings and queens are not politically as important as they once were, they are still very much alive in the psyche. Children, especially, easily

connect with the idea of kings and queens. They know immediately what a good king and good queen are, as well as what a bad king and a bad queen are.

The essence of the good king and the good queen is that they are ones who are able to bless their people and their realm. In the presence of the good king and queen, life abounds. There is order, security, generativity. There is fertility and fecundity. The kingdom flourishes, the people are nourished, and the land is fruitful.

The blessing of the good king and queen is not, first of all, anything tangible or material. It's not anything they do so much; but, rather, it's their presence, their being, their attention. The good king and queen bless their people by saying, in effect: "I see you; I recognize you; I honor you; I affirm you; you mean something to me; you are valuable; you are important; I am pleased by you; I am warmed by you."

It's a great thing to have an audience with the king and the queen – a great thing to be invited and welcomed into their presence. Today it would be like having an audience with the president or the pope.

Now, I know that with respect to the "current occupant" of the office of president in our country, the disaffection among so many of us here is so great it makes it difficult to imagine that a blessing could be received from being in his presence. A number of people I know turn away from the television when his face appears on it. But the strength of the reaction is a negative indicator of the potential for blessing that is there.

So let's take a more positive model. Just a couple of weeks ago, the Dalai Lama was in Seattle and made himself available in our large public arenas to whoever wished to be in his presence. And there were a number of individuals from this community and this congregation who made the effort to be there. They, then, spoke afterwards, some here in our sanctuary, about the blessing they had received simply from being in his presence. It wasn't so much anything new that he had to say. But it was his being, his presence, and being in his presence – being seen and affirmed, even at a distance.

More important than seeing is to sense that you are seen – to feel that you are valued, even if at some distance. When the good king, queen, pope, or president can say: "I see you; I recognize you; I affirm you; I honor you; I

am pleased by you” – when one receives such a recognition and affirmation, it is indeed a great and good thing.

The good king and queen use their power to give power. They enable others to grow and prosper. That is their blessing.

The good king and queen love to see their people thrive. They are pleased by their growth and creativity, warmed by their successes.

The good king and queen are not jealous of the achievements, qualities, or the virtues of their people. They are not suspicious, paranoid or threatened by them. They are pleased to see their people flourish. They bless the people and they, in turn, feel blessed when their people prosper.

So it's a great thing for a child to be able to experience a parent as a good king or good queen. And that is why children connect so easily to a king and a queen.

The bad king and queen

Children also know what a bad king and queen are. They are the ones that bring curses. They exploit the realm for what they take to be their own gains.

The bad king and queen don't say, “I see you.” Rather, they say, “See me, adore me, admire me.” They say, “I do with you as I please. You are my subject. If you wish to survive, obey me; listen to me, see things as I see them, do not contradict me.”

This is the bad and wounded king and queen. They bring curses to the land and its people, and the people fear, and the land shrivels and dies.

What a difficult thing for a child to grow up where the bad king and queen reign supreme.

Each of us longs for and needs the blessing of a good king and a good queen. Somewhere in our lives we have to receive enough of such a blessing to survive.

And the blessing we long for, first of all, is not a material blessing, but the spiritual blessing of being recognized and seen as a person in your own right. Somewhere we need to hear: “I see you; I honor you; I value you; I love you; I bless you.”

An example of a bad king and queen

Sometime I talked to a woman ago who experienced a difficult childhood, one without much parental blessing. Her father, the king, was absent from the home; her mother, the queen, was wounded. As a girl she was told that she was no good and didn't measure up, try as she might. Daily, she was reminded of her deficiencies.

Finally, as an adult, she had the courage to seek out a counselor. The counselor asked her how her life had gone to this point. She said, “Here I am; I've survived.”

The counselor stopped her short asking simply: “Did you? Did you survive?”

Taking inventory

In what areas of your life did you survive or not survive? Where have you received blessing? And where has blessing been withheld from you or missed by you?

I will look briefly at four different areas in terms of blessing received or blessing missed.

And as we look at these four areas, I would ask you simply to take account and make inventory, and not to attach fault or blame to any person. Rather, simply to look at where you have and have not received blessing.

We're all in this game of life together. None of us is whole. Each of us is wounded to one degree or another; and each of wounds others, usually without intending to do so, but rather through our inadvertence and lack of consciousness.

So in one sense, our wounds belong to us as one body; they cross and criss-cross the generations. And so, too, our healing will be as one body.

Also, as we take inventory of our lives in this way, let's do a little more than simply see what memories come up from the past. Often we are blocked from our past and have a tendency to either idealize it or slander it – to paint it in only one color. But our present can be a clue to our past.

What I'm suggesting here is that the way we treat ourselves and others right now is also a kind of memory: that we bless where we were blessed and curse where we were cursed; that we're generous where we were treated generously and stingy where we were treated parsimoniously.

So as we reflect on our lives we can use our present as a way of getting at our past. Our past is remembered in our present attitudes and conflicts. These are not spontaneous or recent productions. They are reflections of memories laid deep within us.

Blessing and physical appearance

Let's begin, then, with physical appearance.

Was your physical appearance blessed? Were you affirmed – were you blessed – for what you were physically?

Were you blessed for your gender, for example? Did your parents want a boy and you are a girl? Or, did they want a girl and you're a boy?

Did your parents bless you as a beautiful child?

And to get at that question from the present: do you think you're beautiful now? Are you comfortable and satisfied with who you are physically? Or when a camera appears, do you run in the other direction?

Or, again, do you find yourself critical of the appearance of others – always judging the appearance of others, always measuring, weighing, sizing up? Are you constantly finding blemishes in your children or with your spouse?

Where did these critical attitudes come from? Has your physical appearance been blessed?

Now, of course, there are cultural standards of beauty, and movie stars and models who represent these standards. But one's nearness or distance from these standards is not the crucial thing here. And, of course, even those movie stars and models may not feel at all secure physically – quite the opposite: their identity and self-worth may be so tied to physical appearance that they are constantly concerned, “Do I measure up?”

Thus, receiving the blessing for physical appearance is something other than how near or far we are to some cultural standard of beauty. That's not the kind of blessing that is crucial for our health and well-being.

There is, I think, a kind of beauty that belongs to each individual. When one has been blessed and feels blessed in their physical appearance that beauty will come through. Whatever the body shape and build, if one has received a blessing in regard to physical appearance and is therefore relaxed and comfortable with who he or she is physically, then an individual quality of beauty will come through in a physical way.

Blessing and our abilities

A second area to take inventory is our abilities.

Have your abilities been blessed?

The question is not: were you blessed with abilities, but have your abilities been blessed? – quite a different subject.

So, again, this doesn't have to do with comparison with others, and whether others have more or less ability in a given area than you do, but what are your abilities? What are you capable of?

Were there those in your life who were well-pleased with what you could do – those who recognized your efforts, your accomplishments, your achievements, your successes?

Were there those who were well-pleased with:

- your intelligence, your imagination, your curiosity;
- your athletic ability, your coordination, dexterity, strength, endurance;
- your ability to work with your hands, to fix things, or to build things;

your artistic ability, your ability to draw or paint or write or sculpt or sing or play a musical instrument;
your manner of speech, your sense of humor, your wit;
your ability to organize, to manage money.

Take any ability or capacity whatsoever. Which of them were blessed? And where did you get the message that you had no ability or capacity in this or that area? And where do you pass that message on to others?

We need someone to bless and recognize us: a parent, a grandparent, an uncle, an aunt, a teacher, an older brother or sister, a friend. We need someone to give the blessing.

Blessing and areas of interest

A third area to be looked at is that of our interests.

Were your individual interests blessed? Were you encouraged to follow the things that had energy for you and which gave you meaning, happiness, and joy?

Or were your interests set aside in favor of expectations, social pressures, and the practicalities of getting on in life?

And do you now have permission now to follow your interests? If not, again, where did you get the message that your interests were not very interesting or were not to be valued?

And do you bless the interests of others – your children, your spouse, your partner, your friends?

Or is your first instinct to dampen down, to discourage, to dissuade, to warn of danger? Do you say, “Not practical, not possible, dangerous, foolish?”

But why not let them struggle with that issue? Why not bless and encourage the energies and interests of those near you, and let them struggle with how to bring those energies and interests into practical reality.

And, as a matter of practical advice, if you bless first and give advice second, your advice is more likely to be sought out.

Our first desire and need is for blessing.

Blessing and feelings

The fourth and final area to look at – the most crucial and problematic of all – are our perceptions, desires, feelings, and emotions.

Were they blessed? Were your individual perceptions, desires, feelings, and emotions valued, honored, and respected?

Knowing who we are – having a sense of self-identity and self-worth – depends to a large degree on having our individual responses to reality validated and respected. To develop a healthy identity children need persons who are secure enough to bless and validate their perceptions, experiences, and feeling responses.

And these are different from an adult's. For children, there's the whole world of littleness, dependency, and helplessness that must be acceptable to the adults.

When the child says, "I'm afraid," or shows fear, then that fear must be validated and blessed – not, "Oh, there's nothing to be afraid of; don't be afraid." Perhaps not for an adult in this instance ... but to a child, it's a different story.

Even when a child says, "I hate this," or "I hate so and so," or "I hate you," – this, too, is to be received and respected. "What do you hate? Tell me about your hatred." Then we can work out an appropriate response. But not: "Oh, no, we don't hate in this family; this family doesn't know that side of human reality."

One of the main issues of families with alcoholic or addictive parents is the lack of validation of a child's perceptions and emotions – "Problem, what problem? There's no drinking problem in this family. You're quite mistaken."

Thus, what you think you see, you don't really see. What you think you feel, you don't really feel. And so the thing that one may feel most deeply about is taken away, and the child learns not to trust his or her perceptions and

responses to reality. That reality has to be denied to protect the king and queen.

The idea of Alice Miller

One of the authors who to me writes most convincingly in this area is Alice Miller. She speaks of a drama taking place in childhood.

And the drama is this: whose reality will be validated, that of the parents or the child? If the parents are needy themselves, they will not be able to understand, respect, empathize, validate, or bless the perceptions, feelings, and emotions of the child. And the child, being dependent on the parents for its very life, will forego its own pain and distress in order to try to please the parents.

And the more sensitive and gifted the child, says Alice Miller, the more this will be the case. The more sensitive and gifted the child, the more the child will be able to pick up on the needs, wants, desires, and expectations of the parents – and meet those needs, wants, desires, and expectations. However, this creates a false identity (and a hollowness inside), an identity not rooted in the emotions, feelings, desires, and perceptions of the child, but rather in the needs, wishes, desires, and perceptions of the parents.

Bumping heads

In regard to a child's capacity to be concerned about the needs of the parents, I remember an incident that occurred many years ago in my own family, an incident that brought home the truth of Alice Miller's idea to me.

One time I and my eldest daughter accidentally bumped foreheads while we were playing some game. We were crawling on the carpeted floor on our hands and knees and we bumped them heads – hard – so much so that I pulled back and groaned in pain.

My daughter, who at this time was no more than two and a half years old, saw my reaction and overlooking her own pain, which was no doubt more intense than mine, asked, "Daddy, are you alright?"

It was only when I said, “Honey, doesn't your head hurt, too?” that she allowed herself to feel her own pain and to cry, and, indeed, very loudly. But, you see, first she had to check to see if I, her king, was alright.

Were there those near you secure enough in their own persons to validate your perceptions and emotions? Which of your perceptions and emotions have been blessed?

Were you allowed, for example, to experience and express so-called negative emotions?

Was your anger blessed? Can you find your anger now?

Was your sadness blessed? Can you find your sadness now?

Or your awareness of your littleness and dependency? Or did you always have to be grown-up and suppress the experience of being small and dependent?

Was your fear blessed?

Or what about your love? Were you able to show warmth, caring, and tenderness? Or was this brushed off as being immature, unneeded, unmasculine?

Again, your present attitudes can be a clue to your past. Do you trust your feelings now? Do you know what they are?

And can you bless the feelings and emotions of others? Or are you uncomfortable with strong feeling: with conflict, with fear, with anger, with sadness, with desire, with tenderness?

How much we need to be blessed in life in all areas! We can't live without it. And how we long to receive the blessing where it has been withheld from us!

It's common, as you know, with adopted children that at a certain point in their lives, regardless of how loving and good their adoptive parents have been, that they will go in search of their biological parents. You see, there's someone out there who has the capacity to bless them and from whom they didn't receive that blessing. They long for that blessing, and have to come to grips with it in some way. (See The Blessing by Smalley and Trent.)

We all long so much to be blessed. We need to hear the words, “This is my beloved one in whom I am well pleased.”

On this Mother's Day is there someone who needs your blessing? Is there someone from whom you are withholding a blessing, someone who longs to hear from you: "I see you, I value you, I accept you, I believe in you, I bless you?"

Each of us needs an advocate in our life – a good king and a good queen who see us, know who we are, and bless us. And where that blessing has been missed or withheld, we have a journey ahead of us – a journey all of us are on for all of our days.

But I believe it's never too late to receive a blessing – never too late, even if those who had the capacity to bless us are gone or incapable of giving it. For there is also one within who would bless us – an inner advocate – an inner king or queen who does affirm and bless us.

There is at the heart of each of us that voice which says, "You're alright. Whatever you've done, whatever you've been through, you are acceptable and you are accepted."

This is a message that comes from the depths of our being and from the core of reality itself, which in its very essence is self-affirming.

To find that inner advocate and to receive the blessing requires the work of self-examination. It means looking at our own incompleteness, for we are controlled by what we refuse to look at.

But if we have the courage and patience to seek, I believe we will find. It's never too late to receive or give the blessing.

Benediction

Our concluding words are a blessing from the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Numbers, the blessing Moses was instructed to give to the people of Israel:

The Lord bless you and keep you,
The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish our 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 11, 2008. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)