

Unitarian Society of Hartford
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The Great Mother's Breast: A Metaphor for Basic Trust
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Sermon

The Great Mother's Breast: A Metaphor for Basic Trust

"I am different from ordinary people.
I drink from the Great Mother's breast." From The Tao Te Ching

Ah motherhood.
I have spent my share of therapy dollars on that topic.
Maybe some of you know what I mean.
My own mother was a remarkable woman with whom I spent time
every week from the day I was born until the day she died—
Over 50 years—every week--
Except for 20 or 30 occasions when my travels were longer than a week.

And I'm a mother myself, of one son with whom I have traversed
wet diapers, boy scout badges, night terrors,
tattoos and nipple piercing,
and though he is now well grown and gone,
I still occasionally do things to preserve my own genome
(he's my only child) that totally defy any good judgment
I may show in other areas of life.
Maybe some of you know what I mean.

I've also experienced fine mothering on occasion from
mentors and friends, and have myself been
"The Great Mother's Breast" to a good number of folks.

But it's mighty hard for me to speak about motherhood.
I avoided it as a sermon topic for seventeen years,
until someone bought a sermon at a church auction,
and the topic they required me to preach on was motherhood.

Today is my second feeble effort.

Motherhood is just such a deep and wide thing....
experienced as great good and great evil,
executed well and badly from moment to moment.
susceptible to selfishness and smallness as well as splendid supportiveness and sacred
sacrifice.

Today, having wrestled with the topic once again,
looking for some small stepping stone in the creek we call
the human condition, some small stepping stone which might facilitate
our human journey,
I've come up with just one conviction to share---**It's never too late.**
Never too late to learn to give and receive maternal care,
caress and concern - never too late to be birthed or to give birth.

Nothing can separate us from the potential
to mother and be mothered, in the highest and best sense of it;
not life nor death nor angels nor powers nor principalities
nor things present nor things to come.
Nothing can separate us from the potential and possibility to
mother and be mothered.
Because whoever's face we put on it,
Motherhood is a mask of the eternal.

That phrase, **mask of the eternal**, was coined by Joseph Campbell,
a self-taught religion scholar who had broad popular appeal
in the latter part of the 20th century.
Witty, irreverent and profoundly spiritual in a totally secular way,
he brought language to what some of us intuited--
that religious stories are just that, stories,
and that they are not in any way diminished in purpose, power, or beauty because of it.

As a matter of fact, as myth, religious stories might be even more
widely successful ,given the chance,
given a bunch of religious people who had the courage
to stay the course as Jews or Muslims or Christians and
to claim the larger meaning of their faith narratives
within those faith communities.

Bishop John Spong comes to my mind as such a courageous person -
His books on how Christianity must change have rocked the world
of many Christians, and for those of us who are not Christians,
his books can dispel many of our ignorant and arrogant assumptions
about what all Christians are like.

Campbell introduced many folks to the richness of all
the world's religions and to the idea that all religion is a wonderful
mask of the eternal, the ultimate, that in nature and imagination,
which inspires us as it inspires horses.

Campbell's work echoes the central thought of one of our great
UU heroes, Theodore Parker, who preached a sermon in 1841 entitled
"The Transient and Permanent in Christianity."

“Looking at the Word of Jesus, (said Parker) at real Christianity, the pure religion he taught, nothing is more fixed and certain. Its influence widens as light extends; it deepens as the nations grow more wise.

But, looking at the history of what men call Christianity, nothing is more perishable.

While true religion is always the same thing, in each century and every land, in each man that feels it, the Christianity of the Pulpit--the religion taught; the Christianity of the People-- the religion accepted; has never been the same thing in any two centuries or lands, except in name.

The difference at this time between the Christianity of the people, and that of Christ himself is deep.

Such is the Transient, and the Permanent in Christianity. What is of absolute value (like love) never changes; we may cling round it and grow to it forever. Yet much of what passes for religion is fleeting. Will you cling to what is perishing, or embrace what is eternal?”

Parker challenges us from the pages of our UU history to not throw the baby out with the bathwater, But to tease out that core fundamental format of the religious endeavor and experience and to embrace that essential permanent core.

So, what if motherhood is, like religion, a mask of the eternal? What if we miss the permanent profound eternal truth of mother, that absolute value which we may cling round and grow to forever, when we romanticize or demonize the relationships we have with our own mothers and children, relationships, which last only so long as life or memory last, a kind of motherhood that is actually transient, fleeting.

What if that which we imagine or experience as motherhood is really a finger pointing at the moon, and not the moon?

Contemporary spiritual guru A.A. Almass is founder of a school for personal growth and inner work, called the Diamond heart approach. The subject on which his school has influenced me most is what he calls ‘basic trust.’

Hameed, as he is known by his students, says that there is that in each of us which yearns for the smell of our baby blankets, the taste of our mothers milk, to be held tight and secure against her body. He asks us to imagine a mother holding a baby—

A mother competent at baby holding—like my own mother was. She was an o.b. nurse for her entire 30 year career and showed thousands of new mothers how to hold, nurse, rock and swaddle their babies so that the babies nursed, pooped and slept in total peace of mind and body.

She was standing right beside me drinking a coke and eating a peanut butter cracker as my son was born, nonchalant at this her 13th grandchild emerging.

She swaddled him in a blanket for the first of many times, assured him that he was held tight by fierce maternal regard, stuffed him against her ample bosom, and said over her shoulder to me, as she swept from the delivery room, “OK, let’s go show Jamey to his dad and Paw Paw.”

Now this baby, held by the competent mother, says Hameed, is unconcerned about anything, totally relaxed in mind and body and spirit, a picture of basic trust--before crying and not being comforted, before experiencing unmet need and misunderstanding: needing a diaper changed but getting fed instead, needing food and getting rocked instead, needing a warm bosom and being tossed into bed instead. Basic trust.

And even though those things and the angst of separation anxiety begin right away, if the baby is generally held and nursed and cared for by a competent mother, scooped up into some fierce maternal bosom from time to time, the basic trust will remain.

Even when we have to go to school, eat our spinach, take a bath, earn a living, and get rejected a million ways—even when we experience the painful feelings that living in a beloved community like this bring from time to time, that basic trust will remain, and it is the cornerstone of a full and wholesome experience of being.

“Yes, but”, inevitably somebody asks Hameed, “ what if you had MY mother?”

Hameed generally responds with a show of sympathy, and then some esoteric tough love remarks which I translate as it’s never too late to have a happy childhood. It’s never too late to start nursing at the great mother’s breast, never too late to experience basic trust,

because that sense that we are held close by a benign universe,
that sense is a core capacity of the human spirit,
an innate though perhaps latent spark in each of us,
a pilot light which never goes out
and which we can choose to stoke to full flame.

That sense that we are held close by a benign universe
is a core capacity of the human spirit,
not requiring a particular kind of real mother.

It's a spark which we can stoke in many ways.
Some of us do it by falling in love, the soul consuming,
lost in love of adolescence.

Some of us do it by polishing and perfecting our competence at something—
A competence that can generally be relied on to catch us
as we fall...because we do fall upon the thorns of life and bleed.

Some of us stoke the spark by getting religion of the theist kind,
where we create and claim a parental god who loves and cares for us,
who holds, nurses and swaddles us, and swats us when we need it.
It is no surprise that most all religions have a god with a face,
a human mask of the eternal.

There is until the day we die that baby inside of us,
that pre-cognitive infant who understands only
and is reassured only by the smell, feel and taste of the mother.

And I don't know about you but I've spent entirely too much energy
trying to kill off that infant in me. We need that infant.
It is ONLY that infant who can experience the basic trust,
which is foundation for a full humanity - a full mental, emotional ,
inspired and embodied experience of being human.

It is only that infant who has the innocence required
to hope against hope,
who has freedom from mental musings and mumblings,
freedom from the monkey mind which analyzes everything
for cause and effect
and counts occurrences of wrong done
and stores skepticism and negativity.

It is only that infant in us who has the capacity, again and again, to
--trust that we'll have what we need...even when we don't.
--trust that we'll all live happily ever after...even when we don't.
--trust that when every one of our mother masks gets smashed
by life's disillusioning thorns on the rose,

there is still that sustaining, renewing, upholding wind,
breath, spirit, which might rise at any moment
and sweep across the face of the stormy deep
and lift us above the battlefield
IF we dare to unfurl our wings once more.

The jaded cautious curmudgeon in us cannot imagine
much less experience basic trust....
It takes the infant, the ever blessed and innocent child,
who is willing to trust....against all odds, choosing not to count the odds.

That child is still in all of us.....
waiting for the Mother to renew its basic trust.
And it is never too late, so long as we have breath, to experience Her.

I was at the UU district annual meeting in Birmingham,
and during the Sunday service, I sat across the aisle
from a man and a small child.
The man looked to be mid 60s and the child looked like a
sturdy beautiful 3 year old.

Something about the way the man was holding the little boy
made me look closer.
The child's eye and motor movement was that of an infant,
and the man held and managed the little boy
as if he were a month old.
I was mesmerized for the entire service, watching them.

Occasionally the boy, whose name I later learned was Angus,
would start to make a sound and the man would whip out
one of those baby teething cookies and
stick the end of it in the boys mouth,
so that he would gnaw and suck and hum happily for while.

Then whenever there was music, the man would clap the boy's hands together and the boy
would grin like crazy.
Whenever there was silence the man would close his eyes
and cradle the boy close, blowing on the strawberry blonde curls
or nuzzling and kissing the little face and ears.

When the boy's arms got to moving too wildly, the man would grasp
both tiny hands in his one big hand and
swaddle the little arms tightly to the little chest.

The boy's every need was met almost before his body knew
it had a need.

It was as if man and boy were one body, moving in some eternal rhythm of stimulus and response.

Watching, I found myself merging into them, found myself being wrapped in the great mother's swaddling arms along with the man and the boy-- found myself being mothered by some fierce maternal regard.

That man was Motherhood, the great mother's love-- the eternal endlessly rocking cradle that sustains us, the bosom of Abraham where I rest in full and basic trust, another mask of the eternal.

When the service was over I introduced myself-- Turned out that the gray haired man was the little boy's father, and that his mom was a Methodist minister I had gone to school with 20 years ago and had not seen since.

After a bit of a reunion, she promptly handed Angus over to me and went off to enjoy the social hour, and for the next 20 minutes Angus and I were the mother together.

I laid him back in my arms and kissed his neck and he laughed, eyes rolling and arms flailing. I turned my head to the side and lent him great hands full of my hair to grab and hold onto and bury his face in. And we were surrounded and enfolded in basic trust, in the love that will not let us go.

The world was alive with the grandeur of god— good orderly direction— Right in the midst of a tragic world where babies can be permanently damaged, where parents can be permanently grieved and challenged, where you and I fall upon the thorns of life.

Angus. There will always be an Angus across the aisle from you too-- an imperfect Angus with nontraditional parents-- just waiting to mother and be mothered by you, just waiting for the lived human experience of Mother at its purest and best.

It is never too late. All we have to do is reclaim that basic trust-- the innate, core capacity conviction that we are held with a fierce maternal regard, tightly swaddled against that bountiful bosom where we are secure and free to experience life as a moment only,

as this moment of dissolving ourselves
into these other selves...imperfect selves...as a hearty gift.

It is never too late. The great Mother's breast is there
In ample supply once we let ourselves remember that we need it,
And turn in her direction.

It is that which makes us different from ordinary people.

Amen.