Love One a Mother

The Reverend Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House -- May 10, 2009

I want to start by inviting you to sit comfortably in your seats and close your eyes, and try to re-experience a time we know we experienced even though we can't remember it – the liquid warmth of the womb, the darkness, the comfortable sloshing back and forth as our mother went though her normal daily motions. Can we feel the absolute security of this place? Can we hear the sound – mother's heartbeat just a few inches from our ears from the time ears were forming, steady, reassuring, the first rhythm and the basis for all life's rhythms that came after? And then one day the world turned upside down and our home was convulsed with great shaking and squeezing and our little heads were compressed and we were stuck in a very tight place for a very long time and just when it seemed we weren't going to make it suddenly we open our eyes and there wqs light and air for the first time and noise other than the heartbeat and we were terrified and we sucked that air in to let out the biggest scream we could. Go ahead, cry. It seems the only appropriate response to the trauma we had just suffered, the greatest most of us would ever suffer. And the only thing that would comfort us in those first few minutes on the outside was to spend time clinging to the person we had just been inside of, feeling her warmth and softness and hearing that reassuring heartbeat.

And our mother responded to this – she pretty much had to. As soon as the birth was complete, a powerful hormone called oxytocin started coursing through her veins, and it's like love potion number 9 – she falls in love with her baby, and by coincidence her baby needs her to fall in love because human babies are helpless for a long period of time after birth than any other animal. So evolution has taken care of this problem and given us chemical-based mother love.

This is the setup than nature provides; we honor our mothers today because it is in the nature of things that we start life with an intimacy with them more total and more physical than we ever have again with another human being. You may live with a spouse or lover for sixty years, you will never get as close to him or her as you got to your mother in the first nine months. This intimacy is the point at which I want to start today.

But I don't want to get all Hallmark Card sentimental – the topic of motherhood here in the 21st century is not all apple pie. First and most obviously not all of us have been or will be mothers. Some of us, like me, are disqualified by our plumbing, and others of us will have simply taken other directions in life. I want to honor non-motherhood as a noble path, and to acknowledge that women who have not had children sometimes feel very out in the cold in a discussion of mothers. Second, every one of us has had some degree of conflict with our real mothers either in childhood, adolescence or as an adult, and some of us hold permanent scars from this. It will not do to simply lift up the cheery aspects of motherhood without mentioning the shadow side.

There is so much sentimental blather in the air at this time of year that we may suspect that Mother's Day is a conspiracy of the greeting card companies, the florists, the chocolatiers, the restaurants and the public radio stations. We forget that it was a Unitarian activist in the Nineteenth Century, Julia Ward Howe, who started this observance a day when women were supposed to rise up and put an end to war. Of course, she didn't exactly put an end to war; maybe what has come to an end is the idea that woman are inherently more peaceful. But what I want to focus on today is the theology of motherhood.

When we are in the womb, our mothers are our total environment. We started as part of her body. In those early weeks, there was no me and her, it was all her. Even after birth, we did not differentiate ourselves from the rest of the world until we learned to recognize our mother's face.

Our mothers then are, in a sense, the ground of our being. There are many things we

choose in life, so many things that we sometimes forget that the biggest things are thing we didn't choose, but were chosen for us. To be born at all, and to be born to this particular set of parents, in his particular time, is just a given, not a choice.

Now what does this have to do with theology? Just this: I think our mothers stand as a symbol for the larger force or entity to which we owe our existence, from which we sprung. The source of our very existence, or as Tillich called it, ground of our being. Some will choose to call this ground of being God, some will call it Spirit, some may call it fate or karma, some will call it the world, and for many of us it will be unnamed. The essential point is that there is something other and larger than ourselves, something prior to our own existences, something we did not choose but which in some sense chose us.

We often go around ignoring this larger context. Buddhists are fond of using the metaphor of fish: the fish do not see the water for they are so embedded in it. We do not see the larger medium in which we live and move and have our being. But it is to us like our mother once was. She was everything, and she was so pervasive that we grow up largely in ignorance of how much we owe her.

And in this vision of motherhood is unconditional love. I don't want to just use mothers as the symbol of divinity, I want to use oxytocin to stand for divine love, the love that binds us to one another, or as I say in the title, love one a mother. What was Jesus' distillation of all the law and the prophets – love the lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. With oxytocin, a mother can't help loving her baby as herself. Oxytocin, by the way is not the sole property of females. It is found in the blood of male birds when they are sitting on a nest. It is the chemical expression of the nurturing instinct.

In the poem I read earlier, Billy Collins says,

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.

I think religious liberals tend to get stuck in the lanyard mentality. We don't know what to call that which gave us our being, that from which we are derived; we don't by and large give any weight to the stories in the Bible, and we believe in the insights of modern science, and somehow we let that be a substitute for thanksgiving. This congregation defines itself as humanist, and if humanism means that we believe in putting humans first, I'm in there too. But if our intellectual agnosticism or atheism is an excuse to live life in ignorance of our debt to things and forces outside ourselves that have bestowed are bestowing and will continue to bestow blessings on us, we are living in spiritual poverty. Not only that; we are living in delusion if we think that all this came about through our own actions.

Through much of the Twentieth Century many Unitarian churches used an affirmation

written by James Freeman Clarke in 1886 as Five Points of Unitarian Faith
'the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by Character, the continuity of human development in all worlds, or the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.'

Some wag parodied this affirmation by saying that Unitarians believed in three things, the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston.

But let me focus on this first idea, the fatherhood of God. That is not particularly remarkable in the light of Christian theology, for God the father is the first person of the Trinity. Jesus himself refers to God as his father and the father of all of humanity.

Orthodox Christian theology holds that Jesus was divine; in his divine aspect, he is referred to as the Logos. The logos, one part of the Trinity, become incarnated in the human Jesus. The word incarnated means to be made flesh. In the Gospel of John, it says "the Word was made Flesh and dwelt amongst us."

Now the idea of a God being made flesh does not begin with the Christians. Ancient religions are full of tales of immortals interacting and interbreeding with humans. You may know of the Greek myth of Leda who was raped by the God Zeus in the form of a swan, and produced two immortal children, Helen and Polydeuces. In the case of Jesus, the immortal agent does not rape Mary, but immaculately impregnates her. And in traditional thinking the agent doing the impregnating is not God the father, but the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity Mary is fully human, but in Catholic thought takes on some aspects of a divine mother.

The meaning of divine fatherhood was further fleshed out by the Council of Nicea in 325. The question they set out to answer was, is the logos, the second person of the trinity, the son of God the Father or was he made by God the father who, after all, made everything else? The answer was that he was the son, or as the Nicene creed says it, "begotten, not made."

This is an important distinction. One makes a sculpture painting or poem; one builds a building or lays out a road or farm. But one begets a child.

And I think the distinction is more profound if we flip the sex roles and talk about mothering instead of fathering. We all make things. We make lanyards. We make pies, we make money, we make a career, we make a scene. But we don't make a person. Some of us bear a person, some of us birth a person, some of us raise a person.

This is why the lanyard is so pathetic in the poem. What is a few twisted strands of plastic braid against the gift of life itself? The poet does a wonderful job of painting this comically for us.

But to get back to theology. Where I think Orthodox Christianity went off the rails was not in saying that Jesus was God but in saying that the rest of us are not. The Gospel of Thomas strongly hints what Emerson intuited a century before its discovery that Jesus preached that all of us had a divine light in us. We are all children of a divine father, or as I would like to say today, a divine mother. Emerson said that the great perversion of the spirit was "that the divine nature is attributed to one or two persons, and denied to all the rest, and denied with fury"[1]

If we are all children of a divine mother, that makes us all sisters and brothers. So the second article of Clarke's Unitarian affirmation of faith proceeds from the first.

Now clearly this language is inadequate; it's suffused with patriarchy, since it was originally expressed in male terms. OK, it was patriarchical; does that mean it cannot be translated? I'd like to think that the concept is not so infected with the oppressive attitudes of the time in which it was written that some nugget of truth may not be mined from it to help us in

[1]R.W. Emerson, Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838, p. 19

our lives today.

Think about the idea of universal siblinghood. In February, I preached on love and Darwinism. Darwinian evolution as it used to be understood would give us all the tendency to protect our own kin – anyone who might be carrying our genes or those of a lose relative. If the overall idea is to propagate your own lineage, we should be protective of our tribe and killing off all the others. But today's evolutionary scientists are very impressed by the fact that we have such keenly attuned social skills, that we have the ability to read each other's minds to some extent. After all, since humans are capable of killing one another, the biggest threat to any individual's existence is not larger or fiercer animals, but other humans. Thus it's a handy thing for survival to have the ability to walk into a group of people and read the body language, facial expression and smell and determine with some accuracy whether you are going to be welcomed or killed. Eventually these social skills evolved into religions which taught the value of love, and extended the circle of kinship out to all humans.

I've sung this African American Christmas carol before; I think it expresses this Universalist idea nicely:

If anybody asks you who I am, who I am, who I am
If anybody asks you who I am, tell them I'm a child of God.

The other day as we welcomed new members into this church, we reminded ourselves that our church is built on covenant. Covenant is the glue that holds together a church which is not based on shared theological belief. It is the sum of all reasons why we come together, and as such it can't be expressed in any finite set of words. But the religious meaning of the term covenant is informed by its history in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew bible is basically the story of the covenant between God and God's chosen people, the Israelites. In the Torah, there are several covenants that God makes one with Noah, three with Abraham and one with Moses.

Now there is an interesting thing about the text which expresses one of the covenants with Abram. It occurs in the story of the first of these covenants, (Genesis 17) when God visits Abram. Two chapters later, the same story is told but God appears as three strangers to Abram and his wife Sarai. Sarai is barren, and is in her nineties, and yet God promises that she shall bear a son and out of that son shall come a great nation. Sarai in other words will be a super mother. She falls down laughing, which is why the son she then has is named Isaac, which means laughter.

But what is remarkable is the word used for God. In most of Genesis, God is designated by JHVH (jahweh) or Elohim. In this first telling of the covenant story, Genesis 17, the term, El Shaddai, is used, and it is used only a few more times in the Hebrew Bible. It is translated as "God Almighty," but when you break it down, "El" is the Semitic word for God -- Elohim is the more usual term for God – and Shaddai literally means mountains, so "El Shaddai" would mean God of the mountains. But some commentators have noted that the term *shaddai* is similar to Hebrew *shadayim* which is "breasts" and thus read El Shaddai as God of the breasts, in other words, a mother figure. This reading is disputed by others. Personally, I like the idea of a maternal God giving the covenant on which the Jewish people are founded. One commentator says that while the breast etymology is weak, the name El Shaddai does imply that God is all-sufficient, as the mother's milk is all sufficient for the newborn child.

The point I am trying to make is that covenant in its oldest religious meanings has overtones of maternal nurturance. The original glue that bound the children of Abraham was given by God, El Shaddai. In this church we no longer conceive of covenant as between God and humans, but as between humans and humans in the institution of the church. But we can hold each other in unconditional love as a mother holds a child. We can find some spiritual oxytocin. At our best, we do hold that way the children of this village.

We are all mothers, we are all babies. Each of us is enwombed in the covenanted body that is this church, and each of us is the womb as well. Let us continue to nurture one another.

Happy mother’s day.
Amen.

Genesis 17 The everlasting covenant and sign of circumcision

1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 8 And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

The Lanyard by Billy Collins

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,
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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.