

## The Good Enough Mother

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1870, Julia Ward Howe, a Unitarian devastated by images of the carnage of the Civil War, put out a call for women to rise up and oppose war in all its forms. She wanted women to come together across national lines, to recognize what we hold in common above what divides us, and commit to finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts. She issued a Declaration, hoping to gather together women in a congress of action. She failed in her attempt to get formal recognition of a Mother's Day for Peace. Her idea was influenced by Anna Jarvis, a young Appalachian homemaker who had attempted starting in 1858 to improve sanitation through what she called Mothers' Work Days. She organized women throughout the Civil War to work for better sanitary conditions for both sides.

Anna Jarvis' daughter, also named Anna Jarvis, knowing of her mother's work, and the work of Julia Ward Howe, seeking to honor their work, started her own crusade to found a memorial day for women. The first such Mother's Day was celebrated in West Virginia in 1907 in the church where the elder Anna Jarvis had taught Sunday School. From there the custom caught on — spreading eventually to 45 states. In 1914 the President, Woodrow Wilson, declared the first national Mother's Day and declared it to fall annually on the second Sunday in May.

Somewhere in the intervening years that spirit and that intent has gotten lost. What had been a festival in which mothers might be united in their public witness to maternal values, has been reduced to a celebration of mythical motherhood that unites the women of America in a tangle of mixed emotions.

At best the celebration of mother's day brings joy. For those whose temperament and circumstances may have created generations of women who were able to navigate the seas of motherhood with grace and equanimity, or those who have managed to bring to bear the resources of their own generation in a way that allow them to actually feel good most of the time about their mothering, today can feel like a reward for a year well spent.

For many others this day can feel like an annual performance review where we are invited to align ourselves and our mothers with that mythical creation known as "the good mother". Ratings and rewards in excess of what we feel is deserved make us feel guilty. Rewards and ratings less than we feel we have earned can make us feel, at best, like martyrs and, at worst, undervalued and unappreciated. Never mind that the standard measure of motherhood is based on a composit role who exists only as cultural myth.

One of the many web sites devoted to Mothers Day sums up the standard like this:

“A mother is the greatest and the most precious gift we receive from the Almighty. She makes each day a glowing one with her unconditional love... so on Mother's Day make her feel on top of the world by showering her with all your love. Give her lovely gifts, cook her favorite recipes or send her our free Mother's Day e-cards. Make her day really special!”

By my tally I was only able to make a month's worth of glowing days this year. I wonder what I get for that...

Mother's Day presents a particular irrational challenge to me because I want desperately for the messages on the greeting cards to be true for everyone without exception - for all mothers to be able to receive such appreciation and acknowledgement and gratitude with a sense of true deserving and all children of all ages to offer the same without reservation. We would all get “A's”. We would all get promotions.

Furthermore, I confess, that on this one day of the year, I, who prides myself as having a fully voluntary relationship with my four adult children, must struggle mightily against being cut to the quick if one or another of them does not call or send a card or a present within a few days which affirms my value in their lives. I am gratified with less than perfect indulgence such as this year's message from my eldest son which reads on the outside “Moms! They're like dads only smarter!” on the inside it says “...and prettier! Happy Mother's Day” - to which he added in his distinctive style and script, “Thanks for being prettier than my dad or John. It really means a lot to me. Love, Chris.” Well, I take what I can get.

My children and I know better than to shower each other with false praise. We have managed three decades of Mothers' Days because we have forged a relationship over time based more on our expressed and individual needs and expectations than an arbitrary date on the calendar.

But cultural pressure to measure up remains alive and continues to influence, for better and for worse, the process of women claiming our own unique identities and a sense of personal wholeness and authentic relationship with the people we parent and who have parented us.

Let us take a moment to sum up the measure of the Good Mother. My favorite summary appears as part of the 2004 Mothers Day Campaign which was an organized effort to challenge mothers to filter the messages and images of mothers they encounter in the media. Here is the image campaign sought to challenge.

“The perfect nurturing mom - always attentive to the kids, doesn't miss a school event, bakes the brownies from scratch – plus the Do it All Mom is the perfect professional career woman – always available for work, stays on the fast track and makes it to CEO - plus she has a perfect marriage, perfect sex life and perfect kids.

Good mothers love every minute of it, never feel ambivalent, never have a bad day, never yell at their kids, and are always smiling, relaxed and in control.

Good mothers always put their family's interests ahead of their own.

Good mothers do not have their own needs and interests, and do not seek their own fulfillment.

Good mothers are glamorous; young, attractive, perfectly fit, designer dressed, perfectly coiffed - and so are their children.

Good mothers love to do housework, are obsessed with cleaning.

Only mothers are capable of housework.

Good mothers have a spotless house and do everything from scratch; home-cooked meals, perfect birthday parties, and crafts.

These are the moms at whom most greeting cards are directed. And if you are or have one of them by nature or nurture, consider yourself blessed.”

But most mothers, even the ones who come close to this standard, are in reality, at times: tired, cranky, arbitrary, dumpy, unavailable, inarticulate, unfair, ambivalent, incompetent, reactive, unprepared, disorganized or impatient, and can be found wandering through the bakery aisle clutching a package of commercial brownies. In short wholly imperfect and human. And good enough.

This is not to imply that all mothering is good enough, that we should have no standards for what all children have a right to expect. It is not good enough to fail or refuse to attend to our children's need for basic food, shelter and safety. It is not good enough to be consistently hurtful or unavailable or unloving. It is not good enough to deny children education and access to basic cultural resources. But the reality is that mothers and children are born together every day in an astonishing wide range of circumstances that are less than ideal for making every day a “glowing one”. Children born to mothers whose own physical, emotional, spiritual needs were not adequately met do grow up and sometimes they pass on those deficits to the next generation. But human spirit is also resilient and many, many individuals, without the benefit of homemade brownies or designer jeans or soccer camp or the constant selfless attention of a devoted maternal presence, become whole and contributing members of society and often become themselves, good enough parents.

And the key to this is to learn one thing: Motherhood (or fatherhood) is not a role, a prescription, a formula that can be measured and summed up on a greeting card. It's a committed relationship, fraught with all of the demands and ambiguities and joys and frustrations and challenges and surprises and rewards that any committed relationship entails. It is a life exercise that involves seeking mutuality and balance of power as the individuals change and learn about their gifts and limitations across overlapping life stages. The parent child relationship is, of course, inherently complicated in the fact that the initial agendas are mutually exclusive. It is a parent's JOB to nurture and guide and protect. It is a CHILD'S job to grow and risk and individuate. Nature does not ordain that children remain connected throughout their lives to their parents. What holds human parents and children together, is that we are, for better and for worse, inextricably imprinted by our early relationship experience. What is more, HOW we are being imprinted is, in any given moment, largely a mystery. If we are able to communicate directly it can be less so. But if out of shame or fear or concern about how well we are

embodying a role, we hold back our best efforts to make our needs and our wishes and our expectations known, parents and children alike can have our personalities shaped under the weight of misunderstanding.

.Earlier this spring twenty six women from this congregation were attracted to a workshop entitled Mothering and Identity. Participants spanned three generations. Each brought into the circle her own stories of how her identity had been formed in relationship with the women who had, for better and for worse, mothered them. To one degree or another each of us had fallen prey to the cultural mythology. Some of us who had been mothered to our satisfaction struggled with the pressure to be as good as our mothers. Others were dealing with disappointments of long unmet needs from mothers who had been unable, due to their own limitations, to either play the mother role or to engage in nurturing relationship. To have children or choose the task for all was to come to some place of greater acceptance and appreciation for our mothers and for our children as unique and complex human beings. This morning you heard from two of them who took on the task with intention and grace. Their stories are real, of wholeness and struggle and reconciliation.

It is in the context of real relationship that this can happen. Over time our parents become human, our children can forgive us, claim their own stories, choose to have children who they will disappoint about different things.

I think that at best we must stop trying so hard to get it right and start trying to make it real. Family relationships form the very core of human identity formation. Mother, fathers, husbands, wives, daughters, sons –names for human being all struggling to use whatever resources we can to eek out some sense of well being with the resource we have available to us from birth. This is not a contest. It's a commitment to doing the best we can in the face of uncertain outcomes.

I have come to know myself as a good enough mother. My children are all grown and we are mostly proud of each other and find pleasure in each others' company. That's my criteria. You get to set your own.

I think of those times when I knew that there were twelve things I could do to make a situation worse and two that could better and that I would likely have to run through at least ten of the twelve to get to the two. What improved the odds was that over time I was able to leverage the authentic complexity of the relationship.

My most vivid example, which I shared with the motherhood class.

My first year out of seminary was a hard one. I had resumed full physical custody of my three children. It had been a hard transition for my oldest son and we had gotten some family counseling and by early February things seemed to be on a pretty even keel.

On the morning before I was to leave them for a few days and fly to Berkeley to meet with the credentialing committee for Unitarian Universalist ministry, I was feeling more than the usual daily stress. I realized that I didn't have anything sweet to put in their lunches so I set about to make Rice Krispie bars. I melted the marshmallows and the butter in a large plastic bowl in the microwave and then set it too close to the stove where a burner was on. The heat from the burner melted a hole in the bowl and contents ran out onto the burner. I was already stressed and I knew that if I could just get the kids

off to school I would be safely able to let off a little steam. No such luck. At about that moment, Chris, who was sitting at the table directly across from where I stood, reached over to his little brother and ticked him on the side of the head. This was a gesture perfected to elicit the maximum response with the minimum effort – which Bob had also perfected. It was a piercing scream that entered my body at the breast bone and passed out through my kidneys. I was holding a twelve ounce glass of V-8 juice. At that moment I lost all intention. I threw the juice (not the glass) across the table. Chris was wearing a hooded sweatshirt with the hood up. The juice grazed the side of his hood and splattered on the wall behind him.

I was horrified. Five months of therapy out the window. A day ahead trying to get him settled down. Not to mention the possibility that I was losing my mind. He got from the table and left the room. I collected my thoughts by doing the only sensible thing. I wiped up the juice. And before I had even fully collected my thoughts, Chris came back into the room and sat down and started eating his cereal.

“Chris,” I said. “I am SO sorry for throwing that juice at you. I am not sorry for being mad. You know that what you did makes me crazy. But you did not deserve to have me do what I did.” In that moment he had more power than he would ever have in his life again.

And he said, “That’s okay, Mom. Sometimes I have days when I feel like that, too.”

Was this the mother of the hallmark card. Hardly. But I am willing to share this with you on this Mother’s Day without shame or embarrassment because I believe that embedded in this story is all the nuance and complexity of good enough mothering. This is the son who twenty two years later still finds me prettier than his dad or John and is not afraid to say so.

Good enough mothering is like Unitarian Universalism is a good enough religion. It doesn’t provide all the answers but creates a context, a framework and a structure that hold all of the promise of relational wholeness. Congregations and families in all their configurations are the place where we learn to be in relationships that sustain us in all of our living and teach us the meaning of love and commitment.

It’s Mother’s Day. Let us celebrate that love “that comes from the midst of everything, sees like the iris of an eye, when the light is right, feels in blindness and when there is nothing else is tender, blinks, and opens face up to the skies.”

