

“Mothering the World”

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Some of us may remember the television program
“Romper Room”...when Miss Molly looked into her Magic Mirror
and “saw” particular children who were watching.

When she said hello to them, it really did feel like magic...
but of course, it really wasn't.

The television host could be pretty sure there would be
a Michael or a Susan or a David or a Jane
watching that day.

But recently I heard a former child, now grown up and in his sixties,
recall how hurt he felt when he was never named by Miss Molly.

That is to say, no matter how well-meaning the script,
the clever device of the Magic Mirror couldn't hold a candle to
genuine presence and attention.

We all flourish when we are acknowledged and appreciated...

When our place in the family of things is noticed and affirmed.

In fact, it is this loving attention—
to each other, to ourselves, to the specific realities of this world
—that brings Life to life.

That loves the world into being.
That nurtures Life's way into healing and transformation.

This Mother's Day, as we are apart from each other,
yet also beholding each other's presence through the
Magic Mirror of Zoom...

We're invited to affirm life in a nurturing way...
whether we are biological mothers ourselves or not.

It is something each of us can do.

And it can help us grow through difficult times...
challenging experiences...
transitions that are destined to transform us,
whether we're ready for them, or not.

By mothering the world...
By mothering ourselves...

we can help ourselves get through
to whatever awaits us at the next stages
of spiritual maturity.

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When we bring new life into being,
whether through biological reproduction or through the millions of
small and large creative acts we each do every day,
we serve life through our attentive presence.

All good parenting begins with simple, patient attentiveness
to the needs of the newborn and the growing child.

And indeed, every act of creativity, of every kind,
can be seen as a kind of parenting.

Of bringing something new to life.

It always starts with attentive presence.

While living very humbly in a small apartment, Vincent Van Gogh was struck by the sight of the evening sky and a lamppost.

He made a small sketch and sent it to his brother Theo saying, “It is so beautiful I have to share it with you.”¹

Every musical composition begins with enjoyment of a series of notes or chords...as the musician tries to arrange them in a way that is most beautiful, that suits them best.

A short story or a poem begins with simply noticing something.

All of Mary Oliver’s poetry has that quality of simple, attentive presence.

And Adrie Kusserow, who wrote “Mary Oliver for Corona Times”²—well, she was, lovingly attentive to the poetry of Mary Oliver!

As Brenda Ueland wrote in her 1938 book “If You Want to Write,”

“[The creative impulse] is a feeling of love and enthusiasm for something, and in a direct, simple, passionate and true way, you try to show this beauty in things to others.”³

Every act of creativity—of birthing something new in the world and of creating new relationship—begins with non-judgmental, accepting presence of what is in front of us, in the here and now.

¹ Brenda Ueland, “*If You Want to Write*” (Graywolf Press: St. Paul, 1987), 19.

² <http://newstoryhub.com/2020/04/mary-oliver-for-corona-times-thoughts-after-the-poem-wild-geese-from-adrie-kusserow/>

³ Ibid.

And as we know, new life is created in so very many ways.

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When we listen to another person with non-judgmental, attentive presence, we invite them to emerge fully in their beautiful uniqueness.

When we listen to ourselves with non-judgmental, attentive presence, we invite ourselves to blossom, as well.

In this time of isolation, even our attentiveness to the absence of each other can be a form of reverence.

Indeed, pretending that everything is “normal” or “business as usual” denies what is true, and stands in the way of the natural unfolding of life.

The chalk marks on our street, and the signs in so many windows, reveal an attentiveness to absence.

Words such as “we love you” and “be well” speak to people who have yet to walk by.

In our neighbourhood, a particularly enthusiastic chalk artist is attentive also to his own imagination—and no doubt his own hopes and wishes for a hurting world.

He draws new and detailed superheroes each day.

Whoever and wherever we are right now, we have the creative materials we need to “mother the world” and love it toward healing...

And far more important than the chalk, or the paintbrush,

is the attention. The presence to this moment.

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We mother the world when we hold with love
our own experience...including difficult emotions
such as irritation, sadness and anxiety.

We may be noticing these more often than we used to.

Wisdom teaches us that to simply notice these emotions
and hold them, as we would a crying child,
can allow them to calm down and not be “acted out”
in ways that can harm others.

This crisis provides a marvelous opportunity to see ourselves up
close, and not at our best.

This is a different kind of “Magic Mirror.”

It invites to see ourselves more clearly...
to be present to what’s real.

By noticing our less-than-optimal behaviours,
and reflecting on them with curiosity,
perhaps with a trusted friend or counselor,

we can give birth to deeper understanding of ourselves,
which can contribute to resilience and more fulfilling relationships
at any time.

For example, when we notice ourselves judging another person
harshly in this time, we might catch ourselves when we want to say
something impulsively, and kindly ask ourselves...what’s going on
with me? What’s behind my impulse to be unkind right now?

Perhaps I'm feeling scared...or I'm worried about my own ability to cope with the pandemic.

Perhaps I'm seeking control at a time when I'm feeling powerless... or I'm letting off the steam of unexpressed anger.

I can talk to someone about this...get it out in the open so I can see it and work with it more consciously.

As many people have observed, and we will explore in future sermons, grief is playing a very significant role in all our life stories right now.

We're feeling the loss of loved ones who are absent, relationships that have changed, job prospects that are gone, events that we miss...

Perhaps most especially, we are grieving the sense of security that comes from thinking we know what's going to happen next.

All of these losses and more add up to complicated and persistent grief, even when we're doing reasonably well under the circumstances.

The emotions of grief are hardly appealing, but they too are raw material for the creative process we're undergoing.

All of them can be noticed, affirmed and explored.

"I see you, anger."

"There you are, denial."

"Ah, sadness. Welcome back."

I'm reminded of the famous poem by Rumi,

“The Guest House” in which he, like other teachers, recommends that we simply invite in all of our troublesome feelings:

*“The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”⁴*

I see that “beyond” as the state-of-being we’re growing toward...which is beyond us at the moment.

When we notice all our feelings,
as a non-judgmental witness might,
we provide loving parenting to ourselves,
in a way that reduces our tendency to cause harm.

Mindful attention is enough...but we might also choose to explore our experience more deeply through journaling, conversation, reflection or prayer.

Works of creativity, such as poetry, song or painting can be helpful as well.

In all of these mindful ways, we invite transformation, growth and new life.

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One of the great gifts of my childhood was to be taught the art of pottery-making by my mother.

⁴ Jalalludin Rumi, “The Guest House,” in *The Essential Rumi: Translations by Coleman Barks* (HarperCollins, 2004), 109.

Over many years of using the potter's wheel in our basement, I made my share of serviceable bowls, some of which still survive in our cupboards.

But in times like these, I don't think of all the bowls that turned out the way I hoped they would.

Instead I think of the failed pots.

The ones that started out so well, rising gracefully on the wheel, perhaps achieving an impressive height...

But then started to go a bit off-center, perhaps because I wasn't fully attentive...

The walls becoming thinner and wobblier, until despite my best efforts the whole thing fell apart and collapsed.

One good thing about that experience was:

I couldn't deny what was happening.

The only thing I could do was let the clay structure fall down into a heap on the wheel and then take a wire, cut it off the wheel, and throw the watery clay back into the bucket, for it to be reworked again.

There was, in that messy process, a clear demonstration of the "That Which Is"—of the "So Be It."

Something that was not hoped for nor desired, but that still provided the raw material for something good, yet to come.

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When we feel that much is lost,
whether in our hopes for a more just and loving world,
or for our own health and well-being, we can trust in this
transformative process...

Knowing that we ourselves are being worked on by Life...
and shaped into people we are meant to become.

Even as we are undergoing this process, we can witness it,
with loving attention, providing mothering space for ourselves.

Recently a psychotherapist who closed her office at the beginning of
the Pandemic sent a letter to her clients.

It was her way of saying “I see you, I hear you, I feel you”—
even in a time of absence.

Though the author allowed her letter⁵ to be published,
she chose to remain anonymous.

Here is an excerpt from her letter:

“No matter what, whether it turns out okay in the end or not,
you carry the Divine within you.

You are Enough, not because of the things
you do but because of who you are fundamentally.

Intrinsically.

⁵ Yes Magazine, *An Anarchist's Prayer to Ease Anxiety* (Anonymous, shared by Ayu Sutriasa). <https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2020/03/24/coronavirus-prayer-anxiety/?fbclid=IwAR0EtlyY0EMBMDB8zVMF4FjTVWStN8OOtK-h4owdl11DZ-uMeQfvk9B2g-k>

Always and without exception.

Take a breath or two to allow yourself to Know this.” (pause)

She continued:

“And when we pick up the anxiety again,
let us aim for flexibility.

Movement space for breath to get in and out of your rib cage,
gentleness for the things we can't do,

and Integrity giving us the strength and resolve
to turn our sometimes-excruciating caring
into solidarity, mutual aid, and direct action.

We are each one person, breathing this one breath,
with common Divinity.

We can do this. Together.”

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In our Unitarian hymnbook, “Singing the Living Tradition”
there's a simple hymn called “I Know This Rose Will Open.”

Roses are often given and received on Mother's Day.

As I sing, you'll see the lyrics on your screen,
and if you like, you can sing along at home...
in unison or even as a round if you like.
I'll sing it several times through.

And after the service today,
when you meet each other for Coffee Time,
I invite you to reflect on the many ways of
“mothering” that are opening up in you
and in the world today.