

**Are you my mother?**  
Rev. Linda Thomson  
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto  
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When I was young my mother used to sing a song to me in a ‘campy’ voice. She’d laugh and I’d laugh - because it was just so corny, because for us it was just a bit too much. The song was called, M - O - T - H - E - R and while I don’t remember the tune, some of you may, I do know that the words went like this:

"M" is for the million things she gave me,  
"O" means only that she's growing old,  
"T" is for the tears she shed to save me,  
"H" is for her heart of purest gold;  
"E" is for her eyes, with love-light shining,  
"R" means right, and right she'll always be,  
Put them all together, they spell  
"MOTHER,"  
A word that means the world to me.

Howard Johnson wrote that poem sometime around 1915, I don’t know when the music that my mom used to sing was written. My guess is that Howard Johnson didn’t think it was corny, that he didn’t laugh. And I don’t suppose that the people at Hallmark are laughing either, unless it’s all the way to the bank.

If you’ve been paying attention, well actually, if you’ve been anywhere but in a cave for the last few weeks, you know that today is Mother’s Day. And listening to the radio, and looking at the ads in the paper, and watching television and walking through any store you’d think that the only appropriate emotions today are adoration and undying loyalty. You’d also think that the only way to mark the occasion is with diamonds, flowers and extravagant gifts. You’d think that all children love nothing more than spending the day doing two things, attentively seeing to their mother’s every need and sitting by her feet looking adoringly into her eyes.

Yet we're all clever people and we know that things aren't always what they seem to be. We know that media messages aren't always to be trusted. We know that there are other emotions and other ways to spend Mother's Day.

I'd like to start by saying that I don't have any particular personal challenges with Mother's Day – no axe to grind. I had a mother; we got along quite well. I am a mother, and I think that things are pretty good on that front too. So, this Mother business has worked fairly well for me and as a result I'm quite happy to mark the day.

But here I am, I want to be honest, I want to talk about Mother's Day – not wanting to rain on the parade of those who have reason to celebrate today and wanting to honour the experience of those who do not.

We know that Mother's Day, or any other commonly observed holiday or celebration is complicated business. We know that there are a variety of experiences associated with all of them, and so when we come to mark them, we find ourselves walking a fine line.

Robert Fulghum, who wrote the essay "All I really need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" a retired Unitarian minister, talks about the challenge, as he reflects on how difficult it was to find a balance. He wrote about how about how each year, he'd think about his mom and the other mothers he'd known and how that really didn't help much. He says he tried to deliver 'on-the-one-hand-and-then-on-the-other-hand sorts of balanced, evasive sermons". He tells about how he'd quoted authorities, read poetry and how he always finished thinking that half of the people were disappointed because he'd not been honest and the how the other half felt he'd not been respectful.

The tension is real. The idea of Mothers and motherhood are particularly laden with meaning and emotion... and despite the advertisements, we know that there is no single understanding about the whole matter.

For many people, Mother's Day is a painful day. For some it surfaces the sad and painful memories of a difficult childhood. How do you, they wonder, look lovingly into the eyes of a woman who hurt you, or who neglected you, or who was not part of your life? Where are the Mother's Day cards for those who have lost their mothers? Some people think with heart-wrenching grief or guilt of opportunities lost, of motherhood ended prematurely or never realized. Can those who are estranged from their mothers or their children find any meaning in a day that reminds them of loss and betrayal? How are those who are childless by choice affirmed amidst the cards and the flowers? How do non-binary or trans parents find themselves in a day which almost relentlessly promotes a sparkly pink version of womanhood? Where, in the commercial mono-message packaging of Mother's Day, is there room for the emotions of all those who have, for whatever reason, anything other than

an idyllic experience with being mothered or of mothering and who find today painful? How can we honour their experience – their reality?

My respectful intent is to find a way to honour most of the wide variety of emotions and responses to Mother's Day, and to offer a suggestion, at one way we, in religious communities, can find a way to reclaim it. A way to make it a day we can all find some value in. I don't want to minimize the hurt that people feel. I know that these are all too real and all too common experiences. I can only imagine how difficult Mother's Day is for some. I'd like us to be honest about that and recognize that the common messages about Mother's Day don't fit a lot of people.

I found it helpful, at this point in my thinking, to ask myself at this point what a mother is – what is the essence of mothering. We all know the standard definition, “a female parent”, but we give less thought to other definitions, “a quality or condition that gives rise to something else” and “to protect.” So, if we expand our definition from the expected to the less expected, I believe that we can find a way to make this day work, at least a bit better, for all of us.

You may know the book I reference in the title of this sermon, “Are you My Mother?” In it a baby bird out of the nest is wandering around asking who ever and whatever it encountered, “Are you My Mother” I could support the argument that the baby bird wasn't as confused as we might have thought at first read. The baby bird's somewhat improbable question, “Are you my mother?” was one we could all ask.

When we look around with unbiased eyes, as the baby bird did, we can ask “Are you my mother”, perhaps not of kittens, dogs and cows - the baby bird didn't get particularly warm responses in all quarters. But the bird did find eventually find care and I suggest we can too, when we look around and ask one another for the support and care we need.

In the story, the excavator – The Snort, went out its way to protect the baby bird, and to return it safety to the nest. Temporarily at least, according to one of the more nuanced definitions of the term mother, The Snort mothered the baby bird.

As I said earlier though, I want to find a way to reclaim the day – not to take away the difficult parts, for that would not be respectful, but to find at least something of value in it for all of us who are involved in this human laboratory you call the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto. And in the simple children's story I find some of the clues that may help with that challenge.

Mothering can be “a quality or condition that gives rise to something else”. What are you becoming? I believe that is one of the reasons why we’ve all chosen to be here this morning. I believe that many of us come to this, or other congregations, looking for support in our journeys through life. What in you has the potential to become something else? Do you have talents and potential that needs nurturing? It is my belief that we all have a need to be nurtured and supported in our endeavours. Perhaps you have an undeveloped gift for organization, or leading a group, or playing a musical instrument or speaking in front of a crowd. I encourage you to look around for the mothering – the support – you need. To ask, “Are you my mother?” - To find for yourself the nurturing you need, to give rise to a new you.

And what about the need for protection implied in one of the other definitions of mothering? What do you need protecting from; yourself? What frightens you; loneliness, illness, the world? Maybe the person beside you can be your mother and offer you at least a bit of protection and comfort as you struggle with the world. Just as we come here looking for fresh challenges and support in realizing our potential, I believe that many of us, have at least some of the time, come looking for a sanctuary, the ability to get away from some of the hard realities we face.

I’ve seen many of you step up when there was mothering to be done. Many of you have seen the tentative attempts of another, a baby bird looking for a mother, or lost and confused, and you’ve accepted the job. With care and patience and with humour you’ve supported the development of others. You’ve shown that you can mother an interesting and varied assortment of people. Time and time again, in our congregations, I have seen people with a variety of gifts nurtured. I’ve been one of them. Nurturing can be tricky business, we need to be careful and respectful, we need to honour the autonomy and independence of others but we can, if we are careful, provide real support for others. I’ve discovered too that we can’t exactly protect people from the world or guarantee them safety. We can’t make the world better for people, but I do know that we can offer some care to one another. We can at least offer others the knowledge that they are cared about, that there is someone who can cry with them, who can sit with them and who can help them deal with the danger in their life. I’ve been literally awe-struck by the care which I’ve heard some of you show to others at times when this sort of protection was needed. When we come together in community, this is one of the things we do for one another. It’s hard work, we don’t always get it right and it hurts sometime...mothering often does.

In community, and in this community we can mother the young and the not so young. In community we all can mother - to exercise our own capacity to nurture new possibilities. Collectively we have mothered and been mothered. And this community has mothered and has been the recipient of our mothering. 25 years ago, 10 years ago, 3 years ago and 8 months ago, this congregation was something else. It has been mothered – it has been cared for and nurtured so that it could become something else. 25 years ago, 10 years ago, 3 years ago and 8 months ago, we were each something else. For some, that change was the result of their involvement here. For some, having a faith community and a group of fellow seekers has been just what they needed. Many have felt mothered by this community. Mothering can take place on an individual and on a community level. We can mother and be mothered by one another, and we can mother and be mothered by community. That's quite impressive.

The business of looking with fresh eyes at the world, of considering that others can, at least in part, be mothers to us, requires courage on our part. Most of us are pretty good at operating from our skills, at appearing competent. Most of us do a very credible job of hiding our fears, of putting on a casual – ‘no problem’ face, even when we are terrified inside. And most of us prefer it that way. We want to look like we're in control, we want others to think we know what we doing – and that's good. Or at least it is some of the time. Yet there are times when we don't know what we're doing and when we could use help. At times our need for comfort and protection is too strong for us to manage without help. It takes courage at those times to ask, “Are you my mother?”

My hope for this Mother's Day is that we can all muster a bit of courage; enough courage to allow ourselves to be mothered and enough courage to mother others. It's possible for those who need support and life-affirming nurturing to offer it to others, and it is possible for the competent nurturers among us to accept mothering from others. It is in this way that I suggest we might reclaim Mother's Day. Many people have difficult or painful associations with motherhood. Loss, separation, regret, anger and betrayal are not typically dealt with on Mother's Day greeting cards. Perhaps you find my assertion that we can reframe in a positive light, what is for so many a painful association, too simple. I understand and I respect that. Yet, I do believe, that we can reframe and reclaim, if we ground our consideration in patience and in full recognition of the complexity of the task. It takes time and it doesn't make the pain go away. But it can, I believe, provide us with something of value. Behind the cards, and the flowers and the ads, there is something of value. Taking time to reflect on the positive impact that being nurtured and that nurturing has had in our lives is worthwhile. Who among us, regardless of our experiences as mothers or as children of mothers, or people who have known mothers, has not had nurturing experiences that affirm our belief in goodness and possibility? We are all

mothers and we can all find new opportunities to be mothered. So I encourage us to consider that powerful question that the baby bird asked. "Are you my mother?", and, I encourage us to consider ways in which we can when it is asked of us, can say yes. So to you all of you - a card, sent with great affection.

Happy Mother's Day!