

Acknowledging Mothers©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Today is Mother's Day—a nationally recognized holiday. I hope today is especially good for those of you who are mothers. So as not to leave anyone out, I hope this is a good day for all of us, whether we are mothers or not. It is both appropriate and important that we acknowledge and honor mothers on this special day. For without mothers, none of us would be here. The world would be completely devoid of human life. In fact, most of the advanced life forms on this planet wouldn't exist if not for mothers across the multitude of species. In this country this holiday is a time when mothers are acknowledged and honored.

And yet, as I think of acknowledging and honoring mothers on this special day, I am aware that the original intent of this holiday is quite narrow and limiting. When you look at where the apostrophe is placed in the word "Mother's," you will notice that mother is singular not plural. So if I was to stay strictly within the confines of how this day is designated, my sharing with you would be limited to things about my own mother. My guess is all of you would consider an entire sermon about my mother to be unappealing and unsatisfactory. That would certainly be enough reason for me to go beyond the bounds suggested by the name of the holiday. But there is an even more compelling reason for me to speak to this holiday much more broadly. You see, if I told my mother I preached an entire sermon about her she would be upset that I would spend so much time talking about her in front of a group of people she didn't know. To respect and honor my mother on this Mother's Day then, I want to be much more inclusive than the name of the holiday suggests. I want to speak to the larger concept of mothering. I think it is important for me to do this because I believe it is the right and proper thing to do.

As Unitarian Universalists we seek to recognize and include those who may feel ignored or left out in any number of ways. Mother's Day in the singular tense, leaves out a significant number of people who have, in one way or another, provided mothering to others. So today I want us each to think about how we might acknowledge and honor our own mothers on this day. And I want us also to contemplate how we will recognize, acknowledge and honor those who have provided us with what we have needed, not just to survive but to thrive.

As we consider what I am suggesting here, I would invite us to recall the Story for All Ages which we heard earlier. In the story Chester was resistant to the idea of leaving his familiar and comfortable home to attend school. He pleaded with his mother to let him stay home. My guess is that every one of us has had times when we were resistant to some change in the course of our life. Chester's mother recognized that what her child was requesting was not in his best interest. She also recognized that what laid beneath his requests were feelings, feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, anxiety and fear. All of us have experienced such feelings. It was clear to Chester's mother that what he needed was something that would be strong enough to carry him through this challenging time as well as many others that he would experience in his future. What she gave him was a way to remember and to feel that he was loved.

This story identifies the commonly held perspective that birth mothers are often very good at recognizing and providing for the needs of their child. It is easy to acknowledge and honor mothers when they are able to provide what their child or children require. Yet there are times when any or even all birth mothers find themselves unable to offer what their child needs. At these times there can be a tendency to look upon the mother negatively. Most people don't realize that it was mothers who struggled to adequately care for their children who were the motivation for this holiday. Here is a bit of history you may not be aware of. Before the Civil War, Ann Reeves Jarvis invested years of her life organizing Mother's Day Work Clubs. The purpose of the clubs was to teach mothers how to properly care for their children. In the early 20th century, Ann's daughter, Anna Jarvis, proposed the Mother's Day holiday that we celebrate today. Because Anna thought so highly of her mother, she wanted to establish a holiday when each person would celebrate their birth mother. Celebrating our birth mother is certainly an important thing to do. But when I think about the work her mother did, I believe it is appropriate to expand the original intent Anna had for this holiday. The focus of Ann Reeves Jarvis' work was mothering. It wasn't just about the issue of someone being a birth mother. She wanted those who mother to have what was needed to properly care for the children.

So who is it that cares for children? Is it only a birth mother? Clearly, many people who are not birth mothers provide care for children. A high percentage of women who have not born a child themselves have nurtured, supported and cared for the biological child of another. There are adoptive mothers. There are step-mothers. And there are foster mothers to name three specific examples. But I think we could, and likely should, consider others as well. I think of the teachers I have known who didn't have children of their own. These teachers demonstrate considerable care for the children in their classes. These teachers help the children gain the knowledge and experience they will need to function well as they progress through the years. Mrs. Raccoon certainly recognized the important role school and Chester's teachers would have in his life. Along with teachers, there are many other women who work in fields that provide for the wellbeing of children. There are childcare staff, doctors and nurses, police women, school bus drivers, and child abuse and neglect caseworkers. This is far from an exhaustive list. In fact it is just a small sample of those who provide care, nurture, protection and support to children.

Earlier I stated that without mothers none of us would be here today. There is an alternative way to conceive of the truth this statement holds. Without children there would be no mothers. From this alternative way of perceiving Mother's Day, I would suggest we acknowledge birth mothers first and that we then go further to consider and to acknowledge the multitudes of women who offer mothering to the children of this world. I would recommend that each of us take time to recall the many women who cared for and nurtured us through the course of our lives. I know in my own life many of those women have been older than I was. But there have been a good number of women who were near my own age and some who were younger than me. While birth mothers are always older than their child, age is not a determining factor in who provides mothering to another.

And now I want to take the concept of acknowledging mothers on this holiday a very big step further. As I have shared with you in past sermons, I spent many years

following the spiritual traditions of the Sioux. The Sioux, along with many other Native Peoples of this continent, believe that we are all related, we are all children of the same mother. That mother is this beautiful and incredible planet we call home—Mother Earth. Without Mother Earth there would be no mothers, no children, no humanity, no life as we know it. I know that there is a recently established day, Earth Day, when people recognize and honor the Earth. But the focus of Earth Day tends to be environmental. I believe it is important for us to acknowledge Earth as much more than just another inanimate object. The Earth is and always will be the origin of our existence and the provider of all that sustains us. The Earth is the original and the ultimate mother of each and every one of us.

So now that I have gone way beyond the bounds of what this holiday was originally established to celebrate, you might wonder what I might suggest as to how we can acknowledge and honor mothers. Here I refer to mothers plural, not mother singular as is the case in the name of the holiday. Again, I would have us recall the Story for All Ages. Chester experienced the power of the simple expression of love that his mother had shared with him. In return, he offered the same expression in response. He took her hand and placed a gentle kiss in her palm. Now before anyone starts going around kissing women's palms, I want to be clear that is not what I am suggesting. What I am saying though is that acknowledging and honoring those who mother can be done with simple gestures and expressions. Gestures and expressions such as a heartfelt thank you, a hug, or an offer to help when assistance would be beneficial and welcomed. These are just a few ways that any and all of us can acknowledge and show our appreciation for those who offer us mothering. And I would suggest that we shouldn't wait until Mother's Day to do such things. We ought to be showing our appreciation in such ways more days than not, maybe even every day.

It seems to me that acknowledging mothers and those who mother each and every day would be the best way to not only acknowledge and honor our birth mother, but to honor all mothers of all time. Such acknowledging and honoring would touch the heart of every mother, birth or otherwise. And it would touch the lives of children who are alive today as well as those who are not yet born. Acknowledging and honoring in the way I am suggesting would, I believe, continue what Ann Reeves Jarvis, the mother of Mother's Day, spent so many years doing, working to make this world a better place for every life that comes into it. That my friends is work which is truly worth every bit of time and energy we can give it. And it is a wish, a dream that every mother holds for their children and for themselves. May this wish, this dream, become a reality.

May it be so.