

MY MOTHER'S GARDEN  
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, May 11, 2003

Happy Mother's Day, everyone! I'd like to spend a few minutes to begin with, just hearing from you about what "Mother" has meant to you. Just a brief word or two of what comes to mind when you think of "mother", either your own mother or someone else's or your own experience of motherhood, whether biological or relational. (cong.)

Mothers have been blamed for most social ills and accredited with most social benefits, sometimes in the same breath. Children are told to respect their mothers on the one hand and to separate from them on the other. When I was a school counselor, one recurring theme in my work with girls was their struggle to understand and cope with their need to separate, to be different from their mothers----without hurting them--and the struggle of their mothers to understand and cope with this need.

It's one of life's hardest moments, to recognize that one's role as a mother or as a child has changed irrevocably in a few short months and that the path through the brambles will be both sweet with berries and prickly with thorns.

This process of separation, of establishing independence, is both painful and poignant. As children grow away from their families, they often explore values and behaviors that are anathema to parents. We have all watched, and maybe even personally experienced, this wrenching time.

Lou and Peter Berryman, folk song writers, penned a song called "A Chat With Your Mom", which illustrates this time of life---at least for some of us. I'll read you just the first verse and chorus.

“O the pirates with their fetid galleons, daggers in their skivvies, with infected tattooed fingers on a blunderbuss or two, signs of scurvy in their eyes and only mermaids on their minds, it’s from them I would expect to hear the F-word, not from you! We sit down to have a chat, it’s f-word this and f-word that. I can’t control how you young people talk to one another, but I don’t want to hear you use that F-word with your mother!”

Mothers are often idealized beyond belief or criticized unmercifully. But the role of mothers in society has become recognized as critically important.

The earliest Mother’s Day celebrations can be traced back to the spring celebrations of ancient Greece in honor of Rhea, the Mother of the Gods. During the 1600’s, England celebrated a day called Mothering Sunday. Celebrated on the 4th Sunday of Lent (the 40 day period leading up to Easter) Mothering Sunday honored the mothers of England.

During this time, many of England’s poor people worked as servants for the wealthy. As most jobs were located far from their homes, the servants would live in the houses of their employers. On Mothering Sunday, the servants would have the day off and were encouraged to return home and spend the day with their mothers. A special cake, called the “mothering cake”, was often brought along to provide a festive touch.

As Christianity spread throughout Europe, the celebration changed to honor “the Mother Church”, the spiritual institution that demanded their loyalty and was said to protect them from hell. Over time the church festival blended with the Mothering Sunday celebration and people began

to honor their mothers as well as the church.

In the United States, Mother's Day was first suggested in 1872 by Julia Ward Howe, one of our feminist foremothers. In her Mother's Day Proclamation, which we read earlier, she is clear about wielding the power of mothers to bring peace with integrity to the United States. Our nation had just been through the Civil War, and Reconstruction had brought with it numerous challenges, though the Union had survived.

Julia Ward Howe held organized Mother's Day meetings in Boston every year. In 1907, Ana Jarvis of Philadelphia began a campaign to establish a national Mother's Day. Ms. Jarvis persuaded her mother's church in Grafton, WV, to celebrate Mother's Day on the second anniversary of her mother's death, the 2nd Sunday of May. By the next year, Mother's Day was also celebrated in Philadelphia.

Gradually, support for Mother's Day grew and by 1911 Mother's Day was celebrated in nearly every state. President Woodrow Wilson made it official in 1914, that the second Sunday of May would henceforth be a national holiday honoring mothers.

Many other countries of the world celebrate a Mother's Day, some on the 2nd Sunday of May and some on different dates. Mother's Day has come to be internationally recognized as an important occasion, though its commercialization can be troubling and somewhat overpowering.

Our mothers have profound influence on us, whether they are loving and kind, or strict and rigid, or cruel or permissive or troubled or healthy. We often both love them and reject them; and those of us who are mothers recognize that our children also struggle with these feelings

about us.

Our roles as disciplinarians and as nurturers sometimes collide; our need to care for our children sometimes interferes with our need to let them go. But mothers leave an indelible mark on their children, for better or for worse.

There's a favorite quote by Alice Walker that describes the indelible mark my mother left on me. Walker writes "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength--in search of my mother's garden, I found my own." I really like that, for my mother was a tireless gardener, no matter which small town or Baptist parsonage she lived in.

But you know, I don't think I remember one thing about my mother's vegetable garden. I don't think I ever ate a tomato or a zucchini out of it. I didn't get shanghaied into weeding it, that I can remember. I have no fond memories of her kneedeep in cornstalks or peas.

And I don't remember very much about her flower garden. Oh, I remember the odd rosebush--always infested with aphids, as I recall---and some nasturtiums and a lilac bush. But the garden of my family home isn't the garden I remember.

Here's what I do remember. How many of you have been to Cannon Beach, over on the Oregon Coast? Can you visualize what it looks like? How the little creek up at the north end of town flows down along the beach and into the ocean, not far from Haystack Rock?

When I was a little girl, my family started going to Cannon Beach every summer for a week. We went to Cannon Beach Bible Conference to hear singing and preaching and meet friends from all over the country.

It was a lot of fun because there were lots of other kids and we had good kids programs.

As I got older, however, there were fewer kids my age. And when I became a teenager, there were really just my sister and me who were close in age. And as it turned out, we spent a lot of time with my mother, walking on the beach or through the town, while my dad was in meetings.

Now, you need to know some things about my mother. My mother loved to memorize poetry and she was able to come up with some poem no matter what the occasion. I have little pieces of poems floating around in my head to this day. I don't know the whole poem, only the line or two that managed to stick in my memory when my mother quoted it. For example:

“Guiseppe da barber, he greata for mash, he gotta da bigga, da black mustache.” and “The moon was a ghostly galleon, tossed upon cloudy seas”, and “The highway man came riding, riding, riding, the highway man came riding, up to the old inn door.”

One day, my mother and sister and I were walking on the beach toward Haystack Rock. It must have been mid-afternoon, kind of a sunny but sprinkly day at the beach in June, the kind that makes us say “Pacific Northwesterners don't tan, they rust.” We were walking side by side, checking out the driftwood and jellyfish and pretty rocks and shells that had been left behind by the tide.

My sister and I, being young teenagers, were also checking out the other teenagers who were on the beach. Some were throwing a ball back and forth, some were jumping the waves, some were just kind of

hanging out, looking at the other teenagers. We hoped some of the cute ones were checking us out, at least at that moment.

Suddenly, our mother, who had been telling us how beautiful the Oregon coast is, no matter what the weather, stopped short, threw her arms wide to embrace the sky, and began to recite a poem. We suddenly hoped none of the cool-looking teenagers were checking us out after all.

Our mother recited this poem, right there, on the spot, in front of all those cool-looking teenagers and us, her mortified daughters:

“O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!  
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies,  
Thy mists that roll and rise!  
Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag,  
And all but cry with color! That gaunt crag  
To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!  
World, world, I cannot get thee close enough!  
Long have I known a glory in it all,  
But never knew I this: Here such a passion is  
As stretcheth me apart,---Lord, I do fear  
Thou’st made the world too beautiful this year;  
My soul is all but out of me,---let fall  
No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.”

It wasn’t till I was much older that I understood the passion and love that my mother felt for the beauty of the world. And I came to understand that my mother’s garden was bigger than her vegetable plot, bigger than her flower bed. My mother’s garden was the whole world, and she taught

me a lesson about that immense garden----that belongs to all of us----and how beautiful and precious our world is.

When I realized what my mother was teaching me, I became a gardener myself. And I'm not just a vegetable or flower gardener either. The world has become my garden too. "In search of my mother's garden, I found my own." And when I became a Unitarian Universalist, I found thousands of other people who also loved this garden and honored it, as we do in our 7th principle: "we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

I also learned that my mother wasn't really as embarrassing as I thought she was, on that cloudy Oregon coast day. I finally understood that, even if that day I hoped the cute guys didn't notice her crazy behavior, she was showing me something really important: that when you love something deeply, it's a good thing to show it, no matter what other people think.

And I learned that lesson pretty well. Guess what happened one day at Cannon Beach 18 years ago, when my 13 year old son was with me, as we walked down the beach toward Haystack Rock, with lots of cool-looking teenagers watching? Yep, you guessed it.

Without even worrying about what he would think, and knowing he would survive this experience and even treasure it someday, I threw my arms up to the sky, and began to repeat Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "God's World"....."O World, I cannot hold thee close enough. Thy winds, thy wide gray skies, thy mists that roll and rise.... Lord I do fear, thou'st made the world too beautiful this year."

In search of my mother's garden, I found my own. And may we all find that garden and nurture it through our care and love. For it is through our love and care that this earth continues to provide for us and all creatures a haven, a home, a garden of delight which nurtures and supports us all. Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #63, "Spring has now unwrapped the flowers", which we will sing to the tune of Good King Wenceslas.

### BENEDICTION

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we are all gardeners in this beautiful world. May we take as good care of our planet as we take of our own small plots of land. And may we be grateful to the mothers and fathers and others who have offered us this learning. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.