

CHALLENGES & MEMORIES: MOTHER'S DAY THOUGHTS!

My mother wasn't very sentimental. As a Master's Level Professional Civil Engineer, she was pretty rational and scientific. She enjoyed a good meal and flowers, and good chocolate, but she would probably have supported Julia Ward Howe's idea of Mother's Day more readily than the maudlin commercial holiday it has become. In her later years, mom was quite comfortable coming to the Unitarian Universalist church and generally agreed with my sermons. Mom didn't seem to be that upset if my brother and I forgot her birthday or Mother's Day or other holidays. She sent out cards for birthdays and several holidays, but if she didn't get many, that didn't seem to bother her. She might remind me of my brother's birthday or ask about my kids, but I don't remember much concern about gifts for Mother's Day or her birthday. It just wasn't that big a deal for her. She was appreciative of what she received, but she didn't gush or make a big deal over, well, anything.

Mom could get upset and occasionally got her feelings hurt, but mostly she was pretty even-tempered, and rational. The tougher thing with my mom, was meeting her high expectations. There was no question that my brother and I would go to college and do well, but she did leave it up to us to decide what we would study! She would have liked to see one of us be an engineer, but she and my dad always supported us whatever we chose to do. Mom had strong ideas of right and wrong, justice with compassion, equality for all. Mom was raised a Methodist because the nearest Catholic Church in Minneapolis didn't have a Sunday School, she probably would have been comfortable being called a Hubert Humphrey Democrat. My dad, also a Civil Engineer, was raised a Jewish Chicago Democrat who joined the Methodist Church to marry mom, so liberal politics and religion ran in the family!

It wasn't always easy to please mom, with those high expectations, but I have known many people with more difficult relationships with their mothers. I particularly feel for those people whose mothers were alcoholics or abusive. I would take my mom's high expectations any day over that. I also feel for those whose mothers weren't in their lives at all, dying in childbirth or leaving them when they were infants or young children. And I would actually say that my dad was generally the more nurturing of my parents, so certainly men can fill many aspects traditionally thought of as a mother's. Two parents, whether both are male, female, or mixed are I think better in most cases than a single parent.

Toya Graham, the mother of 16 year old Michael Singleton, who recently saw her son on TV out with the protestors near their home in Baltimore and went out to get him, slapping his head and face on TV in the process left a different image of loving parenting than we often think about. That she wanted to keep this young black man alive and out of harm's way is certain. That her technique for making an impression on her son might not fit the standards of most Child Protective Agencies is also pretty certain. And yet, the scene was compelling because she cared enough to go out and get her man-child. Where were the parents of the other teenagers, one might ask? Even without TV stations rebroadcasting this scene time and time again, and likely to continue doing so into the future, this is something young Michael probably will not ever forget. There were some comments about black men always having a certain fear of their mothers, but I think that there is a universal fear that we might lose the love and respect of our mothers. I think it is safe to say that Michael understood that his mother loves him and that she expects different behavior than wearing a hoodie, a mask, and throwing stones. Toya may or may not be a helicopter mom, but she certainly is engaged in the life of her son!

One of the serious problems with the educational system in many places is the lack of involvement of parents. My mother took 17 years off from her career as an Engineer to make sure my brother and I got a good start

in life. She went to all the parent-teacher conferences and checked up on us. Since she was working part-time as a substitute teacher, in our K-8 school and one other district school, she also got to know the teachers and students in a way that was sometimes awkward for us kids, but she was certainly engaged as a parent. It was a relief when we convinced her to go back to work as an Engineer once we were both in high school!

The schmaltzy Hallmark Mother's Day cards and ideas about Mother's Day really come from another time, one which may never have really existed. The ideal of motherhood that stemmed largely from the upper class in the Victorian Era never really existed for most women. Whether they worked at home or in the factories or in the 2 vocations open to women, education and nursing, the lives of women have rarely been easy. Cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children is hard work, and with the busy schedules of modern children and the norm of both parents working outside the home, this period in time is certainly not easy for mothers. Even a nice card, beautiful flowers and really good chocolate once a year is not much reward for the role of Mother!

Add in the sense of isolation for mothers of young children who are not working outside the home, high expectations of families, and limited resources and it is easy to see why alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, and general stress often result in family upheaval, abuse, broken families, and a lack of support for education, churches, and non-profits. The mothers who stay sane, juggle work and kids' activities and support their children, and get their children safely to adulthood are pretty amazing!

Of course, Julia Ward Howe's idea for Mother's Day as a time for women to demonstrate for Peace never really gained wide acceptance. A few decades later, Anna Jarvis started our modern Mother's Day after holding a Memorial to honor her own mother in Grafton, West Virginia. She began her campaign for Mother's Day in 1905, and in 1914 Woodrow Wilson signed the proclamation making the 2nd Sunday in May a national Mother's Day holiday. But in the 1920s when Hallmark

and other companies started selling cards and making it a commercial event, Jarvis became embittered and began protesting the change from a time of personal letter-writing and expressions of appreciation into a time of commercial gift-giving. Today many countries join the U.S. in celebrating a Hallmark Mother's Day.

Being a mother is never easy, nor is it always so easy to be a kid. In most families, mothers carry a lot of the responsibility for raising and caring for the children, so it is almost certain that mothers and children will at times be upset with each other, it probably is even in both job descriptions. Working out the differences, with parents setting appropriate boundaries and children learning to live within those boundaries is a major part of both roles. What we learn in our families growing up helps us to function in society and to create our own families later on in life.

Over the years, men have taken on more responsibility in most families for helping with kids, cooking, shopping, and cleaning the house, but women still are more responsible for the household economy and operations in most families. In cases where men remain the primary breadwinner, the role of mother remains primary in the household. The roles have changed somewhat but women typically still run the home at least in opposite gender families.

Mothers play a big role in their children's lives, teaching life lessons that we need to survive, helping us to grow into adulthood, showing us how to age gracefully, or by their absence leaving gaps in our experience. We owe a lot to our mothers, and to our fathers as well. Some of us also had grandparents and other members of our extended families that were regularly present in our lives, a reality that has become somewhat rare as families move back and forth across the country or beyond for jobs. In many of our families, our mothers were the dominant figure, the force with which to reckon, the final word when we wanted to do something. Even when mom told us to ask our father, we knew it was mom that we had to convince! Dad was usually a pretty easy touch, mom not so much.

I remember how pleased my mother was to be presented with twin granddaughters, even if they were born a little over a thousand miles apart! My daughter arrived about 12 hours before my brother's daughter, but a couple years later, his son arrived 2 weeks before mine—not that we were competitive! When we would go back to Chicago, my parents, and after my dad died, my mom would treat all her grandkids, later including my step daughter and my brother's younger son to trips to the zoo, museums, and meals. Lots of good times and an endless collection of photos!

Many of the lessons we didn't learn in kindergarten came from our mothers. What do you remember most about your mothers? What were the lessons that have stayed with you most vividly that came from your mothers? What would you say to your mother if you were to see her this afternoon?

I have shared several of my memories of mom, now it is your turn. What would you like to say about your mothers?

Thank you for sharing your memories and thoughts about your mothers on this Mother's Day 2015. If your mothers are still alive, I hope you will visit or talk to them, and if not, I hope you will think about them for the good times!

Blessed Be and Happy Mother's Day! Amen.