

MOTHERHOOD: MEANING, MYTH, AND METAPHOR

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When Susan asked me several months ago if I would speak on Mother's Day, I thought it would be easy. I thought it would be easy because we all cherish the images of mother and motherhood. We love to see the helpless infant cradled in mother's bosom, taking those first steps and saying those first words with mother's encouragement, learning to play soccer with mom cheering on the sidelines, and later on, the children bringing forth their own offspring in the venerable cycle of life. And we cherish our own special memories of that person – without whom – we would not be present here today. In fact, we would not even exist. We are grateful to that one female who found herself pregnant and decided, for whatever reason, to carry us to birth, to bear the physical pain to separate us from our comfortable home in her body, to nurture and protect us as greedy infants, to teach us to grow, and to give us love -- both tough-love and soft-love. Most of us experience lifelong gratitude for all this, although that gratitude often waxes and wanes during our lifetime.

In the Christian sacred text it is written that even Jesus himself was rather indifferent to his mother at times.

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd...someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." [Jesus] replied to him, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers." (Matt. 12:46-47).

And on another occasion:

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." [Jesus] replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (Luke 11:27).

But, it is written, Jesus last act, while hanging on the cross, was to honor and provide for his mother. He saw her and his disciple John standing nearby. He said, "Dear woman, here is your son." And to John, "Here is your mother." And John took her into his own home. (John 19:26).

We observe, and we experience – sometimes painfully so – this powerful impulse of motherhood. I am always amazed at how a mother regards her son. He can do no wrong, and if someone thinks so, watch out! Having lived in Latin America and Spain I am convinced that Hispanic mothers are the archetypes. When my petite Bolivian barber in Washington cut my hair last and I asked her how she was, she grew sad and angry. She was upset that her baby boy was far away from her and she couldn't be sure he was eating right and she couldn't protect him. Her "baby" is a 24 year-old volunteer in the U.S. Marines on a ship in the Persian Gulf! Mothers will sacrifice everything for their children – whether the children want them to or not.

So I thought I would give you inspiring quotations and poetry about Mother and motherhood – what Erma Bombeck called "the second oldest profession." As I began to think about this the first thing that struck me is that actually there is a great deal of ambivalence about motherhood. Do a reference search and you will find that there is more about disappointment, and issues to solve, and battles to wage, than about glorification. Mothers often find that their expectations of the endless joys of motherhood are unrealistic, and despite many warm and happy moments bearing and nurturing children, there are more moments of anxiety, frustration, and complication. Kids become an obstacle in lives of many.

A woman naturally is better qualified than a man to speak about motherhood, but perhaps a man can be more idealistic about the concept. Most of the glowing rhetoric about motherhood seems to be written by men. From women, observations range from the humorous to the bitter.

*Erma Bombeck sees humor in the motherhood dilemma. She wrote: *The art of never making a mistake is crucial to motherhood. To be effective and to gain the respect she needs to function, a**

mother must have her children believe she has never engaged in sex, never made a bad decision, never caused her own mother a moment's anxiety, and was never a child.

Emma Goldman, an early feminist, provided the bitter view when she wrote: *Morality and its victim, the mother – what a terrible picture! Is there indeed anything more terrible, more criminal, than our glorified sacred function of motherhood?*

Most of us deeply appreciate how our mothers loved us and sacrificed for us. At the same time, our own need to grow and become independent brought us into conflict. In our love-hate relationship with Mother, we hate that she deals in guilt – getting what she wants for us with that old refrain: “I only want what is best for you, dear.”

In search of more sentimental pabulum for the day I thought I would peruse the Mother's Day greeting cards. Hallmark should be more gushy. But the results of my browsing in the card store turned up more than words of tribute. Many of the cards written for mother deal with guilt. The frequent message was along the line of: “Mother, I am filled with grateful love everyday – sorry I never think to tell you.” Today, hundreds of millions of dollars will be spent on flowers, gifts, and special meals-out to honor Mother. Mother's Day has become a day that ranks commercially right up there with Christmas.

Searching for a more profound aspect of motherhood turned into a broader examination of the religious and philosophical underpinnings of the human race. The profound and conflicting sentiments surrounding motherhood are intertwined with humankind's attempts to understand life. Motherhood is one of the most prominent and powerful metaphors to arise from the mythologies of all the earth's races and cultures over the centuries. The earliest people of many cultures extended the motherhood concept from their own familial experience to the recognition of a universal mother-force evidenced in the earth and in the heavens above.

We can easily imagine how the motherhood concept became a primal force in the development of human culture. The idea of producing and nourishing offspring is the first and most basic consideration in the survival of any species. Nature itself is motherhood – with the annual renewal of the plants, the animals, and the warm nourishing weather. No wonder we call nature “Mother.” Honore De Balzac wrote: “... but what is motherhood save Nature in her most gladsome mood?” As our own mother bore us, so nature herself brought forth and nourished the human tribes. Mother Nature became as a deity, the creative force, the mother of all things, to many of the earliest cultures. The Pawnee tribes believed their mother, Mother Earth, mated with Tirawa, the sun, to produce life on earth. Not a bad personification of the scientific reality. On the other side of the earth in South Asia the ancient Ram Yana, a classical Sanskrit epic, evokes the Earth Mother concept. The idea that nature is feminine rolls easily from our tongues. The opening lines of William Cullen Bryant's beloved poem highlights nature's feminine aspect: “To him, who in the love of nature holds communion with HER visible forms, SHE speaks a various language. For his gayer hours SHE has a voice of gladness, and a smile and eloquence of beauty. And SHE glides into his darker musings with a mild and healing sympathy.”

The next logical step is to imagine how easily the concept of *nature as mother* would lead to the development of religion. Mother Nature both nurtures and destroys. Mother Nature is indifferent to human life so she must be appeased. It was a logical step to try whatever could be done to induce Mother Nature show her benevolent side, so that she would ensure the abundance of game, or provide rain instead of drought. As people began to supplicate Mother Nature, to worship her, to sacrifice to her, religion was born. Thus came into the world, in many places, one version or another of the Great Mother Goddess.

The Great Mother Goddess was common to all of the Middle Eastern cultures and religions and later evolved into cultures from Asia to Europe. As a religious symbol of the earth's fertility, she went by many names. In the ancient Middle Eastern religions she was Cybele (si beel), the nature goddess. She was honored at festivals during the spring season with wild music and erotic *dancing* that evoked the sexuality that leads to reproduction and rebirth. Worship of Cybele spread through the Babylonian and Assyrian empires where she was known as Ishtar and she is cited in the Bible as a competing god to Yahweh. In Syria and Palestine she appeared as Astarte. The Egyptians called her Isis. In Greece she was worshiped

as Gaea, Hera, Rhea, Aphrodite, and Demeter. In Rome she was Maia, Ops, Tellus, and Ceres. Many attributes of the Virgin Mary make Mary, the Madonna, the Christian equivalent of the Great Earth Mother, particularly for her great beneficence and her image as mother of a son who is a God.

Earth Mother images are found in many cultures. When I toured the wonderful museum of Anatolian history in Ankara where the artifacts all tend to be older than 3,000 years, one of the most prevalent artifacts was the Mother Goddess representation in hundreds of forms. Every household must have had such an icon to insure protection and fertility. Tour the world's museums and you will find Earth Mother representations, often sexual, fecund, and voluptuous, from cultures that extend from South Asia across the Middle East and Europe to the Americas. Our museums and art galleries are filled with thousands of paintings of the Madonna, usually in her mother pose with her child in arms or at her breast. The fact that no other image has been recreated so many times tells us about the profound penetration into the human psyche of this motherhood metaphor

The motherhood concept infuses our language as well. It is easy to imagine, as language was developing, how the sound of mamma, that involves the lips in a sucking gesture, became the Latin word for breast. The “ma” sound is usually one of the first words uttered by babies. And all of us warm-blooded animals that are nourished by milk from our Mom's mammas are classified as mammals for that reason. That mamma milk-sucking action sound seems to have been picked up into the word “Mother” itself, and our familiar names like “Ma” and “Mom.” Likewise we find the “ma” sound for “Mother” in many languages: Spanish - madre, French – mere, German - mutter, Russian - mats, on so on. (I spoke to Pirkko Graves and we thought that the Finnish language – with “aiti” for “mother” – appears to be a glaring exception. But now she tells me that grandmother is “amma,” and the older form of mother is “emo” or “ema”).

This leads us to another line of thought. “Motherhood” is not restricted to the females of our species. Human cultures identify the feminine impulse as the birthing, mothering, nurturing, side of nature and males as well as females play these mothering, nurturing roles in everyday life. This is not an aberration of male roles but an honoring of the motherhood principle. In the older Christian tradition, Jesus Christ, and even God the father, have been assigned both maternal as well as the traditional paternal characteristics and imagery. Monks of the middle ages often wrote of Jesus as a mother as well as a father. Anselm of Canterbury describes Jesus as father as the one who rules and Jesus as mother as the one who loves. Anselm's vivid imagery tells of a “... Mother Jesus [who] revives the soul at her breast.” He writes:

But you, Jesus, good lord, are you not also a mother? Are not that mother who, like a hen, collects her chickens under her wings? Truly master, you are a mother. For what others have conceived and given birth to, they have received from you... It is then you, above all, Lord God, who are mother.”

Bernard of Clairvaux also described his faith in terms of the motherhood of Jesus and God. I quote one of his sermons:

Do not let the roughness of our life frighten your tender years. If you feel the stings of temptation ... suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified.. He will be your mother and you will be his son.

In Bernard's sermons he admonishes the clergy that they, like Jesus, should be mothers.

Be gentle, avoid harshness, do not resort to blows, expose your breasts; let your bosoms expand with milk not swell with passion.

William of St. Thierry discusses Mother God nourishing the Christian church in powerful images of motherhood:

... it is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish the holy infancy of your little ones.... Since that everlasting blessed union and the kiss of eternity are denied the Bride [the Church] on

account of her human condition and weakness, she turns to your bosom; and not attaining to that mouth of yours, she puts her mouth to your breasts instead....

Other early Christian writers describe the relationship between God and humankind with references to God's womb, to nurturing in God's womb, then giving birth in life.

It is ironic that despite this deep reverence for the concept of motherhood, and the evoking of motherhood as the basis for religion, women themselves – mothers included – were, and still are, accorded a role of subservience, even in matters of religion. From ancient Greece and Rome to the present day, men have dominated women, collaborated to assign women to roles as servants, and barred women from education and leadership. Many religions specifically forbid women to be ministers or priests. The pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, or the Taliban provide ample evidence of this dual role for mothers – glorification and servitude. Thankfully our own denomination, the Unitarian Universalists, have more women ministers than men.

So where does this broad exploration of motherhood, from greeting cards to God as Mother, lead? Mothers, both men and women mothers, nurturers, you are following the blessed impulse that makes the earth a livable place. The *yin* and the *yang* are inseparable and interlocked -- but it is the *yin* that births, and nourishes, and cultivates, and beautifies. Mothers, we honor you now. And may we stand firm for women to have not just adoration but true equality, justice, support, and opportunity. And may we all strive to be mothers, to understand and accept the feminine side of life. Finding and experiencing motherhood will teach us about the true meaning of life. Motherhood imbues us – we accept it.

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