

"The Mother You Wanted—And The One You Got"

A Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, May 13, 2007

For The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

My God, what power! As a man it has always confronted me and put me in my place. I can do anything she can do, approximately. I can, if I put myself to it, do it better sometimes, maybe. All but this.

This I cannot even begin to do. Be mother. Bear child. Open legs and thrust into the world new life. Hold child at breast, sucking, feeding from the life that flows from within me. My milk.

Be the universe to that child. Let it grow from me to create its own small space and then push out the edges of that space until it owns its own universe and I can walk away as if I don't notice. As if my child to whom I have given life can ever be free, complete without me. Pretend that. Say that. Mean that. Have to believe that. Let go. Be gone. Play Lot's wife. Look back a lot. Keep going.

I, a man cannot even begin to play the role, to get in it. I pretend. I say I understand but I am permanently foreigner looking in, wondering what it is to be so, wondering if it is like my space at all. Envious and relieved at once.

"A mother's love for her children, even her inability to let them be," said Florida Scott-Maxwell in The Measure of My Days,

is because she is under a painful law that the life that passed through her must be brought to fruition. Even when she swallows it whole she is only acting like any frightened mother cat eating its young to keep it safe. It is not easy to give closeness and freedom, safety plus danger.

No matter how old a mother is she watches her middle-aged children for signs of improvement. It could not be otherwise for she is impelled to know that the seeds of value sown in her have been winnowed. She never outgrows the burden of love, and to the end she carries the weight of hope for those she bore. Oddly, very oddly, she is forever surprised and even faintly wronged that her sons and daughters are just people, for many mothers hope and half expect that their new-born child will make the world better, will somehow be a redeemer. Perhaps they are right, and they can believe that the rare quality they glimpsed in the child is active in the burdened adult.¹

I remember my mother by desertion and my father by distance. Oh, by love too and all that entails, but the mother I wanted and the one I got were not the same, could not be. She deserted me. She had to. That was half, fully half of her job. If she had not steeled herself to it, I would never have emerged, whoever and whatever I am.

I didn't want to be deserted. At least not at first. Perhaps later there were times that I wanted her to go away, but not at first. The first time was so cruel I hardly forgave her. Until I had forgotten the taste of the cruelty a few moments later and was back at breast.

Some women do it better than others. I don't want to romanticize "being woman". Some do the desertion of their children badly. Some may not even notice that's what they are doing when they walk away from a screaming child. Some hurt their children worse. But all women desert their babies, have to, for the children to struggle out into the promised land of loneliness and testing and

fulfillment and loss and freedom.

As I say, I do not know what that feels like for the mother. I remember leaving my child behind and hearing screams but it was not the same because I wasn't the one my child was screaming for. I could dim my child's pain by picking him or her up. For a moment the piercing cries subsided. I was, after all, a decent substitute when mother was nearby, in sight or sound or close memory. But I was never mother, never more than stand-in.

I was a good father, a caring one. I was the one who got up at night, stumbling through the dark to my screaming child's bed to give comfort, replace the blanket, stroke the head, bring the glass of water, sit and wait until sleep descended into the room and I would stumble to my own bed. But I was never mother. I read book, threw ball, ran field, carried to doctor, met teacher, cheered bad play at soccer, rewarded grades. But I was never mother.

Research psychologists have told us that babies need the warmth of tenderness to grow up whole, that monkey babies crave it so much they will cling to wire dummies wrapped in fur, and that the babies held and stroked by real mothers emerge as healthy young while those who had only the wire and fur mothers become neurotic. I could do that. I could hold and stroke my baby. I did. But I was never mother.

"Oh! mothers aren't fair--I mean it's not fair of nature to weigh us down with them and yet expect us to be our own true selves," said Henry Handel Richardson.

The handicap's too great. All those months, when the same blood's running through two sets of veins--there's no getting away from that, ever after. Take yours. As I say, does she need to open her "mouth? Not she! She's only got to let it hang at the corners, and you reek, you drip with guilt.²

She's not the mother you wanted. You wanted the mother who would smile at you, whatever you did when you wanted to do it no matter why you did and say "Oh, that's nice, dear. Oh, that's nice." It's a good thing she didn't. You know you wanted some things that were not so good. Maybe some really bad things.

I can't help thinking if Osama bin Laden's mother had let the corners of her mouth turn down, fewer people would have been terrorized. I know that's putting too much on Mom, but I can't help thinking it.

The mother you got probably did that. You wheedled and whined and insisted that your best friend could and she never let you and look how it hasn't hurt him. Or her. But she just let her mouth turn down and said "No, we don't do that." Maybe she was wrong. I'm glad she did it anyway. You're easier to live with, with limits.

"Blaming mother is just a negative way of clinging to her still"³ said Nancy Friday in My Mother, My Self. So let go of her. You've got to someday, why not now? Thank her for what she did that worked for you, and get on with it.

She carried you. Maybe it was the best of times for her, maybe the worst of times. It was probably both. It was a long time ago. It's your turn now.

She made some awful choices. How could she do otherwise? After all, she wasn't the mother

you wanted, just the one you got. If she had been the mother you wanted, she would have made all the right choices, right?

Maybe you wouldn't be here if she had really made all the right choices, ever think of that? Maybe you are the result of anger redeemed by love between your parents, the unanticipated product of a quarrel that ended in bed. Maybe you are one drink too many, or a right turn when she should have gone left and if she had she would never have met him, your father. Thank god for bad choices. They make half of the joy of life possible. The good choices do the rest.

No, she wasn't the mother you wanted, just the one you got, and she didn't even imagine, ever that you'd be like you are. Not in ten thousand nights and days. You were a surprise. Still are, no matter how sensible it all seems to you, no matter how far away from where it all started and why.

I've often wondered who my mother was. Oh, I know her name and face, I don't mean that. Wondered who she was when she gave up whatever she gave up to birth me. Wondered who she would have been if she had not. Wondered how she dealt with the frustrations that I brought along, suddenly appearing inside this mother I didn't want inside the one I did.

Who was your mother then? You did not know, of course. You were too young. You didn't notice the thousand thousand moments when things didn't go the way she wanted, when she had to put away her life and tend to yours because you demanded.

What a miracle! You. At last report you hadn't redeemed the world of its woes. If she's still alive, she probably knows that and even may guess you never will. If she has died as many of our mothers have, she probably left knowing that you were who you were, and not the redeemer of us all. You could be the redeemer for yourself. Thank her for your being. If you will be that, it will be enough.

To our young mothers, those who still harbor the illusion that they are responsible for the way their children turn out, I say "God speed." God speed the gentle urgings and limits and love that are never enough. Nothing is ever enough. If anything comes close to it, young mothers come closest.

You will not, any more than your own mothers, be the mothers your children wanted—but that's okay. You're the ones they got, and I say that's good.

I think back this morning on how much wiser my mother could have been, more attentive and supportive. She could have suckled me more and deserted me less, made me decide more for myself and protected me less, taught me to cook and done fewer of my laundries.

Now that I think about it, maybe I did get the mother I wanted after all.

Dick Weston-Jones ©

Footnotes

1. Scott-Maxwell, Florida, from The Measure of My Days (Alfred A. Knopf, 1968) quoted in Sewell, Marilyn, Cries of the Spirit, Boston: Beacon Press, 1991, p. 76.
2. Richardson, Henry Handel, Two Hanged Women quoted in Maggio, Rosalie, The Beacon Book of Quotations by Women, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993. p. 218.
3. Friday, Nancy, My Mother, My Self, quoted in Maggio, Rosalie, Ibid. p. 218.