

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Mothers: Lost and Found

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

“Grow Your Soul & Serve the World”

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Reading:

Mother's Day: Circle of Care, by Lisa Bovee-Kemper

In religious community, we share our joys and our triumphs, our sorrows and our broken places.

In this circle of care, we make space for the complexity of life, the myriad of experiences that bless and break our hearts. The truth of human experience dictates that on any given day, we each come to the table with hearts in different places. It is especially so on this day, invented to honor women who nurture.

In this circle of care, we honor the truth that mothering is not and never will be quantified in one single descriptor. Mothering can be elusive or infuriating, fulfilling or confusing, commonplace or triumphant. It exists in the everyday experiences of each person. There is no human being that is not connected to or disconnected from a mother.

And so we honor the complexity of experience, writ large in flowered platitudes, but here in this space laid bare, honoring the truth in each of our hearts. There is room for all in this circle:

If you have carried a child or children, whether or not they came to be born, we see you.

If you have fervently wished to do so, and circumstances of fate made it impossible, we see you.

If you love children we cannot see, whether because of death or estrangement, we see you.

If you never wanted to be a mother, we see you.

If you are happy to mother other people's children, as an educator, an auntie, or a foster parent, we see you.

If your mother hurt you, physically or emotionally, we see you.

If you had no mother at all, we see you.

If your mother is or was your best friend, we see you.

If your gender says you are not a mother, and yet you take on the role of nurturer, we see you.

If you wonder whether your mothering has been enough, we see you.

And if yours is a different truth altogether, we honor your unspoken story.

There is room for all in this circle.

May it be so, today and always.

Mothers: Lost and Found

I start each morning up in a lovely sitting area up on the third floor of our old house. Where I sit, I look out a large window which puts me at tree top level, gazing down at the street below. On the walls are photographs, many photographs. Most of them are our favorite shots of our boys, Quintin and Corbin. To my left is a triptych of black and white photos with baby Quintin. The first image is of me kissing him, the last of Linda kissing him, and the middle photo is a mom sandwich—a double cheek kiss. There are photos of the two boys together—in dress clothes, in costumes, posed and candid. There's a photo of Corbin with his face covered with dirt and another where he is sporting a shirt that says, "I was hatched by a couple of chicks." Sometimes I look at those photographs trying to look into their souls, understand their smiles, study their eyes, take in their youthful joy and creativity. When I feel I am losing my way as a mom or that they are losing their bearings as young men, I stare at the photos, then close my eyes and silently pray. I pray for many things, including inner peace, clarity, strength, forgiveness, or patience.

This day, Mother's Day, seems to heighten my reflections and feelings. I suppose the same may be true for you. The words read earlier by Lisa Bovee-Kemper, beautifully describe how Mother's Day can create a churning of emotions and experiences. She speaks of, "...the complexity of life, the myriad of experiences that bless and break our hearts. The truth of human experience dictates that on any given day, we each come to the table with hearts in different places. It is especially so on this day, invented to honor women who nurture." I appreciate her sense of, "the truth that mothering is not and never will be quantified in one single descriptor. Mothering can be elusive or infuriating, fulfilling or confusing, commonplace or triumphant. It exists in the everyday experiences of each person. There is no human being that is not connected to or disconnected from a mother."¹

Mothering is an incredibly private *and* public act which is often scrutinized by society. I'm not proud to say that I know I have made my own judgement about mothers. Those adjectives of "good" and "bad" are too easy to apply to those we know and total strangers whom we observe or read about in the paper. We are people with histories of being parented, often unconsciously triggered into memories of our own lives growing up with and without mothers. Mothering is questioned when those who veer from the "traditional family" intentionally decide to parent or become mothers unexpectedly.

I know that as we walk in this faith together my heart has softened considerably as I've come to know people's stories. The gift of this beloved community is to be able to name that which is real and continue to be held in love. This church has held unimaginable grief of children and mothers who have died or become estranged. We've also ritualized the most precious joy of new life and family relationships.

Within each unique story there are touch points for us all. I want to share two stories of motherhood as a way to honor Mother's Day. The first takes place in 1965 during the Civil Rights Movement. The night following what is known as "Bloody Sunday," the Unitarian Universalist Association's office received a telegram from King asking for faith leaders to come to Selma for a second march. The rising up of black Americans across the South disrupted the

¹ Bovee-Kemper, Lisa. *Mother's Day Circle of Prayer*. <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/affirmation/circle-care>

long-held power structure and many of the white people holding that power did everything they could to stop it. Thousands from across the country dared to go to Selma and over 500 were lay Unitarian Universalists.

My story today is of a mother of three, Viola Liuzzo. Those who knew Viola spoke of her as a woman with a compassionate heart. She was raised in the south in the midst of poverty and racial segregation. It is said that when she was six years old, she took money from the cash register of a small store her mother managed. She gave the money to a black child who was even poorer than her. This type of giving continued throughout her lifetime. Her kids describe her as caring for the “underdog,” demonstrated by a time she took up a collection after a neighbor had a fire. Christmas was approaching, the family had eight kids, and Viola wanted to help them replace the toys lost in the fire. Another time, when she heard a person at her workplace had been fired without severance pay, she asked her supervisor to give the woman her full paycheck.

It is no wonder then that she responded to the televised images of Bloody Sunday with heartfelt tears. Her closest friend of 22 years was Sarah Evans, an African American woman who was also from the South. The two women had traveled from Detroit, where they lived, to New York City in 1964 to attend a United Nations Seminar on civil rights sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association. They were both active in the NAACP.² Mary Stanton, who wrote a biography of Liuzzo, describes her as, “She was one of these people who got really involved in everything she did. They become like a vortex that sucks other people into their enthusiasm.”³

Through her tears, Viola declared, “I’m tired of sitting here and watching people get beat up.”⁴ Soon thereafter, she said goodbye to her husband and children, got in her 1963 Oldsmobile, and was on the road to Selma.

Our reading said, “We honor the truth that mothering is not and never will be quantified in one descriptor.” The truth is that mothers make all sorts of choices that impact their own lives, the lives of their children, spouses, and sometimes many more. As I learned about Viola, I imagine she saw no difference between her children and other people’s children. The injustice she witnessed was so great that it called her into a spirited and powerful chapter of American Civil Rights history.

They say Viola was an ideal volunteer. She was up for any tasks assigned and did them with a glad heart. There is an account of her beaming as she received resounding applause when she handed over a check from her husband’s union to Hosea Williams, one of the leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was on the ground organizing the marches. She was part of the movement’s transportation committee, which meant she was part of network of drivers who taxied people from Montgomery to Selma and then drove them back to their homes. On March 25th she was driving with 19 year old Leroy Moton when a car carrying four white men forced her off the road. She was shot in the head and died instantly at the age of 39.

² <http://uudb.org/articles/violaliuzzo.html>

³ Stanton, Mary. *From Selma to Sorrow*

⁴ *The Voting Rights Martyr Who Divided America*. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/28/politics/civil-rights-viola-liuzzo/>

The image of her body slouched over in her car with a shattered driver-side window and blood dripping down the seat was captured and distributed widely by the media.

For a few days, she was celebrated as a martyr for civil rights, but soon thereafter rumors about Viola spread throughout the media and into households worldwide. She was characterized as being promiscuous with black men, having mental health issues, as being an addict and a bad mother. It was later discovered that this smear campaign was fueled by the FBI which was trying to divert attention from the fact that one of the four men in the car that night was an FBI informant and a member of the Klan. Her story went underground for many years and quite honestly, is only recently beginning to make its way into the center of our Unitarian Universalist story alongside the death of Rev. James Reeb, a UU minister who was beaten to death in Selma prior to Viola's arrival.

One can examine this tragic story of a Viola's death through several lenses: sexism in the form of lifting up Viola's motherhood but not Reeb's fathering, white exceptionalism demonstrated by history valuing white people's deaths over those of people of color, and how easy it was for the FBI to smear the story of a woman's life in order to protect their own. The family suffered greatly from the initial, unimaginable grief of losing a mother and a wife and then from a wave of hateful acts that followed. Their home was vandalized, a cross was burned on their front of lawn, and her daughter endured taunts and having stones thrown at her as she walked to school. Her mother symbolized what happened when people crossed the color line and became sympathizers.

Much of America weighed in on what it meant to be a mother who "abandoned" her children. The sheriff of Selma, Jim Clark, was quoted in the Detroit News as saying, "I have five children too. But the night this happened my wife was at home with the children where she belongs."⁵ In July 1965 the Ladies Home Journal published the answers to a poll which asked readers if they thought she was a "good mother" and 55% of their readers did not. One woman who participated in a focus group was quoted as saying, "I feel sorry for what happened, but I feel she should have stayed home and minded her own business."⁶

I wish I could say that such public scrutiny of mothers is in the past, but I believe we continue such practice today. Lisa Bovee-Kemper reminds us that here, "We make space for the complexity of life, the myriad of experiences that bless and break our hearts." It is not easy to examine our own and other's lives within the societal context that holds up the idealized image of motherhood on Mother's Day, but so often creates internal doubt, double-standards, and judgement. It is both a beautiful and cruel world...one that often blames the victim, judges the dead, and speaks ill of mothers who experience poverty or hold powerful positions in both the corporate and public sector. May we find a way to be more loving and forgiving of ourselves, those we know, and those we may never know—recognizing the complexity of life's choices and circumstance, individual call, and uncharted outcomes.

⁵ Meyer, Rev. Judith, *One Mother's Life*, <http://www.uusm.org/one-mothers-life>

⁶ *The Voting Rights Martyr Who Divided America*. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/28/politics/civil-rights-viola-liuzzo/>

I want to end Viola's story with a message of hope. In 2013, the Ford Freedom Humanitarian Award was given to Viola's daughter, Sally. Sally recounts Martin Luther King III pulled her aside and said, "I wanted you to know something: 30 years ago, my dad couldn't be in this ballroom. And today you and I are here together, and it's because of your mother. And I've never forgotten that."⁷

I promised a second story. This story reminds us that mothers give birth to children though many do not end up raising them. This story involves a beloved member of White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church, David Heath, and it is a story of a mother who was found.

David was adopted at birth by his parents Henry and Thelma Heath of Xenia, Ohio. He told me that his parents were open about the fact that he was adopted and that they knew nothing about his birth parents. He grew up in Xenia and his parents fostered his love of music. He admits he was a "bit of a nerd," who participated in choir, band, and school musicals in his early years. You'll have to talk to him if you want full biographical information, but let me say that from my perspective he has been blessed to have lived a life made meaningful by a loving wife and kids and being afforded the opportunity to study and work for what he is passionate about and loves.

He says he never wanted to meet his birth parents. As he grew older, he learned that many who do find their birth parents are hurt or disappointed at the end of their search. His own internal question was around what sort of obligation he might feel if he did find his birthparents. But the world works in mysterious ways and it was David's own children who urged him to learn more about his past. They suggested he get a DNA test so they could learn more about themselves and their genetic makeup. He obliged and used Ancestry.com to discover his genetic heritage.

The snowball effect began to take form. When you do the test you are put into a database of over a million others and your DNA is matched by six DNA data points. The results connected him with second, third, and fourth cousins. He looks back and describes how all of a sudden, "Here I am, looking for my birth parents." The myth of sealed adoption papers proved to be untrue and for twenty dollars he was able to receive a copy of his adoption papers and his original birth certificate from the Ohio State Public Records Department. His name at birth was Gary Lee Kneisly, his birth mother was listed as Mary, and his birth father was listed as "unknown." The world of Google simplified his ability to find her - Google and what he calls some major coincidences. Where Google failed, connections emerged. David said, "It hit me like a bolt of thunder that one of my close friends, Bill, was a previous principle at the high school Mary attended as a young woman. He called his friend and asked if he could send him a photo from her yearbook. The next day, when he and Bill were on the phone, Bill said there was someone David should talk to and handed over the phone to his buddy, a man named Craig. By coincidence, Craig's mother was best friends with Mary, David's birth mom. There was more; Craig knew where Mary lived. He knew her husband had died several years earlier and she was now in a relationship with a man who graduated high school with her.

⁷ Grigsby Bates, Karen, *Killed for Taking Part In "Everybody's Fight."*

There is that idea that we are all separated by just six degrees, six contacts...Now, all that separated David from his birth mother was the step to make contact. On November 15, 2015 David sent a letter to his birth mother. It begins, "Dear Mary, My name is David Heath. I am 67 years old and was born on January 22, 1948 in Columbus, Ohio." He went on with details of his adoptive parents, the chronology of his life, and ended with pages of photographs of him growing up and current family photos with his wife Ann and their two adult children. The letter is straightforward, sent to a total stranger who is his birth mother. He wrote, "I am your biological son, and I'm happy to be able to contact you. I'm writing this letter to thank you so very much for giving me life. The most important thing that I want you to know is that I have had a very good life." He posted the letter and was off to Florida that same week for work.

Imagine Mary receiving his letter. David, in a kind, generous, and compassionate way, thought carefully about her and knew that there were several responses that might follow. He wrote, "I am aware that my contacting you out of the blue may be a bit of a shock. I don't want to upset you in any way. Yet, I would like to get to know you. I'd like to know that you've received this letter, so I'm enclosing a self-addressed stamped envelope. If you don't want to communicate with me, simply mail back the empty envelope, and I won't contact you again. Or, of course, you could use the envelope to send me a note." Mary disregarded both requests and instead, looked at the phone number on the letterhead and picked up the phone and called David. They met in Tampa at the tail end of David's business trip. "I can't tell you how connected I felt," David said.

David was Mary's first child, conceived with a man she only knew briefly. Two years later, she was married and gave birth to three additional children. When they were adults, she told all three of her children about the child who was adopted. He has connected with his biological siblings. His biological sister, Jan, and he are close. Raised as the oldest sibling, she is overjoyed to embrace the big brother she never had. His birth brother, Dale, greeted him with a big bear hug the day they met. He too noted that he always wanted a brother.

We chuckled at the fact that David now has two mommies! At this point in his life the son of two mothers is asking, "Now who am I?" The son of his childhood is one and the son of Mary is another. There is no blending at this point. He regularly visits his 97 year old mother who lives in a nursing home in Ohio. He has decided not to tell her about Mary and to let life as she knew it just be. Somehow, intuitively, he feels she did not want him to search. He is surprised by how much guilt he has felt, as if he is betraying his adoptive family. He is grounded in the Heath family tree which goes back before the revolutionary war. Those are his people.

Now there are new people...Mary tried to find her son, but when she contacted the Florence Crittenton Home where David was born there was no information. Her partner, Carl, and she tried to trace down any piece of information that could lead her to him. Carl shared with David, "I've known Mary all my life. I've never seen her as happy as when she heard from you." David and Mary talk every week and this past Christmas he received a card from her with a \$25 check and a beautiful needlework runner. Mary always asks about his mother. "She is so non-demanding," David remarks.

This year, David sent two sets of flowers to his mothers. He celebrates the new relationship with Mary and his birth siblings as they share their first Mother's Day. He also celebrates and honors

his mom who raised him from birth and has lived into her 97th year of life and his sister whom he loves dearly.

From today's reading, "And so we honor the complexity of experience, writ large in flowered platitudes, but here in this space laid bare, honoring the truth in each of our hearts. There is room for all [here].

All of us come from mothers—some are alive and present, others have passed or are estranged. We move from being mothered by biological or non-biological mothers or by a larger circle of women who "mother" us in so many ways. Some may never know the identity of their birth mother or lost their mother at an early age. Some of us are mothers—mothers who joyfully live into this sacred role and others who mourn children lost through premature death, mental health issues, addiction, estrangement, or incarceration. As we age, we often return the care by "mothering" those who have raised us and assisting with their medical care, housing, finances, and offering companionship.

With each passing year, we are called to grow and change. We live this human life not in isolation but in relation to others. Our mothers make and made choices often impacted by their circumstances we may not know. The same is true for each of us. May this beloved community be a place where we can be honest about our families and our upbringing.

To learn to center each other's stories in a sacred way takes work and practice. Often, it involves unlearning old patterns of communicating even if we feel they are helpful. At this church Sharing Circles and the Wellspring Program teach us how to listen and be heard in a radically hospitable way without interruption, judgement, or the need to "fix. Our stories deserve such kind and fertile soil. My hope is that we can continue to practice such deep listening to each other's unique stories and grow together in community.

May this be a home where we feel the tenderness of being held in love and where we can forgive and be forgiven. In love and gratitude, grief and disappointment, weariness and strength, silence and celebration, may we move through this day acknowledging the women who birthed us into being. Our faith calls us to live lives of integrity, service, and joy. Each of us holds the possibility of changing the course of each other's lives and, in small and grand ways, the world.

May it be so and Amen.