

# *The Good Enough Mother*

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**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

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**Reading:**

*"An Observation" by May Sarton*

True gardeners cannot bear a glove  
Between the sure touch and the tender root,  
Must let their hands grow knotted as they move  
With a rough sensitivity about  
Under the earth, between the rock and shoot,  
Never to bruise or wound the hidden fruit.  
And so I watched my mother's hands grow scarred,  
She who could heal the wounded plant or friend  
With the same vulnerable yet rigorous love;  
I minded once to see her beauty gnarled,  
But now her truth is given me to live,  
As I learn for myself we must be hard  
To move among the tender with an open hand,  
And to stay sensitive up to the end  
Pay with some toughness for a gentle world.

(Originally published in *A Private Mythology*, 1966)

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**Meditation and Prayer:**

Spirit of life, Ground of all Being,  
that which moves through life in all its forms,  
leaf, bird, earth and sky, babe and mother.  
Here we gather in your presence,  
in the presence of all which is beyond names and knowing  
And we gather in gratitude and in awe.

We are in awe of the wonder of creation, alive around us,  
For fragrant lilac that perfumes the air  
For verdant lawn and magenta shrub lit wild with flowers  
For warm days and long days, for a world come back to life.

We are grateful to be spectator to such a world,  
Grateful for the life that has been given us  
With its triumphs and its pain, for its gentleness and its bumps and tears,  
For those who loved us well, and those who loved us as well as they could  
And for all who stewarded our steps along the way from childhood to adulthood.  
Recognizing the best in us, and encouraging us to dream for ourselves.

For those who gave us life and those who showed us how to live it.  
For this world alive with summer, and for each day of life we have been given,  
We respond with gratitude and with awe.  
Little more than this life we have is Heaven enough for us.  
And for it we give thanks.

For these and for the many unspoken prayers and meditations of this hour,  
We together pray. Amen

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It's funny how life works sometimes. As I was preparing to come here, preparing a sermon on the "good enough mother," a slightly more livable ideal, I got called to perform a memorial service. It was for a woman who had died at the age of 91, mother of three girls, grandmother of six, great-grandmother of three. She had been a UU her entire adult life, a Girl Scout Leader, a devoted wife. I hadn't ever met the woman. She lived in a nearby retirement home, and long before I arrived she had been grappling with Alzheimer's. It all but erased her memory by the end. She didn't recognize her daughters, although -- and this always amazes me -- their mother's good manners and kindness stayed until the end. She'd welcome her daughters to her room, ask them about themselves, thank them graciously for coming to visit, but only had the vaguest idea of who they were. They were sad to lose their mother, but as is almost always the case in such instances, they had really lost her long ago.

Still, we had a life to honor, so I asked them to tell me about their mother, about the things they remembered about her. Her daughters started saying all the most wonderful things. They told me about a woman infinite in patience, kind, fun, intelligent, devoted to them and their father, a woman who taught them to be generous with themselves, to spare the world and others hard, to do good and speak good, and to be independent also. The proof was in the pudding, as they say. She raised three wonderfully warm and *good* women. You loved them all immediately.

In telling me about their mother, they talked about how she was talented and never lost her temper. They told me about how she would take the whole neighborhood five miles to the best sledding hill in the county whenever it snowed, and how she made sock monkeys by the hundreds for children at a local hospital. They told me, in other words, all the good stuff.

However, as you may know, in funerals it is often just as important to recognize a person's flaws. After all, not only do you want to represent a person's full humanity -- their strengths and their weaknesses -- but you want the service to ring true. Obviously, if the person who has died was stubborn or prone to drink too much, or whatever, then almost everyone in the room will know about that. If you don't mention it, that becomes the proverbial elephant in the room. You would be amazed how often when you speak it aloud -- when you say, "and Joe could also be a stubborn pain in the neck" -- how much laughter there can be and how much more real the service becomes. In that one phrase, you have given permission to tell the full story and mourn the real man.

So I explained this to these grown daughters, and they agreed that it was a good thing to be honest. Then there was this silence as they sat for a minute, and they thought and they thought, and they thought, and finally it was one of their *husbands* who chimed in. "Carol was an inveterate saver," he said. She had a drawer filled with garbage twisty-ties and a closet filled with sock monkeys she hadn't finished for the kids at the hospital. They all agreed. So this woman who drove all the kids in the neighborhood five miles to the best sledding hill in the county whenever it snowed, who taught her daughters to love nature and preserve it, and cooked a fantastic blueberry cobbler -- she had her dark side ... garbage twisty-ties!

Here I was, all set to preach about the ideal of motherhood we can none of us ever live up to -- a patient, kind, smart, fun, devoted, sock monkey-making mother who takes you sledding -- and just the day before, I am called to do a memorial service for *just such a woman!* Life, which is full of practical jokes, proved that it is possible.

So perhaps what I want to say to all of you is that the ideal, though possible, is still one we can, and maybe even should, let go of. Let me say a little bit about why.

First, the personal. I, for one, know I will never be the perfect mother. Patience, I'll tell you now, is not my strong suit, and I can delay having kids until I am 60 and I won't be as patient as this woman I just memorialized. Moreover, if I think too much about this ideal of motherhood and all it requires, I think I might just give up the idea of being a mom. And yet I think I'll make a good mom. So, if I am going to have a baby, I have to let go of the ideal.

Second, being a great mom is more possible if we had great mothering. And I would bet that there are a lot of us who did not get great mothering. We may not talk about it, we may not share it with our colleagues at work or even with our friends, but it is, I know, the case that much pain is done in the name of love.

Two of my closest female friends, for example, had long bouts with bulimia. Both trace that struggle back to things their mothers said -- ongoing messages of criticism that tied future happiness to body size and shape, messages they heard loud and clear at a time when they were adolescent and tender. I know their moms. I love their moms. I am *sure* their mothers did and said what they thought was loving and would help their daughters set the best course for self-care and in light of the "lookist" culture they would face. *And*

they made a bad call. Furthermore, whether it is on this issue or a thousand others, we will all make one or two or two dozen bad calls as parents. We are bound to. We are human and flawed and trying to do our best, and sometimes our best is not perfection. So be it!

So, if we didn't grow up with perfection, and we are bound not to be perfect, why set up for ourselves an ideal of perfection? Why draw a portrait of motherhood that only makes it look so darned scary? Why not set our goals not on the perfect mother, or even the good mother, but the good *enough* mother, and save ourselves the angst?

Well, what does this woman look like? What might she look like?

Before I begin, I must give some credit where credit is due. The phrase "good enough mother" comes from D.W. Winnicott, a pediatrician-cum-psychoanalytic theorist, who pioneered the idea of the good enough mother up against the idea of the perfect mom. His notion is a bit of a set-up, because the perfect mother, as Winnicott describes her, is perfect from the infant's perspective. The perfect mother satisfies all the infant's needs and quickly. The good enough mother lets there be a lag, so the child learns to experience want and frustration and gradually is motivated to do and find and achieve for him or herself. The good enough mother, for Winnicott, is always loving and patient. She never retaliates against her infant or shows anger or frustration. Through love and increasingly leaving the child to struggle, she teaches it independence.

In that sense, actually, Winnicott's mother is the *perfect* mother -- for she perfectly prepares her child for the life of being an adult. What is most striking to me about Winnicott's mother is that what she has mastered is not seeing her child's suffering or struggles or pain as indictments of her parenting. Part of this pain is life, she realizes, and she lets her children learn to face it while there is still someone there to help them get back up.

Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote a book titled *The Good Enough Parent*, takes Winnicott's theory a step further. Bettelheim suggests that one ought not try to be a perfect parent, in part because of what that says to a child about the expectations you have for them. Perfection, in other words, is a dangerous and destructive ideal and one that is particularly corrosive as a centerpiece around which to build family life. To foster impatience with human flaws and frailty, by modeling an impatience with your own, breeds contempt for self and others. And this, in turn, can get in the way of perhaps one of the most important gifts that mothers give (or fathers too, for that matter) -- and that is the gift of modeling how to love and care and stay connected to others.

Perfection is a hard burden to bear, for us or for our kids. Florida Scott-Maxwell wrote in *The Measure of My Days*, "[A mother] 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." Moreover, why is it that when a woman becomes a mother, she herself is surprised and sometimes disappointed to find that she is still just human?

Kids will be kids and mothers will be late and sometimes grumpy and sometimes forget and even be mean. But if we forgive ourselves for not being an ideal parent, we will do far more for our children. What more powerful way is there, after all, to communicate to our children that no matter what life brings them, when they stumble and when they soar, they'll be acceptable not just to us, but to themselves also? That no one is asking for perfection -- no perfect children or perfect mothers in our world, just the old college try, the gentleman's C, the good enough striving? For life is in the journey and perfection oftentimes gets in the way.

"I cannot forget my mother," Renita Weems writes. "Though not as sturdy as others, she is my bridge. When I needed to get across, she steadied herself long enough for me to run across safely." May we do that for our kids. Weak and at times unstable, faltering, but determined, may we pick the times to be strong and to be the steady presence that makes their journey from childhood to adulthood possible.

For as the children's book we read this morning rightly points out, "There are lots of things moms can't do. More than you can count." And that's okay. Because there is one thing they do better than almost anyone else -- and that's love their children.

As flawed as we are, we can love our children, and teach them to love themselves. It is the best we can do, and it is, frankly, good enough. Happy Mother's Day, everyone. To good mothers and good enough mothers, happy Mother's Day.