

Women's Work

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It is Mothers' Day, another of those holidays which have always been difficult for me. I know that it is part of Unitarian Universalist tradition to point out that Mothers' Day was originally proposed by Julia Ward Howe, a Unitarian, who conceived of the observance as an opportunity to mobilize women for a day of mourning the high cost of war and promoting a program to ensure future peace. In my experience, however, it has often seemed to be a holiday invented by florists to make a profit on universal guilt feelings. I have seldom know quite what to say about Mothers' Day. Consequently, I have frequently managed to be out of the pulpit on the Second Sunday in May. However, this year circumstances required I take my Sundays off earlier in the year, and this time there would be no easy escape from Mothers' Day.

Ever since that realization dawned on me a month or so ago, I have been wrestling with what I would say this morning, feeling quite certain that there would be little I could say that I have not said before in one context or another. (I apologize in advance to those of you who have heard it all before.) I have found myself wondering what is at the root of the guilt we often feel in this society about our mothers--a guilt which is annually expiated in mid May. I have found myself wondering whether that guilt is rooted in the fundamental disregard of feminine values which seems to define traditional cultures, a disregard so pervasive we need to set aside a special day to atone for it. I have found myself wondering how our civilization might be different, had we not been shaped by a religious culture which valued the masculine over the feminine and which defined the sacred in terms of dominance rather than nurturing. This morning, I will spend our few moments together thinking aloud with you about some of these familiar questions, in an effort to suggest how the world might be different in a society which paid proper honor to the feminine within us all.

As I began thinking about this sermon, I kept hearing a voice somewhere deep in my mind, a familiar voice whispering something that was not quite intelligible, and yet felt strangely familiar. I strained to recognize that voice, to understand what it was saying, but I could not quite bring it into focus. Then, one night, I woke from a sound sleep to hear the voice of my Aunt Martha, the woman who had been a mother to me, sighing deeply and intoning, "A woman's work is never done."

I hadn't thought about it for years, but now I remembered that she used to repeat that phrase like a litany, almost as if it were the anthem of her existence. As a child I had come to recognize the statement as one of those interjections in life, a formula not intended to communicate new information or to require a response, but rather a way to affirm the ongoingness of existence. Now, long years after her death, she was whispering

her familiar line into my inner ear with an insistence she had never used while alive. And, for the first time, I found myself heeding those words, thinking about them, exploring them for some hidden insight.

I was surprised to realize that with all my memories of Aunt Martha, I have no recollection of her taking her ease. Surely there must have been times when she simply sat down and rested, listened to the radio, read a paper, or chatted with friends. Surely there must have been such times. But I have no recollection of them. I remember Aunt Martha constantly busy. There were only four of us in the family; we lived in a small apartment; there was no yard work or gardening which required our attention. And yet, Aunt Martha was always busy. She was awake and at work before I awoke, and she was still awake and at work after I had gone to bed.

She filled her days with dusting and cleaning, mopping and waxing, cooking and doing dishes, tending to the recurrent crises of two small boys, shopping and washing and ironing and mending clothes. Nothing in her life was ever finished. The last piece of silverware had scarcely been dried and put away when someone was using a glass and setting it aside to be washed the next time there were dishes to do. She had barely emptied the laundry tubs before one of us was depositing dirty socks in the hamper as seed for the next wash day. Dust was one of the few self-generating realities in her world. Before she had reached the door of a room she had just dusted, new layers were already settling. Before the last dirty dish was cleared from the table, she needed to be thinking about what she would prepare for the next meal. Small wonder that she punctuated her life with the reminder that a woman's work is never done.

It was not the same for the rest of us in that household. My uncle worked hard, for eight hours a day. Sometimes he worked overtime. But when his day was through, his work was done. He could spend his time reading the paper, playing with us, listening to the radio, and in later years, tinkering with the old, second-hand car which never seemed to run right. And while we two boys, as we grew older, had chores to do, and eventually school work and finally part-time jobs, we, too, had moments when the work was done, when we could sigh and say, "It's finished." Not until she lay on her death bed, could my Aunt Martha say, "it's finished." The most she could do was give herself a furlough from her perpetually uncompleted tasks, knowing all the while that there was endless work waiting for her.

I do not want to give the impression that she complained about the constant work she faced as her lot in life. She knew well how to complain, but she reserved that talent for other injustices. The closest she ever came to complaining about her lot was that deep sigh, and the murmured reminder, more to herself than to anyone else, that "a woman's work is never done," even as she moved on to the next task.

Very early on, I learned to dislike "women's work." I remember vividly the day my Aunt handed me a dust-cloth and asked me to dust the furniture in the living room. She returned to the kitchen, and I stood in the center of the room, looking at the furniture and thinking, "She wants me to dust every surface in this room: the table tops and the table legs, the seats and backs and even the rungs of the chairs, the baseboard and the window

sills, every surface." I remember thinking, "By the time I get to the end of it, new dust will have settled on the surfaces where I started. One could get trapped forever in a room like this, dusting for eternity." It was not that I was lazy. In fact, I worked hard, even as a youngster. But I wanted to be able to see some end to my efforts; I wanted something to be different because of the energy I put forth; I wanted to accomplish something. I wanted to do "man's work!"

As this recollection struck me with full force, it was almost as if my Aunt Martha patted me on my shoulder and smiled a knowing smile, and faded away. "What a wise, shrewd woman she was," I thought. It had never occurred to me with such force that in the world in which I have lived, "women's work" was just another way of saying, "unimportant, insignificant, repetitive labor." To be sure, it was the kind of work absolutely necessary to the continuation of life. Nonetheless, it was regarded as having little intrinsic value. Its only worth was related to the fact that it freed men to do the important things.

Men created things, built things, brought new things into being, changed the world. A man could look at the result of his effort and see a consequence. Building buildings and nations, altering the face of the planet, laying down roads, uprooting forests, changing the course of rivers and of history, inventing and manufacturing devices and machines of all kinds, restructuring the meaning of life--that was man's work. Men could tell when their work was over because the world would never again be the same--or so we told ourselves. Men work for eternity; they break out of recurrent cycles; they change things forever.

What we call women's' work, on the other hand, is never finished because it is tuned to the rhythms and cycles of existence. No matter what you accomplish in terms of the tasks necessary to sustain existence, the same tasks will be waiting to be done tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. So-called men's work moves from one thing to another; women's work moves through recurrent cycles. In our culture we do not value the jobs which have no term, which have no end. Those who tend our homes, remove our garbage, nourish our existence, teach and care for our children; those who make no tangible, obvious mark on history are little honored in our society. We give them little reward. Honor and reward is reserved for the movers and shakers, those who change things, who make things, who set records, who leave a monument to their passing. Regardless of their gender, the people whose lives are spent nourishing and sustaining our existence within the recurrent cycles of life are little valued, or honored, or rewarded.

Someone once said that Genesis has it backwards when it suggests that the human race was created in God's image. More likely, the gods we have worshipped have been structured to reflect a human ideal I would suggest to you that it is not insignificant that Yahweh, the god of Jewish-Christian, patriarchal culture is envisioned as a creator, a maker, one who dominates creation, who imposes a rational ideal upon a preexistent reality. God in our culture, is a masculine reality, separate from the natural world, unrestrained by its cycles and its necessities. God, in our culture, does important work--creates a world from nothing, declares it a finished job, pronounces that it is good, and then, his work done, goes off to take a nap. The god of western culture is a god who has

power over, who dominates, who is the all-powerful master of nature. It should surprise no one that in our patriarchal culture, the ideal is to be strong enough to resist all outside pressures, to be able to impose our will upon the world, to impress our image upon the fabric of existence, to have power over ourselves, over other people, over the natural world.

The result is a culture forever at war with necessity. The result is a society in which virtue is identified with the ability to dominate. The result is a culture in which natural cycles are seen as an obstruction to be overcome. The evidence of this war with necessity is present at all levels of our existence. The desire to dominate--defined as political realism--is seen in our assumption that there is only so much power to go around, and if some other group or nation has more, we must have less, and therefore life is a constant struggle for domination.

The desire to escape the natural cycles is to be found in our persistent assumption that those who change the world are more to be valued than those who spend their lives in harmony with the world, that what has been called women's work is only valuable because it enables men to do the important work.

The refusal to accept the necessities of life and its inevitable cycles is to be found in our anger and frustration about the inevitability of aging and of death. We regard the aging of our bodies as a personal affront which we ought to be able to avoid. We regard death as a punishment for our failings. We forget that every stage of life has its own peculiar pain and suffering, its own unique joy and beauty, and we fail to search our lives for the peculiar gifts which are present in every stage of our living. For us, the meaning of life is found in attaining power over the world, in ability to accumulate and aggregate and possess its gifts, rather than in the empowerment which results from living in the world, from living richly with its dark realities.

There was a time in human existence when things were not as they now are. Before God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing and lifted himself out of the cycle of necessity, there was a different conception of reality. The feminine principle presided over existence. When God was feminine, the holy was not separate from the natural world. The Goddess was the sacred force which brought all things into being, which nurtured all life, which shared the rhythms of existence, and which received all life back to itself at the end of life. When God was feminine, the sacred expressed itself not in terms of dominance over the recurrent cycles of existence, but rather as the nurturing impulse within those recurrent cycles.

It was in the daily routine of work which never ended that people encountered the holy. Tending the garden, preparing the food, cleaning the home, making the clothes, washing the dishes, all the tasks which by their very nature needed to be done again and again and yet again were sacred, holy undertakings. This "women's work" that is never done was the earliest rosary, the earliest mandala, the earliest mantra.

The Goddess herself moved through the same endless cycles, seeking not to dominate the world, but to enable its existence, keeping its peace, revealing the power which comes from accepting the inescapable necessities of existence, the power which comes from knowing that while no one escapes this world alive and while there are ills for which there are no cures, always there is healing and meaning in being part of the on-going process by which life is born, by which life is sustained, by which life dies and is born anew. When god was feminine, the holy was found in the dusting, in the sweeping, in the sustaining activities of life, and power consisted not in dominating the world, but in living comfortably as an expression of the world.

In his book, *UNCOMMON WISDOM*, Fritjof Capra comments that in many non-western religions, and, indeed, within some of the mystical traditions of Christianity, it is precisely in the routine work of the world that the holy is to be sought. The Zen disciple, seeking the holy, may be told by the Zen master to do the dishes, or carry water, or chop wood. In the cloistered life of Christian monasteries, the initiates are normally given routine, endless work as a path to union with the holy. Even in our contemporary world, the secular equivalent may be found in joggers who run the same course day after day and report a heightened sense of awareness, of integration, of wholeness as a consequence. Capra suggests that part of the reason the sacred is so hard to find in the contemporary world is because we persistently seek it in the wrong places. We have sought to storm heaven by dominating the earth. In truth, the holy is seldom to be found in men's work. It is more often found in women's work.

All of this suggests to me why it may be so important for our generation to rediscover and to reconnect with the nurturing impulse in the world and within each of us, affirming the enduring worth and value and power which that impulse represents. The human culture which seeks value in terms of domination has all but run its course. We have created a world of constant struggle and striving, a world of endless acquisition in which we have more and more in our lives and less and less meaning in our existence, in which the drive for possessions threatens the basis of life on our planet. We have created a world of endless competition in which we threaten our own destruction in service to abstractions which have neither existence nor value apart from our own minds. It has created a world in which resentment of the inescapable limitations of life poisons our existence and spills out into lethal social situations.

To honor nurturing principle, the feminine side of our existence, would imply the restructuring of many of the values by which we have shaped our world. It would require a new affirmation that the earth is of worth in and of itself, and not because of what we can do with it and to it. It would require a new affirmation that human relationships are rooted not in our ability to acquire things and power and in our ability to defend those things and that power from others, but in our ability to create viable means for sharing together the goods of life--that sacred power consists in the ability to enable the flowering of life. It would require the affirmation that the cycles of our existence, with their peculiar joys and pains are to be embraced and tasted and celebrated, not evaded and escaped. It would require the affirmation that life is its own meaning, life and the living of it, and failure to find meaning in the daily round of existence is to miss the real

blessedness of existence. In short, a society organized around a reverence for the feminine in all of us would be a society equipped to live in a world transformed into a neighborhood, a single, organic, ecological community in which mutual nurturance is the ideal and the necessity.

"A woman's work is never done," sighed my Aunt Martha, over and over like an ave. It was not a complaint. It was an affirmation. I did not value women's work because in this life it has no end. I wanted to do man's work. I wanted to change the world forever as a consequence of my sojourn here. For a short time, I actually thought I might do it. Now, I know better. I am older and a little wiser, and I know that the important things I have done in my life are things like cooking and doing the dishes and sharing with another person those processes which make life possible.

I now know I shall leave no permanent mark on the world. Nor do I want to. It is the work that is never finished, the living, the loving, the dying, the preparing of the soil out of which new life may spring, the nurturing of life and hope which is truly important work, which is a human work. And that, my friends, is the feminine imperative; that, my friends, is the ultimate blessing of the nurturing impulse.