

Good Enough Mother

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 11 May, 2008 Chip Roush

FIRST READING A 20th century pediatrician and psychoanalyst, Dr. D. W. Winnicott, discovered that it was important for a baby's mother to meet most of the baby's needs, but it was also important that she *not* meet every need. He used the phrase "good enough mother" to describe this optimal, *imperfect* caregiver. In the following short quotes, I have not changed Dr. Winnicott's gendered language:

"The good-enough mother...starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure."

"It is the good enough mother's ...failure of adaptation, her failure to give him everything he needs, that permits her child slowly ... to learn to tolerate frustration, to acquire a sense of reality and to learn to get some of what he needs for himself."

SECOND READING Anna Quindlen was born in Philadelphia, in 1952. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1992, for her columns in *The New York Times*.

"There was a kind of carelessness to my childhood. I wandered away from time to time, rode my bike too far from home, took the trolley to nowhere in particular and back again. If you had asked my mother at any given time where I was, she would likely have paused from spooning Gerber's peas into a baby's mouth or ironing our school uniforms and replied, "She's around here somewhere."

By the new standards of mothering, my mother was a bust. Given the number of times I got lost when I was young, she might even be termed neglectful. There's only one problem with that conclusion. It's dead wrong. My mother was great at what she did. Don't misunderstand: she didn't sit on the floor and help us build with our Erector sets, didn't haul us from skating rink to piano lessons. She couldn't even drive. But where she was always felt like a safe place.

The idea that that's enough is a tough sell in our current culture, and not simply because if one of my kids had been found wandering far from our home there would have been a caseworker and a cop at the door. We live in a perfection society now, in which it is possible to make our bodies last longer, to manipulate our faces so the lines of laughter and distress are wiped out. We believe in the illusion of control, and nowhere has that become more powerful—and more pernicious—than in the phenomenon of manic motherhood. What the child-care guru D. W. Winnicott once called "the ordinary devoted mother" is no longer good enough. Instead there is an *über*-mom who bounces from soccer field to school fair to play date until she falls into bed at the end of the day, exhausted, her life somewhere between the Stations of the Cross and a decathlon."

MUSICAL TEXT "Careful the things you do, Children will see and learn. Children may not obey, But children will listen." {music: "Children Will Listen" by Stephen Sondheim}

SERMON How many of you knew that today is the 100th anniversary of the 1st "Mother's Day"? How many knew it was invented by a Unitarian? How many of you knew that Mother's Day was originally about *peace*, rather than cards and flowers and meals in restaurants?

We humans have celebrated the concept of motherhood about as long as we've been standing upright. The female statue found at Willendorf, Austria, is estimated to have been carved 25,000 years ago. It should not be surprising that the mystery and miracle of new life would inspire our ancestral artists.

More recently, like in the 16th century, English and Irish Christians would return to visit their home churches on the fourth Sunday of Lent. Because this was the one day where mothers got to see all their children, it came to be called "Mothering Sunday," or "Mother's Day."

Unitarian Julia Ward Howe may have known of this English custom, when she called upon the women of the world to stand together to call for peace and disarmament, in 1870. She *was* influenced by Ann Jarvis, who had been holding "Mother's Work Days" to improve sanitary conditions since 1858. Howe led "Mother's Peace Day" observances for a number of years, but it failed to catch on nationally or internationally. Then Ann Jarvis' daughter, Anna, took up the cause, and led a "Mother's Day" celebration

as a sort of “Memorial Day” for women, in Grafton, West Virginia, on May 10th, 1908. That holiday caught on. President Woodrow Wilson called for a national Mother’s Day in 1914, and just a few years later, the holiday had already become so commercialized and sentimentalized that Anna Jarvis herself opposed what it had become.

...Which is one of the many reasons why Mother’s Day can be a tricky holiday about which to preach. On the one hand, we do want to celebrate the sacrifices and the joys of the ordinary, good enough mother. On the other hand, we do not want to enrage or depress those whose mother is not, or was not, good enough at all. Nor do we want to sadden those who never knew their mother, or those who never knew their child, or those who want children but cannot have them, by praising motherhood above all other human endeavors. Finally, there are the adoptive mothers and the foster mothers and the fathers who function as mothers and lots of other nurturing folks we want to honor, as well.

However, given those caveats, the fact is that we all do have a mother. And, although the holiday is no longer what Julia Ward Howe envisioned, I do want to celebrate this mother’s day by echoing her call for peace—not just peace between nations, or between peoples, but also peace between our ears.

Mother or not, female or not, I would like us to take a moment and find some rest and respite from the competing demands of perfection that pour out of our televisions and magazines. Let us find some time today to celebrate the quiet victory of being good enough.

How many of you know someone like the uber-mom that Anna Quindlen wrote about, in our second reading? How many of you have felt jealous of a friend or family member, female or male, who seems to have it all—work, family, social life?

Becky and I visited one of her cousins, as we were driving back from the funeral this week. Her cousin is famous in the family for being organized and level-headed and a great mom to her six children. She cooks and sews and cleans and launders and plants flowers and coaches at least two of the teams that her children play on—and she takes gorgeous photographs and writes copy for her husband’s political campaign flyers. Her house is a home, full of love and respect for each other.

And, in the first hour we were at her house, she made self-deprecating remarks about her housecleaning, her appearance, and her parenting skills.

It is a difficult business, being a mother these days. No matter what you do for your children, it seems like there is some news report or neighbor—or family member—who says that you aren’t doing it right.

I recently visited a friend in another state, a teen-aged mother, and was taken aback to discover her baby eating a chocolate bar for breakfast, as she sat in the corner and smoked a cigarette.

I mentally compared her to another friend, in yet another state, who can tell you *to the day* when it will be safe for her infant daughter to eat home-grown vegetables, or honey, or egg whites, or cow’s milk, or chocolate or any of a dozen other foods to which newborns are evidently sensitive.

And I know that both of those women are doing the absolute best that they can, for their baby; and they are both not merely anxious, but truly frightened that they will do something wrong, and harm their child.

Parenting is a tough job.

And if you are a working mother, then things are even more difficult. Imagine, for a moment, that you are Jane Doe, a young woman with a husband or a partner, and two healthy children. Both of you adults work during the day, but you have found an excellent daycare center that provides the kids with creative activities and healthy snacks until they get picked up after work.

One day, Jane has her annual performance review and she is given high marks. Not only does she get a raise, there is a hint that there might be a bonus at the end of the year. As she drives to pick up the children, she is feeling really good about her career, until a story on the radio tells about the new set of business leaders who not only earn more money than she does, they are doing it at a younger age. How does Jane respond to that news? Is she comfortable with the success she does have, or does the comparison with others make her feel like a failure?

Perhaps Jane finds joy in sharing her wealth with others. With her increase in salary, she can now send more money to her favorite charities. Does the smile on her face widen or disappear when she reads about her high school classmate who spent her vacation helping hurricane survivors in the Gulf Coast?

Of course, Jane loves her children deeply. But what if one of them has trouble making friends at school? How does she feel about her child, and how does she then feel about herself? What if her other child is very bright, but not quite as smart as another student? How does Jane handle the pressure to excel? How does she deal with her fears that she is either doing too much or too little to give her children the best chance to succeed in their lives?

Note that we still haven't mentioned how Jane feels about the pressures on a woman to look like she is 18 years old with the metabolism of a hummingbird. How does Jane feel about her body? Is she able to appreciate any of her blessings, if she feels "deficient" in some other way?

If Jane is like millions of other people in these United States, she might seek some comfort and balance by joining a church. Yes, but which church? The one to which Jane was first attracted promised a very clear set of values and practices. All she had to do, to feel good about herself and her place in the world, was to follow a specific set of rules. Jane felt wonderful. She now had answers for her self-doubts, and she slept better than she had in years.

Unfortunately, she soon realized that all of the church leaders were men. Women were not allowed to serve beyond a certain point. Jane was bitterly disappointed, and vowed to do better research the next time.

She found another church, with a female pastor, but all too soon, the rules and regulations which had initially offered her comfort began to chafe and itch. To put it in the terms of Anna Quindlen's story, Jane did not want a god that prevented her from riding on the trolley, or only approved of riding her bike in certain places. She did want a god with whom she could have a safe and loving relationship, wherever she happened to be at the time. Jane wanted a good-enough god.

She didn't want a perfect god, a personal god that knew everything about her, and who stood ready to give her whatever she needed, whenever she needed it. She wanted a god who would help her learn to tolerate frustration, to acquire a sense of reality and to learn to get some of what she needed for herself.

Jane wanted a life that felt like a safe place.

That's what we are doing, here. We are co-creating lives that feel safe. We are co-creating a congregational community that feels like a safe place.

We are teaching and sharing an understanding that our universe is "good enough." We are learning ourselves, and teaching each other, that *we* are good enough.

Just as children may not obey, but they will listen, so will adults listen. Helder Camara says, "be careful how you live your life for it is the only gospel others will read." We are all modeling, for our children and for each other, how we understand the world.

As I was checking in, at one of my meetings recently, I was expressing my concern that our house would not be clean enough for a party that Becky and I were about to host. Bonnie Mathias reminded me that sometimes it is a kindness to one's guests to *not* have a perfectly clean home so they do not feel compelled to attempt to live up to perfection, themselves. What a liberating thought! Thank you, Bonnie.

By trying to live up to mythic standards of cleanliness, and by becoming anxious about my attempt, I was communicating to others that this was the life I thought I *should* be living. I do feel, that a clean house is more pleasant to live in than a filthy one. But when is it "good enough," and when does it become too much?

How do we communicate to our guests, that it is their company we treasure, not their opinion of our housekeeping?

How do we communicate to our children the safe-enough, healthy-enough, successful-enough lives we wish for them?

How do we convince ourselves that our efforts to live in this world are sufficient, that, in our specific circumstances, we are doing exactly as well as we can, and that's enough?

Here is where a really good minister would tell you all how to do it. A perfect minister could tell you exactly what would work; she could explain the theological derivation of her advice; he would communicate it in such a way that we all felt *both* supported and challenged to live out his suggestions.

I am a *good-enough* minister. All I know is, the way to feel "good enough" seems different for every person—AND if we share our individual journeys toward "good-enough-ness," then we can inspire and challenge and support each other along the way.

It never ceases to amaze me how women and men whom I respect and love feel "*not* good enough" inside themselves.

I know that we *are* good enough. I know the Spirit of Life beats in all of us; I know all of us feel a tug toward goodness and truth and beauty. I wish that I could communicate my certainty to Jane Doe and Anna Quindlen. Then they, too, would know that they are good enough mothers. I wish it for you—that you might feel *in your bones* that you are good enough, exactly as you are.

I think it would change the world. If people really felt that way, if they knew themselves to be valuable and saw that all those around them were, too, we might treat each other a lot differently. With our own wounds healed, or at least acknowledged and addressed, then our compassion for others would increase, and we would do less violence to one another. Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day for Peace might finally be realized.

It could be that a perfect god could make that happen all at once, in an instant. But we didn't ask for a perfect god, we asked for a god that was good enough. Well, whether we asked for it or not, that appears to be what we have—a good enough god that expects us to do much of the work ourselves. So we have to remind ourselves and each other that we are good enough. And we have to work hard to demonstrate it.

Theologian Phil Hefner calls us humans "created co-creators," which is his way of saying that the universe is a good and loving place, and that we share the responsibility to prove that. We are co-creating our reality, helping our good-enough god to make our world the kind of place we want it to be. This "co-creation" stuff may sound a bit new-age-y, a bit too "magical" for our sophisticated scientific sensibilities, but I assure you that it is quite real, and very serious. Let me explain how.

A while ago, the East Waynesville Baptist Church in East Waynesville, North Carolina, excommunicated all of its members who had voted for John Kerry in the last election. Democratic voters were told to repent their sin, or to leave. Some left because they were Democrats, some left in protest, and some people stood and applauded as the others left.

Let's be clear: this is not about Democrat, Republican, Green, or Independent; it is not about liberal or conservative, however you define those terms. It is about confusing politics with religion. I have heard some Unitarian Universalists speak against Republicans in ways that sound all-too-similar to the Minister in East Waynesville. This is about the kind of world we are co-creating with our words and our behaviors. When we speak about our differences, and emphasize our disagreements and refuse to have anything to do with people who believe differently than we do, then we create a world beset by strife and full of hurt and animosity.

How might it be better if we took note of our differences, and talked about how we disagreed, while celebrating the fact that we are fundamentally the same? What if we lowered our voices when we talked about abortion or the death penalty or race or finances? What if we felt *good enough* about ourselves that we could really listen to the concerns of those on the other side—whichever side that might be?

How would our world feel, if we treated each other with respect and compassion, even as we disagreed? The issues might not get resolved, but the debate might feel a whole lot more peaceable. And wouldn't that be progress already?

John Lennon sang that "instant karma's gonna get you." We see the proof of this all the time. Say there is a public water fountain that is broken. The first time you push the button, nothing happens. Then, the second time, it shoots too high, so it splashes you right in the face. Well, if someone comes along in a

bad mood, and tries to get a drink, when they get splashed, they might get angrier, and kick the fountain, and end up hurting their foot and making their day even worse. Whereas maybe somebody in a jovial mood, whistling along happily, when they bend over and get sprayed, they jump back and start laughing, and continue whistling on their way. Instant Karma *is* going to get you.

We're not just teaching our children about the world; we're not just modeling our understanding for each other; we are all truly co-creating our world. We do not have complete control over creation—nobody does, nobody is perfect, we are all just good enough—but we do have some control and if we use it consciously and carefully then we can influence our world to be a better place. Not a perfect place, but a good-enough place.

We are love. Each of us, every one of us is good enough exactly as we are. And each of us is responsible for sharing our love with the rest of the beings on our planet.

At least, that's what my imperfect, good-enough mother taught me.

So may we be.