

Lessons from My Mother

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 8, 2022

Our lives are a network of memories, good mixing with bad, traumas and celebrations placed with equal weight on our hearts. I remember driving down Route One in New Jersey with my mom, passing numerous gas stations and Wawas on our way to who knows where, singing along to ridiculous songs with nonsense lyrics that made our eyes tear up with laughter. Or times we spent together with tears of sorrow streaming down my face as we sat on our back porch and I lamented with her about a love who had gotten away or the loneliness I felt at school. Memories I cherish with a humanly imperfect person, coupled with recollections of arguments, anger, and my own judgments of her imperfections. Or the other mothers in my life, my paternal grandmother and her tray of cookies, my maternal grandmother whose intermittent anger was coupled with doting gifts, the aunt whose jokes left me belly-laughing on the floor, or the stepmother who taught me how to dance my anxiety away. These are my experiences with motherhood, a rollercoaster of emotions at times, joy and laughter interrupted with bouts of anger and disappointment. I know each person in this space we share virtually have their own stories of motherhood, joyful or painful or often a balance of the two. Today we honor all of that.

Sometimes I think we hold mothers to an unachievable standard of compassion, caretaking, and self-sacrifice – expectations that can hurt us when we feel they are not being met. I invite us, instead, to notice those other beauties of motherhood – the imperfections, the complicated love, and a desire I have seen throughout generations in my own family of trying to make a better life for one's child, no matter how flawed this attempt may be.

Have you ever truly looked at a rose, and not seen petals trimmed in unappealing brown, or leaves with small bug bites in them? And yet, have you ever truly looked at a rose, and not seen something beautiful? We are both. We are each riddled with imperfections and yet we each have something to offer the world. Imperfections make us living beings and make us real – and,

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when not traumatic, may even be embraced. With the right contrasts, art is made. I wonder of those flaws present simply because we want the best for another – anger or judgment or criticism paired with a desire for a life well lived for one’s beloved child. We cannot be our best self without having tried and failed multiple times. Each piece of art is inherently riddled with imperfections and yet the senses come to appreciate these flaws as beauty. I am reminded of a quote by an unknown author, “I’m beautifully broken, perfectly imperfect, beautiful in my flaws. All together, I am a beautiful disaster.” Can each child and each mother repeat this refrain, and perhaps even offer it to each other? We, and our mothers, and our children, are beautiful, in our own unique way, each inherently flawed and imperfect.

A pattern I have come to see in the matrilineage of my own family is a consistent, flawed, heartfelt attempt at creating a better life for one’s child than that mother had herself. And I see each successive generation achieving this – I see the wounds increasing as I track this lineage back in time, and I see the imperfect and yet dependable attempt of each mother to create a better life for her child than she lived. And the children struggled and even suffered but the attempt was made and will be made again to the next generation. Understanding these layers of generational wounds has given me such profound respect and apperception for all those mothers in my bloodline who came before me and came before my own mother – anger slips away as understanding and appreciation creep in – generations of imperfect mothers working to care for their children as best they can. I see that intermittent anger in my grandmother that can at times be scary and yet I know what she faced as a child was worse. I do not think this is at all uncommon, nor do I think it is easy, nor do I think it is to be overlooked, but we can perhaps achieve a level of appreciation, even if from afar.

And this lends itself to complicated love – love for a mother and from a mother, for a child and from a child. I have observed and experienced a special kind of unconditional love from mother to child. One that is always there. Not always expressed, not always apparent, not always acted upon, but nevertheless there. Beautiful and unique. To me, I wonder if this love is unique to motherhood. And it is not created through a bloodline, but through any form of

motherhood. The love that withstands any heartache, any mistakes, any wrongdoings. I have seen estranged mothers carry this with them for decades. I see this thread tying together all the generations that came before me. I also see self-love in this web of complexity. If you don't love yourself, it's hard to express love for another. I witness this dichotomy in my grandmothers. We never discussed this, but it's not hard to intuit. My paternal grandmother loved herself, and brought this to her children, although often in hidden and non-verbal ways. My maternal grandmother did not love herself, and while I watched her try to bring love to the family of which she was matriarch, she stumbled and fell time after time. Their relationships with themselves translated into their relationships with us – with all of their decedents. Complicated, imperfect love. Genuine love.

Many of us have a tapestry of relationships that feel maternal and we can learn lessons from each. From an aunt I lost early to a tragic death I learned that only pain and loss can show you the full extent of love. In her living years, she taught me how humor is more powerful than hardship. I think of the stepmother who instills in me that true beauty is what you hold within, the grandmother who demonstrated how baking cookies nurtures love. And yet the most influential is my own beloved, perfectly imperfect mother. My mom lived a hard life, but she thrived and remains my hero and my biggest influencer to this day. Today, I bestow her most powerful lessons on to you.

My mother's first lesson: everyone is deserving of love and compassion. My mother truly cares for everyone she meets. I saw this in action as I was growing up. Our house was always filled with people – often teenagers I was friends with who wanted to be there more than their own homes, who came and stayed because they preferred my mom's house. She offered spaghetti many evenings to anyone who may need it. As her own children grew and moved out of the house, she had a rotating cycle of beloveds staying with her instead. Those young people who lost a parent; a young adult eager to leave an unhappy family situation. And she saw everyone as a person. The young adult who lived with us because of his struggle with substance abuse – he was not a drug addict to her. He was a person. She saw beyond the façade of labels and

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offered this unconditional motherly love to anyone who needed it. Everyone is deserving of love and compassion. My mom created heaven in this realm for those struggling and those on the outskirts.

My mother's second lesson: you can heal if you commit yourself to healing. I saw this in her own attempts to end the cycles of anger in the generations before her. I saw this as she dug herself out of the hole she plummeted into after her sister's death. I saw this when I was a child as she consistently worked to heal her own pain and work on that complicated love. I began to plummet as a teenager, and she wouldn't let me. I sank into my own hole dug with the spade of anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder and loneliness. She insisted that I use that spade to create foot holes and climb out. No matter how far down I plunged, she never gave up on me, and she never let me give up on myself. She drove me to and from therapy every week. We got exercise together, we watched movies together, and I healed. It was hard work. And the ferocity with which she committed herself to my own healing has remained with me for decades. Each of you can heal – I truly believe that. We have the tools and the resources we need to make the best out of this one, fleeting life we have. To those who struggled with the dual diagnosis of mental illness and addiction, she encouraged them to heal in the support group she started. To those who lost a mother, she encouraged them to heal by encouraging them to go to therapy and engaging with those things that fed their souls. To those who didn't have a home they wanted to go to, she offered spaghetti and a desperately needed ear to listen. I saw so many of these people eventually heal and thrive.

My mother's third lesson: life is beautiful. We still have dance parties in the kitchen when cooking holiday meals. She taught me to see the beauty in a garden, in bleeding hearts and cherry blossoms, and gave me a true appreciation for art. She herself is an artist, turning wood into furniture, simple fabric into chic ensembles. Music is a blessing – my childhood is a compilation of Nirvana and Beck and Beth Orton and the Smashing Pumpkins – I still hear this music echoing in my mind. There is so much beauty in the world, and so much joy to be had. She opened my eyes to this through dance parties and intricate, homemade pastries and

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jokes that brought tears to my eyes as I sank to the floor laughing. There is so much joy in life. To my imperfect, flawed, beautiful mother, I give thanks for the lessons she bestowed. I am filled with gratitude. She had that beautiful, jagged, rough, hole filled heart we heard about in our Time for All Ages. ¹

And I do not do this to glorify Mother's Day or imply that my mother and I had the perfect relationship because we did not, and no family does. But through the hardships, these genuine lessons prevailed. When my mother passes, this will be her legacy to me, and to all those I share these lessons with. To me, this is a celebratory day. But there are people all around me who feel differently, and that is ok too, and to be honored. There are those with difficult relationships with their mothers, or no relationship with their mothers, or whose mothers have passed. There are those who are mothers, or were mothers, or long to be mothers. There are birth mothers and stepmothers and adoptive mothers. I wonder, in reflecting on motherhood, what beauty can we nurture today?

We can each treasure those moments of companionship and joy, even if brief. We can pause in a moment of genuine reflection and try to understand the history of our mothers and all they have experienced. Not to find excuses, but to understand and appreciate. I wonder if we can celebrate and nurture unconditional love, with a mother or a child, yes, and beyond that. Who in our tapestry of mothers cares with that same vigor? What children can we, in turn, love as our own? What love can we offer ourselves? Are our hearts torn and bruised and jagged and as such beautiful because it shows we have loved?² I wonder of that inquisitive beauty found in understanding, appreciating, and navigating imperfection. I shared with you my own lessons from my mother figures, and I am curious of yours. What will their legacy be? And there are those among us who celebrate and truly cherish this day! I invite you to lean into and appreciate all the joy you have; it is unique and special and to be cherished. Everything we can garner from our relationships with those mother figures in our lives is beautiful, whether they

¹ "The Perfect Heart" by Paulo Coelho

² ibid

cultivated the beautiful or we had to independently find it within. As we heard in our reading earlier, “We are the whole, complete, beautiful selves that we were born to be.”³ Whatever this day means to you, I hold you in my heart. In this community, we are each loved, unconditionally.

May it be so, and Amen

³ “Feel That?” by Gwen Matthews