

A Universal Matter
May 9, 2021

Welcome and Lighting of Chalice - Rev. Betsy Tabor & UUFES Youth

We acknowledge that our Meeting House is located on the homelands, the N'Dakina, of Abenaki people who inhabited these mountains for thousands of years and still fish these cool lakes and streams.

Welcome. Here we seek justice and truth and understanding.
Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.
Here we seek healing and wholeness. Welcome, all.

Although Mother's Day does not appear on liturgical calendars, today's service is about widening our view of it and noticing what happens in our hearts when we look at it through a wide-angle lens.

In the spirit of the 3rd UU Principle – that we affirm and promote spiritual growth – we light our chalice in acknowledgement of *everyone* who nurtures and kindles the light of truth and kindness in others. We light our candles for all people, no matter their gender identity, who give of themselves to help others grow.

Centering Music - Our centering music is the African American spiritual from slavery times, "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child." May this old song stretch the boundaries of the heart, as we reflect that the person singing it could well have been sold away from their mother or could have been someone whose own child was sold from them.

Shared Affirmation

Hymn - "Blessed Spirit of My Life"

A Time for All Ages - Alice Posner

Happy Mothering Sunday, as it is often called in the U.K. How do you mother?

Thinking about mothers day this year I was thinking about all of the often invisible caregiving work that happens around the world, that keeps everything going. I am a mother, I am also other things, and one thing that connects me to so many others is the caregiving work I do. Caregiving is often treated like a natural resource, and natural resources can be taken for granted.

I like to think on the plant aptly named "mother wort." You have probably seen it even if you did not know what it was. It could be considered a weed. It is a green plant often growing in roadsides or other edge areas.

It stand tall with layers and layers of leaves that grow from a central stem, and look like hands open, palms up to the sky. On a close look you can see at the base of the leaves, at each layer, there are rows of spiky thorny pods. We all know from mother bears both the nurturing and also the fierce work mothering involves.

The book I would like to share today is called “We are Water Protectors” by Carole Lindstrom, an Ojibwe native author, and I will also share the illustrations as best I can by Michaela Goa de, an Tlingit Alaskan native author.

Reflection - Meredith Morten

Who am I? Indeed, who are We, and where did we come from?

I can tell you that as a child at age four I played with sticks, pinecones and pine needles constructing environments for imaginary people and creatures. And that as a middle schooler I accompanied my mother on excursions in search of rocks and minerals along muddy river banks and in the foothills of the White Mountains. My childhood spelled Wonder, Nature, Love of the unknown and a grand Search. My mother was a spiritualist at heart. She studied comparative religion and philosophy in college, was a WWII code breaker, and took up welding at age 50. She liked a good challenge. She exhaled her final breath when she was 98.

I am still discovering how her influence quietly shaped my life.

In graduate school I created structures that were essentially Temples, constructed of fiber and wood increasing in scale from pedestal-sized objects to installations that I (or a viewer) could enter and contemplate. Archaeology had long interested me and was a major source of inspiration. Prehistoric structures and the people who created them particularly fascinated me. Who were they? What were their beliefs? What was the significance of the objects and structures they left behind? And, what force was compelling me to understand them?

The fascination grew. When my daughter was 12, an opportunity arose for me to create work in Macedonia, a region of the world I soon discovered was rich in prehistoric artifacts, goddess figurines in particular. I conceptually based my project on a Neolithic Bird Goddess whose attributes were believed to be Life giving and Life taking, essentially symbolizing the cyclical nature of life. On a subsequent trip I created an installation dedicated to the Macedonian icon, the Great Mother Goddess. She had the head of a bird, torso of a woman, and lower body of a house, temple, or hearth - metaphorically the womb of all creation. These sources of inspiration were created around 6000 BCE; they were small and made of local clay by unknown artisans believed to be women. My artwork in response was abstracted, layered with reference, constructed of a variety of materials, very large and meant to be encountered experientially. Underlying my projects was a search – was it possible to connect emotionally or spiritually with people of the far distant past, essentially our forebears, through objects made by their hands with skills not unsimilar to mine? Was there any difference between them and me, at the Core?

8,000 years is a long expanse of time. If we were to compress and collapse it (time travel so to speak), where would we be and what would our lives look like? I believe there’s a thread that connects us.

I continue to ask Who am I? and where do I come from? Who was my mother, and her mother, and her mother, and on backwards through time? I’m guessing that I would eventually arrive at a peaceful and harmonious people - a woman and a man, very distant relatives of mine, who honored Nature and all that life has to offer. I suspect they lived in a society in which

hierarchical structures were not defining, issues of power and control non-existent, and people lived in balance with one another and with the universe. Some, myself included, believe it was a matriarchal society.

On this Mother's Day of Pandemic Year 2021, I think of my mother and other strong women who have passed into the quiet folds of time, and I celebrate my life as a Mother and as a Daughter-of-Time. Today I watch for Robin and Phoebe who have graced my front and back doors with beautiful nests. I wait for Mother Nature, my version of the Great Mother Goddess, to breathe life into the nests as she starts the cycle anew on time's continuum.

“Songs My Mother Taught Me” Antonin Dvorak

Played by Betsy Ginsberg and friends (quintet)

Reflection - Ann and David Wilkins

It's no surprise that motherhood is an important theme in art in almost every culture and every period. When we teach in Rome, we're surrounded by churches dedicated to Mary, and many street corners have images of the Mother and Child. Museums are crowded with paintings of this popular subject.

One of our personal favorites is this painting of the Rest on the Flight into Egypt by the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio from circa 1597. The Biblically-based story relates how Joseph rushed his wife and her baby away, fleeing the soldiers of the murderous King Herod. But, as is common in great art, Caravaggio's representation goes beyond the specific story to make a universal point: the love of a mother for her child and her need to protect him.

Mary holds her baby close and he sleeps peacefully: he's confident and secure in her arms. But Mary's sleep is fitful: her brow is furrowed. Even in this quick nap she can't relax.

Caravaggio has a reputation as a bad boy: some of his paintings reveal how well he understood violence, and he fled Rome after killing a man in a fight over a tennis match, or perhaps over a woman; the documents aren't clear. But he understood mothers, didn't he? Such tenderness and love. So human.

Note the absence of the traditional halos. Also Mary wears a simple garment, not the usual royal blue and red. Her reddish-brown hair is uncovered. This is a human mother, an unusually human Mary, not enthroned but seated on the ground.

This isn't just any family fleeing from danger. An angel has been sent to make music to help Mary relax. Since the youthful angel hadn't memorized the song yet, Joseph has been pressed into service to hold the music. The music is a Flemish motet with a text from the Song of Songs that starts "How beautiful you are." Both Joseph and the donkey seem to be mesmerized by the angel and the melody that serenades mother and child. May music enrich your day too!

Joys & Concerns - Girl w/ the Flaxen Hair (Claude Debussy)

Played by Eve Goss

Hymn - "Spirit of Life"

Meditation/Prayer

We give thanks for the gift of life,
 For the woman who gave birth to us
 And for everyone who has mothered us, women and men,
 With a kind of love we cannot live without.

We are grateful for those who have helped us heal
 Who have listened, shared, and held us in hard times and in sweet times.
 We are grateful to those who noticed when we changed and grew,
 who praised us when we took risks,
 cheered when we succeeded and stood by when we did not.
 May we find compassion and acceptance for the mothers within and around us.
 May we in turn find life-giving ways to be. Amen.

Response to Joys and Concerns

Lord's Prayer - In the spirit of this weekend and of the rising feminine in today's world, we share a womanist version of the Lord's prayer. The author is Rev. Yolanda Norton, Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible and Farlough Chair of Black Church Studies at San Francisco Theological Seminary. As we say or read these words together, notice how opening up the old language feels to you.

Our Mother,
 who is in heaven and within us,
 we call upon your names.
 Your wisdom come.
 Your will be done,
 in all the spaces in which you dwell.
 Give us each day
 sustenance and perseverance.
 Remind us of our limits as
 we give grace to the limits of others.
 Separate us from the temptation of empire,
 and deliver us into community.
 For you are the dwelling place within us,
 the empowerment around us,
 and the celebration among us,
 now and forever. Amen.

Musical Segue

Reflection - Rev. Betsy Tabor

We can be utterly tone deaf to each other. Doing something about this is meaningful spiritual practice.

This spring, the UUA invited music directors to submit recordings for a collection of music created during the pandemic. Shana, who's mixed over 40 hymns with UUFES singers and musicians, chose one that we discovered this year and have enjoyed, "Calm Soul of All Things." It has beautiful guitar playing and harmonies. But last week, she wondered if our recording would be disqualified. Why? For "insufficient captioning."

Tone deaf to that issue, I didn't understand – our slides clearly display the lyrics of the two verses. Shana had to spell it out – the in-between parts of the song, where no one is singing, needed captions, too. Something like "gentle guitar music, major key" or "bassoon and violin singing with one voice." I still didn't get it. Then it finally clicked....This is about inclusivity!

John and I have watched various TV series this year. I see now how cluelessly we've enjoyed our good fortune of being able to hear clearly...and how naïve, even self-absorbed, we've been in puzzling over the captions on the screen that say "suspenseful music building" or "contemplative, soft music." Tone deaf to their purpose and lacking in empathy, we've found them silly and even chuckled about them.

Shana's story shows how easily one can ignore the needs of others, such as people unable to hear music. Captions aren't funny; they're kind. They ensure that more people are thought of and included. They grow the Beloved Community. What could be more important than that?

Seeing each other more clearly may feel uncomfortable or troubled, but the bigger picture opens us up, too.

The caption conversation illuminates how limited someone's experience of music may be, especially if *you* happen to be blessed with ears that hear clearly. Realizing this, as we see musical captions, invites compassion into our experience. It may feel sobering to think of the many people who hear only a narrow range of frequencies, but it's heartening that now an angel has come along and done something about it.

Those captions on TV? They invite more people in. Knowing that expands every viewer's experience. Connects us. Opens hearts.

Our culture can be tone deaf about Mother's Day, too, making it a Hallmark holiday of flowers, breakfast in bed, and dining out. I say tone deaf because, while Mother's Day is about appreciating moms for all they do, it reaches a narrow slice of what mothers and motherhood are all about...and it can leave so many people out.

This is a tough weekend for the woman who struggles to conceive or the one who always wanted kids, but it never happened for her. It's a complicated weekend for birth mothers, adoptive mothers, mothers who gave up babies. It's hard for mothers who've had abortions or

miscarriages or stillbirths. This weekend, people are grieving their mothers. They are grieving sons and daughters who have died.

And Mother's Day inevitably brings up the complexities of our own relationships with our mothers – loving, cringe-worthy, estranged, softening, sad, hurtful, close, or confused – not to mention that if we've not married our mothers, some of us have become them!

Looking beyond bouquets and cards doesn't have to be a downer! Rather, let this expand us. Looking at the bigger picture of all that mothers are and that mothering is can open the heart. Celebrating, appreciating, and getting together is good for soul, no question. So is letting in and feeling the world's mother stories.

So let it all in on Mother's Day, of all days, with our biggest wide-angle lens.

Let in gratitude for this gift of life.
 Let in appreciation of those who have mothered us well.
 Invite in empathy and forgiveness.
 Let in mothers in hospitals and homes.
 Mothers on the border.
 Mothers in refugee camps.
 Mothers in our memory.
 Let in the Bird Goddess, too.
 And the Earth Mother Goddess.
 Let in the Madonna.
 And the bird sitting on her eggs.

Let them in with love.

The Morning Offering - "23rd Psalm" (a feminine adaption by Bobby McFerrin, 2003), performed by Cantus (not recorded for copyright reasons)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91TbjlaS4kc>

In a 2012 interview with the Omega Institute, McFerrin said: "The 23rd Psalm is dedicated to my mother. She was the driving force in my religious and spiritual education, and I have so many memories of her singing in church. But I wrote it because I'd been reading the Bible one morning, and I was thinking about God's unconditional love, about how we crave it but have so much trouble believing we can trust it, and how we can't fully understand it. And then I left my reading and spent time with my wife and our children. Watching her with them, the way she loved them, I realized one of the ways we're shown a glimpse of how God loves us is through our mothers. They cherish our spirits, they demand that we become our best selves, and they take care of us."

Community Response

1. What does today's goddess language feel like to you?

10:55:08 From Cindy E: Overdue!

10:55:31 From Kim H: Refreshing

10:55:38 From Shana A: transformative, heart-opening

10:55:39 From Margaret R: These versions make me realize why the words never made sense to me when I was young.

10:55:44 From Linda H: balancing

10:55:47 From Betsy L: I feel included

10:55:47 From Alice P: It removes the barriers to the true meaning for me.

10:55:48 From Ellen W: Inclusion gives them much more personal feeling & strength from them.

10:55:49 From Meredith M: coming home

10:55:51 From Sam P: Over due! Too.

10:55:56 From Diane S: The words made my heart smile.

10:56:16 From Kathy B : Wow, so many more possible meanings.

10:56:23 From David W: expansive; old meaning plus increased insight

10:56:29 From Barbara B: Helps letting go of the past and restriction.

10:56:29 From Eve G: They feel perfectly natural —

10:56:30 From Eleanor J: When first hearing this song on the radio while working in my kitchen, I stopped to listen carefully, then the words made their impression on me and I couldn't believe the feeling of acceptance and forgiveness. Like I'd never felt before. I sat down and burst into tears at the kitchen table.

10:56:37 From Meredith M: uplifting

10:56:40 From Kim H: More loving.

10:56:41 From Sam P: Goddesses everywhere among us.

10:57:13 From Barbara L: I loved David and Ann's sharing a different perspective of the art of the Escape to Egypt. Mary as a real mother.

10:57:58 From David W: Mothering isn't restricted to women. Men can mother too, can't they?

2. We might think of mothering as holding. When we came into the world, someone held us – our first experience. In many places, humans are beginning to hold each other again. Have you had a memorable post-Covid hug? How was it? You might remember it for a long time.

10:58:34 From Bruce L : Living in the embrace of Gaia, amidst the caring comes some hard lessons....

10:58:37 From Ricky B: The incredible moment of hugging Bobbi! Won't forget how wonderful that felt.

10:58:37 From Linda H: yes! all can nurture well

10:58:50 From David W: humans are WARM; that's what hugs reveal!

10:58:51 From Margaret R: Longing for the day when these qualities, nurturing, raising, etc. are non-gendered.

10:59:05 From Kim H: My daughter a few weeks ago...after almost 2 years! Tears...and not wanting to let go

10:59:09 From Hope H: I visited Ingrid on Friday - we hugged. It felt wonderful.

10:59:42 From Peggy P: my sister

10:59:50 From Jorge D: My ten-year-old grandson, Diego, hugged and hugged and would not let go.

11:00:01 From Linda H: Surprising...from my granddaughter who held on & on.

11:00:05 From Deborah G: A hug from my 3 year old grandson even if it was a hug around my knees!

11:00:07 From Eleanor J : Hugs are longer and really feeling deeply.

11:00:16 From Shana A: two closest friends, joy, connection

11:00:31 From Alice P: Esther role-played hugging auntie for a few days and then we made it real.

Our cup overflows....

Hymn - "We Laugh, We Cry"

Extinguishing of Chalice

Reminders

Budget Hearing

Coffee Hour

Benediction

The bigger picture opens us up. It expands our experience of the Beloved Community.

Notice what a wide-angle lens on Mother's Day feels like. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo says:

"Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor." Let them in!

Postlude - "Say, Darling, Say" (Appalachian folk)

Hush little darling don't say a word

Poppa's gonna buy you a mocking bird

Say darlin say

This service can be viewed for 90 days at:

https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/D_EkZ9CgJhGMPJ2tswCOmn9ISuq-Igpcp40E0JQaHY14ipfMUe5JOkID_kEtxCV9.R4qj2OJ544eeLgWe

Passcode: 0@yEh1XM