

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

**“In the Service of Life”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 10, 2009

**Sermon**

I feel compassion for Bristol Palin who narrowly missed possibly becoming the first teenage mother in the White House. She also narrowly missed being forced to marry her baby's father. Bristol and her father were on the Today show on Wednesday advocating for teenagers to from sex outside marriage. The Madonna like image of her with her baby clearly sent another message. When asked about this, she stood by her abstinence message while still glowing about being a mom.

Not that being a single mom has been easy for her. She acknowledged that her current life is nothing like what it was a year ago before she became pregnant. “It’s completely changed,” Bristol told host Matt Lauer. “I’m up all night with [Tripp]. I’m constantly changing diapers and making bottles. Your priorities change 100 percent.”

In an ideal world every child would be a wanted child that arrived right on schedule. Philomena and I were very fortunate to conceive Andrew quickly when we were ready to become parents.

Unfortunately, that isn't how things often happen in this world. Many women who desire to become mothers find they cannot get and/or stay pregnant for a myriad of reasons. And many women become pregnant the way Bristol did, by accident, not intention. And many women still become pregnant through sexual violence.

However women become pregnant and however miserable their pregnancy and painful the delivery, the hormone oxytocin evolved to wipe away the past. Within an hour after birth, oxytocin floods the mother's brain, helps her recognize the baby's unique scent, lets down her milk, and bonds them together. The momentum of billions of years of evolution drives mothers to continue the species by manipulating their emotions.

The bonding of mother and infant may begin motherhood, but being a mother requires far more than hormones can program. Today I'd like to examine motherhood as a shining example of how to be of service to life. At the most elemental level, procreation is fundamental to life on this planet. We all have a huge investment in that process being both successful and harmonious.

I've identified six praiseworthy qualities that mothers exhibit and cultivate. I don't know if there are more than these six. What I do know is how critical each one is to raising healthy and happy children. My thesis is these qualities are not just important for being a good mother. They are important qualities for the support and service of life itself. As we celebrate these qualities today in mothers, let us also reflect on how they support and uphold all life.

The number one quality to celebrate in motherhood is commitment. Even before conception, commitment to motherhood sparks, kindles during pregnancy and bursts into flame when the child is born. As Sophia Loren put it, "When you are a mother, you are never really alone in your thoughts. A mother always has to think twice, once for herself and once for her child.

There is a ferocity to that commitment that gets her up again and again in the middle of the night at a baby's hungry cry. That commitment holds her at the bedside of a sick child. It watches over them as they tentatively leave the nest. A mother never fully separates from her child. It is as if a part of her heart has been ripped out of her chest and been given legs to walk around on.

Amy Tiemann, from Chapel Hill, North Carolina who blogs as "Mojo Mom" writes about her seven year old daughter:

There is NO opting out of this relationship, even in very trying times. Her behavior was something that I would never tolerate in a boyfriend, and would make me seriously re-evaluate a marriage. But she is a child who is learning how to be in the world; my child. It is my job to be with her through this, to teach her the skills she needs, and to keep loving her all the while.

Amy's commitment leads to the second quality that mothers exhibit: effort and persistence. I'm sure all the mothers present here today would agree that all mothers are working mothers. There is a wonderful Jewish proverb that expresses this sentiment: God could not be everywhere, so God created mothers.

How many of us would be toilet trained, use napkins, say please and thank you, eat our vegetables, clear the table and wash the dishes without those persistent reminders from our mothers. Mothers play a central role in transmitting culture to their uncivilized little monsters, particularly their little boys.

The commitment, effort and persistence mothers offer lead to the praiseworthy third quality that many of us may be ambivalent about: sacrifice. From day one of pregnancy, women must sacrifice their bodies to their growing fetus. Morning sickness, hormonal swings as estrogen and progesterone bounce up and down, swollen breasts, belly and thighs packing on fat that will never go away, ravage her body as the egg implants in the uterine wall. The fetus feeds first sometimes depleting the women's body of nutrition as she now eats for two, and she gets the leftovers.

Once in the world, the infant dominates her thoughts and emotions. She must sublimate her wants and needs to the well-being of her new charge. I remember how shocking it was when Andrew was born to have this responsibility 24-7! It was an unwelcome adjustment for an independent, self-reliant woman like my wife Philomena (as it was for me too).

The biological necessity of motherhood can become a habit quickly in the first few years of putting the needs of family first. Tenneya Jordan has a telling definition for this: A mother is a person who, seeing there are only four pieces of pie for five people, promptly announces she never did care for pie.

To some, sacrifice comes easily, to others with great resentment. This leads to the fourth quality of motherhood to celebrate: stretching. That stretching also begins in pregnancy as the waist expands. Giving birth requires 10 centimeters of stretching the cervix before the baby can stretch the birth canal enough to escape the womb. The baby leaves stretch marks behind to remind the mother of what she's been through, and that her life, like her body, will never be the same.

The physical stretching of the body is nothing compared to the intellectual and emotional stretching required. There is so much to learn about how to properly care for a child at each stage of its development. Today, parents obsess over how to stimulate infant brain development with mobiles, Mozart, and mental challenges even while they are still immobile! They look for activities to do and groups to join to encourage their growth and development.

The hardest part of that stretching, I think, is the emotional stretching as the child separates from mom emotionally. Early on, the child recognizes that he or she has a separate self. The toddler learns the terrible n-word and uses it like a knife to cut the emotional umbilical cord to mom yelling, "NO!"

Older children learn our emotional weaknesses and foibles and exploit them to their advantage to get what they want. The self-reflective mother must wake up to this and stretch past these weaknesses and foibles. She is pushed and pulled to grow emotionally along with her children.

All the stretching is just a prelude for the next quality mothers must master, letting go. Again, almost from day one, motherhood is a battle between holding on and letting go. Each step away feels uncertain and dangerous. Letting the child out of your sight, letting them make their own choices and mistakes, letting them choose their own interests and friends gradually releasing them into the wilds of humanity to find their own way. Those of us who are control freaks hate this part of motherhood while acknowledging its necessity. Letting go is necessary for them to grow up and fly off to follow their own inner calling.

The last quality cultivated through motherhood I'd like to celebrate is joy. There is much joy in motherhood for all the trials and tribulations. The mother – child bond reflects back and forth the deepest kind of human love most of us will ever experience. It is no accident that a model for divine love in Christianity is Mary's unconditional love for Jesus.

Like Mary's love for Jesus, a mother's selfless giving to her child unconditionally has its own innate joy. Just holding a sleeping baby can fill a mother with this blissful feeling. Loving unconditionally is a profoundly meaningful gift. Giving that gift can release great joyful satisfaction.

There is yet another kind of joy that mothers experience. This joy has a special word dedicated to it in the Southeast Asian ancient language of Pali. It has roots in the native language the Buddha spoke 2500 years ago. The Pali word for this sympathetic joy is called, *mudita*. *Mudita* is the joy one experiences when another experiences joy. It is the delight a mother feels watching a baby's face light up as she takes her first steps. It is the pride a mother feels as a child begins to exhibit his unique talents and abilities. It is the satisfaction a mother feels as her child walks across the stage and receives a diploma.

The joys of motherhood shine forth in spite of the letting go, the painful stretching, the self sacrifice, all the effort and persistence, and the endless commitment. Not all the time, nor always when desired or anticipated, but often enough to make motherhood a worthwhile and satisfying way to be in the service of life.

And we don't need to be mothers to experience that same satisfaction. Motherhood can be a template for how to serve life without having children. There are many ways to be of service to life beyond motherhood.

Devoting oneself to a marriage relationship can be a way to serve life. Working as a community organizer as I have done in ARISE, A Regional Initiative Supporting Empowerment, can be a way to serve life. Starting and sustaining a business can be a way to serve life. Teaching and mentoring can be a way to serve life. Writing a book can be a way to serve life. Painting, sculpting and other artistic pursuits can be a way to serve life. Even spiritual practices and religious devotion can be ways to serve life.

All these ways to serve and more all require commitment, effort and patience, sacrifice, stretching, letting go and yield joy. All these ways to serve life create meaning and satisfaction. All these ways expand our hearts through serving.

Service to Life initiates another expansion that leads a mother, and each of us as well, beyond ourselves. No mother can raise a child all by herself. One of the big surprises many women experience with their first child is the lowering of boundaries. Strangers will want to touch your protruding belly. They will comment on your infant's attractiveness and give unsolicited parenting advice. The world naturally wants to treat a mother as a public person.

Mothers respond by becoming drawn into play groups, parent teacher organizations, and into communal activities. They come through our doors here wanting a liberally religious faith community in which to nurture their child.

The service of life stimulates a progressive expansion of concern that reaches from family to community, to the environment, to the planet, to the source of life itself.

So as we celebrate motherhood today, let us recognize motherhood as an example of what we are all called to do, to find a way to be of service to life. We can look to our mothers for guidance for how to be of service through cultivating

qualities such as commitment, effort and persistence, sacrifice, stretching, letting go and joy. When we have all of these qualities in the work we choose, or the work that chooses us, we will find meaning and satisfaction.

Please notice these qualities are not outcome oriented. As with Bristol Palin, parenthood may not have been chosen. Our children may be very difficult or even die, our community organizing may fail, our books may not sell, our art may be panned and our spiritual practice may be frustrating and feel fruitless. Change is a fact of life. All that arises, passes away. The meaning and satisfaction are to be found in the *service* of life more than the result. We are called to love and let go, again and again.

Today, may we honor our mothers as devoted servants of life and follow their loving example.

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