

“Raising My Wildflowers”

A Reflection by Barbara Kline
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
Mother’s Day
May 14, 2017

Wildflowers! Those who know me know I love weeds. A lot of weeds are quite healthful, and flowers are just beautiful. In my opinion, Mother Earth and human mothers have much in common. We produce a beautiful array of amazing beings. In nature, flowers and weeds commonly grow together to help each other—like poison ivy growing near jewelweed, with jewelweed useful as a cure for the effects of poison ivy. This is rather like our children, who can make a mess and then look up at you with their muddy feet and hand you a bunch of dandelions, saying, “I picked these for you, Mommy.”

Raising my wildflowers has been the best and most challenging thing I have ever done. It is never boring, that is for sure. I also see wildflowers as beautiful and never boring. They pop up in the most unusual spots and can make your day. Children can do that too. One of my kids will do something that just lights up my soul. I know I am truly blessed to be a mother, and I savor every day. Just like the wildflowers that I come upon when taking a walk, I appreciate the loveliness and individuality of each of my wonderful children.

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A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull

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Coffee hour in a Unitarian Universalist church! It’s the most credible place I know for affirming a garden of wildflowers—children, that is. “What to do about kids who run through the clusters of grown-ups with hot coffee in their hands?” It’s a concern at every church—UU churches perhaps more so. My brother and I wouldn’t have dared to do that at the church where we grew up, and I have fond memories of the potlucks, holiday programs and more in the fellowship hall of that small Presbyterian church in Iowa. I didn’t become Unitarian Universalist to escape that church, but because this faith that we share simply offered a more resilient perspective of the holy, intentional inclusiveness, and a fuller—let’s just call it permissive—practice of how we raise, teach, and interact with our children.

There is a price to be paid for raising what Molly affectionately calls “free-range children”. Consider coffee hour and the sudden alarm sounding from a parent or from Molly or me. “Oh no, she’s out in the Spiral Garden all by herself!” or “This is NOT a place for running!” or “(Name withheld), you may NOT have six cupcakes!” Yet, the young voices of wisdom that sound in our interactions with the youngsters of this congregation never cease to warm my heart, startle me into a newfound appreciation for how our kids connect the dots, and ante up a conversation with a pitch from left field that brings gasps of wonder.

Yes, Barbara, in nature, “flowers and weeds”—or weeds that are flowers—“commonly grow together to help each other.” Every meadow, every forest glade, every lakeside, every yard, every garden, every family, and every congregation thrives with the presence and vitality of wildflowers, which we just may recognize as our children. In your words, Barbara, “they pop up in the most unusual spots and can make your day.” Even as their energy can wear us thin and wear us out, family life and congregational life is anything but boring! And my hunch is that just about everybody here this morning has a low tolerance for boring, so those of us in the pulpit and around it try not to be! Our kids simply don’t have to try.

Recall the story of the Flower Communion and how Norbert and Maja Capek committed to Unitarianism. Newly arrived from Czechoslovakia and not quite settled in New Jersey, they were exploring. While they valued their Baptist roots, they were ready to explore what else was out there. With eight children under their wings, Norbert and Maja made a pivotal decision for those first Sunday mornings in their new home. They sent out a posse. The Capek youngsters were on a mission to check out other churches and report back on what they found and how they felt about what they found. It was the First Unitarian Church of Orange, New Jersey that topped the reviews. This, by the way, is the same church served for so many years by my colleague and the interim minister who preceded me here, Tony Johnson. Of course Tony was there long after the Capek kids landed, but I can imagine his excitement if he had greeted this enclave of kids checking out his church. Welcoming wildflowers? Raising wildflowers? Yes and yes!

When I dedicate a child, I tap the wisdom of the Lebanese poet, Khalil Gibran:

“Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of
Life’s longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you
yet they belong not to you.

... You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.

And we give the child a flower, a symbol for the unfolding of a beautiful life.

This tradition connects intimately with the religious education that our youngsters experience here. Their own thoughts are tapped. Their questions are encouraged. They are also expected to listen to one another, to respect one another, and to discover through stories and experience the values of compassion and justice and love that shine through our Unitarian Universalist principles. Promoting “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” becomes for them, “We believe that each and every person is important.” Promoting “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” becomes for them, “We believe in caring for our planet Earth, the home we share with all living things.”

Just as Barbara expressed her appreciation for the loveliness and individuality of each of her wonderful children, so too they are part of a family. Just as we honor the distinctiveness of each and every child, so too they are part of the family of this congregation. Raising wildflowers is not about raising beautiful little showstoppers, but rather honoring the distinctive beauty and gifts and quirks and delights of each blossom while tending to a larger garden of which each flower is a part.

Flowers and children and hope and beauty are dance partners in the rite that is our Flower Communion. I don’t doubt that some of you sent your youngsters out into the yard early this morning to find some blossoms to bring. I can only imagine those eight Capek kids running out into their yard to gather blossoms for the Flower Communion that the Capeks brought to that long ago Unitarian church in Prague and then to First Unitarian Church of Orange, New Jersey.

Yes, Barbara, and yes, all who have known that winsome moment when our little urchin hands us a bouquet of dandelions, “These are for you, Mommy.” Such is flower communion with our child. Beauty emerges when loves takes root, and take root it does when we are warmed by such a gift given with innocence and pride. All it takes for Mommies to melt is a bouquet of dandelions held up by little hands.

I recall my own little daughters handing me a gift of fresh raspberries. They knew how much I adored raspberries. “These are for you, Mommy!” Moved and surprised, I did ask where they found them; they didn’t grow in our yard. “Oh...they hesitated...they’re from Mrs. Carmer’s yard.” Undoubtedly my best friend, Ann Carmer, who lived just across the street, was unsuspecting as her daughter Caryn and my little ones went about their not completely innocent business of picking these succulent treasures from those bushes just outside Ann’s back door.

Free spirits they were, loving and with a growing edge when it came to how they shopped outdoors.

Perhaps the act that most valiantly defines motherhood is timely and thoughtful letting go. Being born is letting go. Giving birth is letting go. Adopting a child means that someone else has let go, willingly or otherwise. To give ourselves over to personhood is to let go of expectations that our mothers will sooner or later be who we wanted them to be. To give ourselves over to motherhood is to let go of expectations that our children will sooner or later be who we want them to be. This is the paradox of maternal connection. My own theory of labor pain is that it's a ruse to distract us from the angst that goes with the territory of giving birth to a child once that child is born through the endless cycles of holding on and letting go. This is no less so for those of us who have been graced by children through adoption, for the demanding process of adoption is a form of labor. Parenthood altogether is holding on and letting go, holding on and letting go.

Motherhood and parenthood are not relegated solely to those of us who "have children", that expression of possessiveness that belies the reality that we never really "have them." Each and every person here this morning has mothered and parented when you have nurtured a child, when you have found yourselves attached even for a moment to the grace and wonder of young life, when you have contributed in any of the myriad possible ways to that child's well being. Why else do I address all of you in the ceremony of a child dedication with the question that follows the same question addressed to parents:

"Do you promise that to the best of your ability you will nurture and instruct this child in the way of love and mindful living both for her sake and for humankind?"

So far, no one has refused.

They grow embraced by our love, by our teaching, and sometimes by our chasing them all the way into the garden, where they seem so at home, and other times to the farthest corner of the yard, where they seem equally at home. Perhaps they know that one of us—a parent, a caregiver, a friend, one of those congregants who made a promise to them early on—will come after them.

"It goes so fast," my own mother said at the age of 90 or so. "It goes so fast." Life, yes, and raising our children and watching them sprout and grow. It goes so fast, finding ourselves on and that threshold of letting go in ways that are as pivotal as when we first allowed them to go out the door on their own. Raising our freedom loving, why-asking, high energy, variably abled, wondrously wise, little blossoms that reach for the sun and bend with the wind and stretch into the fullness of who they are; it goes so fast.

"I tried to tell her:"
writes Naomi Long Madgett of her daughter:

This way the twig is bent.
Born of my trunk and strengthened by my roots,
You must stretch newgrown branches
Closer to the sun

Than I can reach.

I wanted to say:
 Extend my self to that far atmosphere
 Only my dreams allow.

But the twig broke,
 And yesterday I saw her
 Walking down an unfamiliar street,
 Feet confident,
 Face slanted upward toward a threatening sky,

And
 She was smiling
 And she was
 Her very free,
 Her very individual,
 Unpliable
 Own.

May the wildflowers we know and the children we will never know, be graced by such spirit, with the assurance that they grow and stretch in a larger garden, which will soon enough look to them for nurture and love.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*,

Barbara Kline, Reflection on “Raising My Wildflowers,” Worship Service at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, CT, May 14, 2017.

Naomi Long Madgett, “Offspring,” in *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women’s Spirituality*, Edited by Marilyn Sewell, Beacon Press, Boston, 1991.