

*Reflections on Motherhood*  
A sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner  
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READINGS by Kathleen McTigue

All of the central opportunities of a classical spiritual life are available in the walk with children, if we can open our eyes to see them. We are called to hold love at the center of what we do. We are called to study and practice patience, forgiveness, crime and punishment, power, suffering, grace, creation, and relinquishment. How could this not be a spiritual path? It's there for us very clearly when our children are babies and young children, but it doesn't seem to disappear even when they're in their fifties. Our influence decreases or even vanishes, but our urgent concern for our children never leaves us, and the role of mother or father stays with us until the day we die. I have also long realized that aunts and uncles and friends of the family play parenting roles often and well. The spiritual path with children is available to all of us, whether or not we give birth, as long as we choose to be a committed figure in a child's life.

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We don't hear stories about saints and sages walking the path to their enlightenment hauling bags of diapers and stacks of diaper wipes, mini-packs of tissues, liquid Tylenol, and teething rings. It's hard to imagine them engaging in soul-deepening religious thought or dialogue while they wipe a runny nose or clean up after SpaghettiOs. And a parent is more likely to be found poring time and again over the words of *The Runaway Bunny* or *Goodnight Moon* than over the classic sacred texts.

The real journey with children is motivated not by our spiritual hungers but by our offspring's more prosaic appetites. Although children's lovely, spontaneous ways may reawaken us to the world, being a parent often doesn't look anything like traveling a spiritual path. Parents have little opportunity for regular prayer or meditation, Sabbath reflection, study, or journal-writing. Instead, such practices may be reduced and disrupted almost to the vanishing point. The real journey for parents leads right through the life we are living—through the chaos, the interruptions, and the exhaustion.

This ordinary, unsung path requires tremendous openness to the unanticipated. It meanders around a thousand turns that feel like detours or dead ends. It requires faith that the spirit does not grow in a straight line; nor does it require traditional forms and practices, as helpful as these can be. Real spiritual growth depends on our willingness to be transformed. And very little transforms us as thoroughly as sharing our lives with children.

## SERMON

Well, this is it. My last sermon here at AUUC. My last real opportunity to reflect on motherhood in the abstract before I am so immersed in it that there will be little or no time to reflect at all (or so I hear). I am very glad Baby Benner did not decide to make an early arrival, so I am here with you this morning. I am trying not to build up my expectations for an obedient child based on this one incident of cooperation.

It is a little hard to know what to say this morning, as I stand on the cusp of what is likely to be the biggest change I will ever know in my life—beyond those of being born and dying. Becoming a mother is something I have thought a lot about—long ago as a very theoretical but taken-for-granted plan when I was young, a little later at a time when I feared it might happen too early, still later when I realized it was something I very much wanted and yet I might never have the opportunity, and especially in recent months when it is no longer theoretical but it is also not yet reality. I have thought more and more about it—as I felt the baby move inside me for the first time; as Derek and I began to plan, as best we could, for the arrival of this new person in our lives; as I washed and folded little, tiny clothes with ducks and bears all over them; as, in the last couple of days, I have realized that I am actually going to have to give birth soon. I have thought and read and talked and written a great deal about it, and at the same time, I am aware that, truly, I have no idea what this is going to be like.

As a minister, I have had the privilege of walking with so many families, with so many of you as you experienced the joys and struggles of parenthood. As you adjusted to being parents. As you wrestled with what kind of parents you want to be. As, sometimes, you had to watch your children in great pain and know there was nothing you could do to make it better. As, in a whole variety of ways, you had to let go. Now, as I stand on the edge of this journey myself, I realize how little I really ever knew or understood—though my care and concern was always genuine. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your journey, even when I didn't share it.

One of the things that seems most remarkable to me about parenthood is how utterly ordinary and how completely transformative it is, both at the same time. This seems true certainly on the large-scale, given that the majority of human beings experience parenthood and have been for all of human history of course, and yet for each individual person, it is completely life-changing and miraculous. On the one hand, it is the most natural, most ordinary thing for us to do. It is our biological imperative as part of life on this planet and it is something that, until very recently, was taken for granted as one of, if not the central goal and achievement in life. We were built to be parents, to give birth to the generation that will replace us.

At the same time, for each person who becomes a parent, (especially in this time when much more often parenthood is a choice, one that sometimes involves a great deal of intention and high-tech intervention), our own experience of becoming a parent may be the most remarkable thing that happens to us. It changes everything, or so I hear. Most of all, it changes us, every single one of us who goes through it. Like the experience of falling in love, though people becoming parents is something that happens all the time, when it happens to us we cannot believe anyone has ever experienced anything like we are experiencing—it is just too amazing.

Becoming a parent seems both ordinary and transformative in another way as well, in the way lifted up by the two readings by Kathleen McTigue I shared with you earlier. Being a parent involves, especially in the early years, seemingly endless repetition of the most basic activities

human beings do—changing diapers, feeding, offering reassurance and safety. The day-after-day routine of parenthood is inescapable and does not seem to resemble the great spiritual path we hear so much about. It is true, as she says, that the world's greatest religious teachers were either not parents, like Jesus, or they left their children behind in order to reach enlightenment and offer it to others, like the Buddha. The women who stand out as great spiritual leaders, and perhaps it is no coincidence that there are many fewer of them, also were people who did not have children, especially young children, at the center of their lives. The demands of hands-on, every day parenting simply do not allow for the great spiritual pilgrimage, or hours of contemplation and meditation.

At the same time, I cannot count the number of times I have heard people say that becoming and being a parent has been the most deeply spiritual and meaningful part of their lives. That is it in relationship with their children that they have learned the most, grown the most, loved the most, lived the most. There is significant tension between this truth and the truth of how boring and frustrating and mindless parenting can seem at times. And yet both things seem to be true.

What makes it even harder to grasp, at least from my outsider's perspective, is how mixed up with each other these two aspects of parenting are. It's not like someone holds up a sign or taps us on the shoulder to point out when we are having a spiritual moment in parenting. It's not like what we are doing actually changes. It's more that the moments of transformation and grace are deeply imbedded in all the ordinary, repetitive things we do, and if we are not careful, we will miss them. In fact, the potential for them is probably almost always there, if we but have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts that believe.

I actually believe that, as Unitarian Universalists, this is easier for us to understand and accept than it might be for some others. After all, many religious traditions are built upon the model of a strict separation between the sacred and the profane, believing that there are certain holy places and times while the rest are not, or that God can only be present in particular ways. According to this way of understanding the world, there are the saved and the damned, the clean and the unclean. There is that which is holy and that which is decidedly not, and never the twain shall meet.

Most of the time, this is not how we Unitarian Universalists understand the world. A faith in unity lies at the core of who we are. And not just the unity of God, or the unity of humanity, but the unity of all that is. There is no separation between the sacred and the profane, the holy and the unholy. God or Goddess or spirit or the divine can be anywhere and in any form. In fact, its presence is perhaps never in question, only our ability to see it.

So it should not come as a surprise to us that in parenting, as in all other endeavors in life, everything is mixed up together. We cannot sit and wait for the holy to appear; nor do we need to go to a special place or create a special time; we must look for it where we are, wherever we are. We can find the holy in all that we do, however mundane and repetitive it seems.

The truth is that, for the vast majority of us, life is pretty ordinary. Most days consist of getting up, getting dressed, eating breakfast, getting ready and heading off for whatever it is that takes up most of our time—be it work, school, parenting, or something else—coming home and reversing the process of the morning. There are, of course, days and times that stand out, when regular life stops if only for a moment, when we are visited with such joy or such sorrow that everything seems

different. There are highs and lows in life, and we often work pretty hard to create the former and avoid the latter, but the truth is, most of life for most of us is simply life, day after day after day.

This could be unbearable. If we thought that spiritual experiences, that growth and enlightenment, that joy and wonder could only happen in those moments that seem to stand on their own, life would be pretty tough to take. I think, in fact, this is a central problem of our time. No one wants an ordinary life. No one really believes that there can be meaning and spirit in the everyday. And so we strive for our fifteen minutes of fame, or always knowing that feeling of falling in love, or experiencing enough excitement and adrenaline that we can pretend we are more than our ordinary lives.

Of course this is deeply dangerous. Not only because it means we put ourselves at risk with dangerous stunts or by being unfaithful to our committed relationships or by seeking constant entertainment rather than genuine engagement or by overindulging in drugs or alcohol or pornography or gambling as we look for the next big high. It is dangerous also because it denies the truth of our lives, and the genuine gifts of meaning and hope that lie embedded in the most ordinary of times.

Falling in love is a wonderful thing and I wish such an experience for everyone. But loving, over time, through challenge, through all the day-to-day seems an even more remarkable thing. Perhaps less exciting, perhaps more ordinary, but also richer and deeper and truer than is possible while we are still falling.

I imagine the same is true about parenting. That the moment of becoming a parent, be it in the delivery room or the first time we hold our newly adopted child, is a high like nothing else. But it seems to me that it is in *being* a parent, in faithfully doing all those boring, repetitive tasks that need to be done, it is there that true love and grace are to be found. I am sure it does not feel that way all, or even most of the time, but I think the task is not to make it more exciting but rather to see the beauty that is there already, to know that all those tasks add up to love of the deepest kind. What could be more sacred than that?

And so, as I embark on this next journey in my life, and as you embark on one as well, I wish for all of us the ability to see and know and appreciate the great gifts of the ordinary, the wonder that is present in the day-to-day, the holy that is with us always. May we indeed, have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts that believe.

I want to close my reflections this morning with a letter, a letter to our soon-to-born child, a letter of hope and possibility and my last opportunity for a while for peaceful reflection. I share it with you because, in significant ways, parenting is not unlike ministry and many of these wishes and imaginings echo through my hopes for you as well as my hopes for my son or daughter.

Dear Little One,

The time has almost come. After a good long while when you were simply an idea, a hope, a dream and then a time when you were real but hidden, still unknown, it is now almost time for you to come fully into this world, for us to meet you and to begin to learn who you are and who you will be.

Truly I cannot put into words all that I feel at this time—the joy, the excitement, the terror, the uncertainty, the hope, the love. It is almost more than I can bear. The idea that soon I will be a mother seems at once the most natural and right thing in the world and yet still unbelievable, still impossible to understand completely.

I have in my head a picture of the mother I want to be, a picture made up of the best of everyone I see around me. I want to be a mother who is always patient and kind, playful and affectionate, understanding and endlessly creative. A mother who knows how to grow and change with her child, to accept the gradual letting go that will begin as soon as you are born. A mother who does indeed find the sacred in every moment, who does not need the highs but is content with whatever comes. A mother who doesn't get bored or tired or angry or hurt. A mother who gives everything she has and yet isn't so self-sacrificial that it damages her or her family.

This is the mother I want to be, and the one it will take me time and tears to understand I can never be. I will do my best, I hope, but I also *will* get bored and tired and angry and hurt. I will run out of words to offer and games to play. I will get stuck at times, and resist the letting go. I will give too much, and then too little, and then too much again. I cannot promise always to be kind or patient or understanding, as much as I might try. I will make mistakes, and sometimes I won't be able to see what I have done wrong. Most of all, I will forget that each moment with you is infused with the holy. I will close my eyes, though rarely on purpose I hope, to the grace which resides there, in each mundane task I do as your mother.

But this I promise, to the best of my ability:

I will love you, whoever you are, whoever you need to be. Though we may struggle with one another at times, I will strive always to remember that you are your own person, not a reflection of me, and you deserve your own life to live. I will take care of you when you cannot care for yourself, and work to let go enough to allow you to care for yourself when you can, knowing that I will not always be able to be there with you and for you, as much as I might want to be. I will try to stand back and let you make your own mistakes as well as have your own achievements, so that you know yourself to be a whole person on your own. I will strive to, at least once a day, take a deep breath and really look at you, to see again what I know I will see in the first moments after you are born—all the wonder and possibility and miracle of life given to me to care for and watch over for a time, the greatest blessing I could imagine.

I trust that we will learn to forgive one another as well as ourselves our mistakes and that, imperfect as we both will be, we will also find within each other the truth of love and beauty and the greatest meanings in life.

I cannot wait to meet you, my child, and to see what life has in store for us.

With more love than I can imagine,  
your mother

May it be so. Amen.