

## Handle With Care: Reflections on Mother's Day

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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

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**Reading** *Shoulders* by Naomi Shihab Nye<sup>1</sup>

### Sermon

Rev. Ann Kadlecsek

This week, we got some experience with rain that never stopped falling. But eventually it did. And just in time for Mother's Day.

I am conflicted about Mother's Day. I'm a proud mother, and happy to celebrate that fact. And I appreciate my mother, and hers, and all the mothers who have loved and protected and nurtured and educated and whose hearts have opened wide and broken in all the ways.

And this day can inspire powerful remembering and gratitude - an honoring of ancestors and a recognition of a love that treats another as precious, that handles with great care. We could do those things any time, but Mother's Day is a reminder and an opportunity to do so together.

And. There are some problems with Mother's Day.

One problem is the flawed assumptions that are built into the modern celebration. We can start with assumptions about who we are celebrating.

We all entered the world because someone with a uterus nourished and protected us within their body for 9 months (or thereabouts), and then gave birth to us. That person gave us life at some cost to themselves – that gift is worth celebrating, but the person with the uterus may or may not be a mother. There are plenty of people who give birth for whom the term “mother” doesn't work, and our collective understanding of gender has expanded to honor that reality. And there are plenty of people who did not give birth to the person for whom they are “mother.” There are people with multiple mothers, or no mother. It's more complex – there are more options - than the narrow stereotypes would have us believe.

There is also an assumption that there is a specific, almost magical love, that can only be found between mother and child. An intense, profound love often happens in such a relationship - there are hormones after giving birth that make it more likely, and we may be most open to it there, but it doesn't always happen there – and it does also happen outside that relationship. When we focus our awareness and acknowledgment of that kind of love on its presence in someone we call mother, we can miss out on it in other places, and we can be devastated if that one particular relationship is not where we find it.

Besides those assumptions, there's the problem of commercialism – a lot of money is made around Mother's Day. And in that context, participating can feel more like an obligation or a performance than a heartfelt recognition of a particular person or kind of love.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/shoulders>

And then there's the problem that Mother's Day seems to define ideal womanhood rather narrowly and not always in the best interest of women. A pedestal can be a confining space.

Finally, there's all the people who don't fit well into this day: people who have lost children or mothers, people who wanted to be mothers and couldn't, people who never wanted to be mothers and are, people who know themselves to be mothers, but are not recognized as such, people whose mothers or children were troubled, or disappointing (or worse). This day is, for some, a day for reckoning with grief for mothers or children who are no more, or that never were.

As I said... some problems.

And so some of us celebrate, and some of us grieve, and some of us choose to ignore the day altogether.

And yet, we are all deeply affected by the presence and absence of the particular profound love that treats another as precious, and that is often associated with mothers. We can use all the opportunities we can get to name its power - to say thank you for all the places where we find it and give it - and to make space to grieve, to heal - to reckon with the complexity. For ...

We're not going to be able  
to live in this world  
if we're not willing to give and receive that kind of care

The road will only be wide.  
The rain will never stop falling.

We are all deeply affected by the presence and absence of this particular profound love. And we're affected in different ways, at different times - the precise mix of celebration, grief, trauma and healing varies within us and among us.

And that is what we are here for.

This church is a place where we strive to make space for people with different needs and experiences and perspectives to be in community together. At our best, this is an intentionally big tent of welcome and belonging and care - even when it holds both celebration and grief. That's hard to do - but it's so important for this divided world that we keep trying.

Striving to be that kind of community asks some things of us. One is to let go of the idea that our individual needs are the congregation's needs - that if something here doesn't work for us personally, it's a problem that needs to be fixed. In the kind of community we're creating, some of what happens here - words, music, actions, events - are for you; and some are for someone else, and it all coexists. In this big tent, we make our own meaning of what happens here, as we value what others need as much as what serves us.

There is, of course, a difference between something that doesn't work for us, or that's uncomfortable, and something that actively harms us. Things that happen here that perpetuate wider oppressions or constitute abuse or bullying are problems for us all and for this community as a whole. One of our tasks in this kind of community (especially for those of us who carry various forms of privilege) is an ongoing discernment about whether a particular thing we don't like is a problem for the community that needs to be addressed or our own chance to reflect and grow.

However you relate to anything here, there are a host of other perspectives here with you. And we strive to make space for all of it, because what we're doing here is much bigger than any of our individual reactions or responses or understandings.

A second thing that this "big tent" community asks of us is an openness to the possibility that something that has accumulated harmful baggage, might also have a meaningful core - for us, or someone else. We don't have to reflexively reject the whole package - we can (sometimes) claim the core.

Unitarian Universalism is doing that these days (slowly and not without controversy) with some theological language and concepts. If you discovered Unitarian Universalism during our predominantly humanist phase a few decades ago, you may have noticed the shift, and you might have feelings about it. And that's OK. There is space for those feelings. But what's happening is not a rejection of humanism - it's an attempt to also more explicitly claim what is good in our older heritage. Not either/or - both/and. Making space for diverse experiences, because what we're doing here is bigger than any one experience.

We pause in every service so people can move stones, even though not everyone relates to that ritual, because we commit to a variety of opportunities for spiritual reflection. We sing Christmas carols on Christmas eve - some cherish the tradition; others don't appreciate it, or even find it a difficult reminder of harm experienced elsewhere. I've heard both perspectives here. And that's OK. We do this because we value the core messages of our heritage and the season, and because - as best we can - this community is here for all. And the things we don't like are, if we choose, an opportunity to grow - to explore where our reaction is coming from, what's going on within us, whether we want to respond with intention instead of as a reflex - and perhaps explore ... is there something of value within this thing we don't like?

With Mother's Day, we can, perhaps, practice - both claiming a meaningful core and making space for each other and all the complexity we bring. There is a core that honors the nurturing love that treats another as precious - that makes us willing to rearrange our lives for another human being. There is nothing transactional in this love - it is not earned, or an obligation. It is simply a response to the presence of another precious, worthy, fragile human. Sometimes this love carries and shelters another, protecting them from harm. Sometimes it offers a challenge, or wisdom from the generations and life experience, or an infusion of joy. However it shows up, it's a love that feels our connection intensely, that breaks our heart; that transcends death; however we configure and arrive at it, it's a love that changes us, and those who love us or are loved by us. It guides us to ourselves.

We live in a world where that kind of love happens, and it is good.

So today,

Perhaps you can celebrate the presence of that love wherever you have found it, or given it.

Perhaps you can grieve all the ways it has been, or is now, absent.

Perhaps you can begin to heal from ways in which a narrow conception of that love excluded you, or someone you care about.

Perhaps you're indifferent to this particular day, but you believe in being present to those in your life who find meaning in it.

Whatever you're doing - because making space for all of that is what we do, perhaps you can do it here, as we open ourselves to offering and receiving ever more of that kind of love.

Because we have to do more of it.

We're not going to be able  
to live in this world  
if we're not willing to do that  
with one another.

The road will only be wide.  
The rain will never stop falling.

Wherever we learned about the love that treats another as precious, may we ever more offer and receive it, and celebrate it every chance we get.

May it be so. Happy Mother's Day.

Amen.