

**A Mothers' Renaissance:
Birthing Values that Enable Families to Thrive**

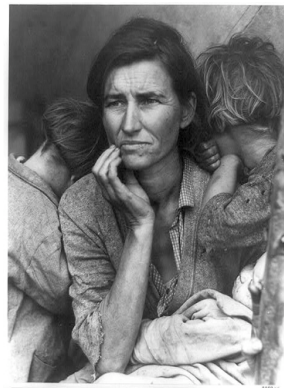
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*The most important thing she'd learned over the years was that there was
no way to be a perfect mother and a million ways to be a good one.*
— Jill Churchill, writer

**Call to Worship
Virginia Jackson**

We hear a lot about the “Mommy Wars” going on in American society, as if stay-at-home moms are pitted against working moms, relentlessly judging each other. The media plays it up, because if we feel our personal choices are under attack, we get riled up and buy the magazine. In fact, I feel like fellow mothers, working or not, are my closest allies. They're the ones who know what it is to hose vomit off a carseat or manage a tantrum in the grocery store.

If there is any “Mommy War” going on, it's that the values that mothers typically hold dear and try to instill in their children are at odds with the values of mainstream culture. In a society where productivity, the bottom-line, and material gain are most celebrated, the efforts of mothers are often undervalued.



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Mothers across the board say that parenting is the most important work we do. We are the glue that holds families together. We are the oil that makes them run smoothly. We shape human lives and create future citizens. *The Motherhood Project*, which Duane is going to discuss a little later, sees us as “potential catalysts for cultural and social transformation”. That’s a pretty powerful role.

Indeed, I feel very powerful in my children’s lives. They are 3 and 6 years old. Lifelong habits are being established now and I want to make sure that exercise, nutrition, music, friendship, and gratitude are ingrained in their daily lives. I want to make sure they can move through the natural world with reverence and without fear. I want to help them learn delayed gratification, careful consumption, and the value of saving money. I teach them how to write thank-you notes, how to recognize when their bodies need sleep, how to ask for privacy. I am attuned to their emotions, so when my son was paralyzed by the prospect of reading a book to his class on Kids are Teachers Day, I could help him work through his anxiety, prepare effectively, and experience success.

A handful of people in my circle truly *get* what I do as a mother, but generally, when I tell people I’m a full-time mom, I feel small. I feel like an underachiever in their eyes. Everyone around me seems so darned *busy*. Usually, I am **not** busy. I don’t want to be busy. I don’t want to be productive. I want to be *present* in my family, accessible to my children and my husband. I want to have time to cook wholesome food, to squat down on the sidewalk on the way to school to watch ants, and to read really good books. I am protective of this life, and deep down I know it’s the right choice for **our** family now, but I do wish that good child-rearing, in whatever form, was more highly-regarded.

In today’s service, we’ll pay homage to mothers and examine how we can better support their efforts. Come let us worship together.

Sermon
Duane Fickeisen

Let us acknowledge that the relationship each of us has with our mother is complex, nuanced, sometimes fraught, sometimes wonderful, seldom simple, almost never reducible to a greeting card sentiment.

Some of us are close to our mothers, others of us may never have known our birth mother, and for some of us a grandmother, aunt, sister, stepmother, adoptive mother, or other woman loved and cared for us in the role of mother. Some of us have or had simply awful relationships with our mothers and some of those have moved to estrangement. Others of us have been blessed with a wonderful relationship and are very close. Most of us are somewhere in between those polarities. And some of us this morning are actively grieving the death of our mother.

And let us remember that the founders of Mother's Day envisioned it not as a day to celebrate motherhood or to acknowledge the women who have been our mothers, but as a day of political action, a day for mothers to unite in demanding social change — specifically to gather in a convention to demand peace during a time of war. They sought an end to making their sons instruments of violence. It was a day to embrace power and to work as change agents to transform our world. In her 1870 proclamation calling for the first mother's convention against war, Unitarian Julia Ward Howe called on mothers to

“Say firmly...

Our husbands will not come to us,
reeking with carnage,

For caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn

All that we have been able to teach them
of charity, mercy and patience. ...”

In that spirit, let this be a day to celebrate, encourage, and join the efforts by mothers to be agents of social change, working to lift

up values that enable everyone to thrive in nurturing and caring families, communities, and nations.

There is an organization that has been working toward that end. It's the Motherhood Project.² Their mission is "... to change our culture and what it values — to make this a society with a healthy balance between the values of what has been called the "money world" — the values that dominate our culture today — and the values of what we call the "mother world" — the values essential for nurturing human beings and building healthy, caring human relationships."

The Project completed their Motherhood Study in 2005. The study included a survey of 2000 women over 18 who are mothers to at least one child under 18 years old. The survey was designed to be a comprehensive national survey representing the broad diversity of mothers in our country. The survey data were complemented by focus groups and in-depth interviews.

The study results indicated that mothers have much in common across many dimensions despite the common media portrayals of differences. Across age, race, religion, ethnicity, geography, and employment status differences, the survey indicated strong agreement among the mothers on the importance of mothering, the satisfactions they derive from mothering, and concerns about the negative forces in our culture that threaten the well-being of children. The results also indicated no significant evidence for what the media have described as 'Mommy Wars' — conflicts between mothers who are employed in the workforce and those who are not.

A supermajority — 81% — expressed being 'very satisfied' with life as a mother. Another 16% said they were 'somewhat satisfied.' Those who were married were more likely (85%) to be very satisfied with their lives as mothers than those who live with a partner outside marriage (80%) or those who are single moms (62%).³

The same high percentage — 81% — said that mothering is the most important thing they do. About half said they share day-to-day responsibilities of parenting with a partner or spouse, but

² <http://motherhoodproject.org>

³ Perhaps that reflects that for most mothers their spouse or partner is the primary source of emotional support.

even so it won't surprise you to hear that most of the moms provide the majority of daily care.

Overall the results indicate a high proportion of mothers take their role as mother very seriously and that they find the role satisfying.

But more than half said that society does not adequately support mothers, children, and families. Among the biggest concerns is the failure of society to support teaching children positive values, largely due to negative influences of media and advertising and to over emphasis on the importance of money.

When asked about specific concerns with regard to their own children, education and safety and security were listed most often, followed by drug and alcohol abuse. Asked similarly about specific concerns for themselves, finances were listed first followed by healthcare and safety.

When asked the more general question to rank priorities for change that would benefit mothers and families, nearly all listed reduction in domestic violence, enabling mothers to spend more time with their children, and support for healthy marriages as high priorities.

In focus groups women often said that in general our culture does not adequately value care giving — in the family, in our communities, or in our society as a whole.

We place too much emphasis on what the Motherhood Project calls 'market work' and too little on 'care work.'

The focus on market work, which has to do with productivity and profits, leads us to measure value in units of money and to focus on the accountant's bottom line. And that clouds our consideration of what is truly valuable asserts William Raspberry, the now-retired *Washington Post* columnist.

It leads us to the pursuit of stuff with the expectation that having more things — or at least the next great thing — the one you just can't wait to have, just can't live without — will bring us happiness. Alas, it seems that as soon as we have it there is always yet another cool thing to take its place in our desires. In the process we become competitive consumers and put the rights and privileges of the individual above responsibilities to each other and to the transcendent.

It's a worldview that works within the paradigm of the zero-sum game, the dog-eat-dog world, and we play to win — to beat our opponents — who become losers. Alas playing by those rules assures that ultimately everybody loses. The hubris of radical individualism, of pride and ambition, ultimately leads to the hero's downfall. The authors of Greek tragedy knew that well.

The alternative is the win-win paradigm of a positive sum game. Rather than striving to have more and better stuff, the care-work approach demands collaboration and stewardship with a focus on nurturing and caring for others.

Making connections and caring for relationships and social networks are more important to our ultimate happiness and well-being than having more stuff. The focus in this alternative model is on teamwork and mutual care to assure that everyone has an opportunity to thrive and to contribute to the good of the whole. In this paradigm we learn to value community and family for their intrinsic benefits, as great good places that hold us and provide a venue for expressing our love.

It is a radical shift from seeking to get stuff to seeking to express love and care. From 'me first' to 'all of us together.' From asking "What's in it for me?" to "How can I contribute?" From asking "Who or what serves my needs?" to asking "Whom or what am I called to serve?" It is sad commentary that advocacy for the shift is considered countercultural, even dangerously radical.

But the Motherhood Project advocates just that — making the shift from valuing the bottom line to valuing relationships and families that thrive. That's what is needed to raise healthy children with a strong, internalized sense of collaborative values and ethics. And that's what we need to transform our culture away from the radical individualism that leads to the hubris of expectations and entitlements toward a transformative altruism that leads to strong and thriving communities of care where we will not permit anyone to be left behind.

If we made that shift, wouldn't we support quality life-long education for everyone, universal access to healthcare, strong marriages that support the commitment of two people to love each other no matter what and regardless of their genders, and financial stability for families?

If we valued nurturing and caring families over individual gain, wouldn't we experience an increased sense of security and safety? I've argued before that while we can't shield ourselves completely from violence and natural disasters, our best defense is strong community that responds to emergencies with generosity and compassion. Wouldn't abuse of drugs and alcohol be reduced? If we removed some of the pressure for perfection and performance, wouldn't we have less need for escape through substance abuse? And wouldn't you expect that domestic violence would be reduced in a society that valued relationships more than things?

Our Universalist forebears got this perhaps better than anyone else in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in America. They understood from a deeply grounded religious belief that every person has inherent worth and dignity. The teachings of Jesus to love one another, our ultimate universal salvation, and the 'everlasting love of God' as John Murray put it, all call us to care for each other, to create strong families and communities where everyone can thrive.

Some of our Unitarian forebears got it, too. In particular I'm thinking of the late 19th century women Unitarian clergy in the Midwest who sought to encourage and sustain strong families by making their churches community centers that offered education and support for women and children.

The motherhood survey suggests that many — most mothers — get it that we really need a cultural transformation. But the cultural resistance to radical change is very strong, and the bottom line is still for the most part focused on the market values. The renaissance won't happen easily, and it deserves all of our support in order to assure that everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Almost everyone in the motherhood survey (99%) said they want to see more mothers and fathers working together to reduce the negative influences of our culture on children. Nearly one in three said she was already participating in a group working to improve the lives of mothers, children, and families.

In the spirit of Julia Ward Howe and the first Mother's Day of action, let us all commit to supporting the transforming power of love through empowering families. Just as she urged women to refuse to allow their sons to "be taken from us to unlearn all that

we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. ...," let us all join in refusing to allow our culture to take our children away to unlearn the values of care and replace them with the values of the market.

Motherhood is a powerful source of transformation. But the transformation we need is not just the responsibility of mothers. It's a campaign that needs all of us to roll up our shirtsleeves and join in the spirit of "We can do it!"

Let *that* be our tribute to mothers and our celebration of Mothers Day. Amen.