



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Good Enough Unitarian Universalism

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On this Mother's Day, we are lifting up and offering gratitude for those people in our lives who have nurtured us and shown us care. I want to give a shout out to my own mother, who I am lucky enough to call my biggest fan. I'm hers too. For as long as I can remember, my mother has used her own gifts as a mother to nurture not only her own children, but other families in whatever way she can. She was an advocate for breastfeeding for much of her adult life, a leader in her local chapter of La Leche League for many years. We lived in South Carolina when I was a young child, and I have memories of sitting with her late into the night as she pumped breast milk, not for her own children but to donate to the hospital to enable mothers eager for the benefits but unable to produce enough milk to feed their newborns. For many years, she volunteered at our local hospital in Massachusetts, offering breastfeeding support and education for new parents at a critical time of development.

She recently retired from being a social worker with children facing a diverse set of emotional and behavioral challenges. After many years on the job, she rarely saw improvement in her students' ability to cope with their own lives. More often, her work with her students was the practice of creating a loving environment—over and over again—where the students could feel their worth and value regardless of their ability or circumstances. In her words “many kids have such a deep hole in their need to be nurtured that it will never be filled. What you can do is show them by example that they are valued and lovable.” She will tell you that she learned this way of being from her mother, a deeply caring and accepting woman who died too young, suddenly soon after her 73rd birthday. In my mother's own words, her life purpose is to simply “pass on the love she has received in her life.”

As much as my mother was caring, my father was equally as hard on me and my other siblings. As I learn more about the German culture of perfection and hear stories about how his father was hard on him, too, I understand more about the limitations of his own upbringing and how he projected that onto us. I know my dad's father died early of a heart attack leaving him fatherless at a young age. But even still, my father's love often felt very conditional upon me being perfect-- doing the right thing, getting good grades in the right subjects, being thin and pretty and following the rules. I was mostly able to keep up as a high schooler, getting good grades and having both the privilege and the grades to get into the right college. But college was so much more difficult than high school, and as hard as I worked, the accolades didn't come readily. When I came out as queer and grew and decided to pursue a non-traditional path of ministry, a calling so different than my Dad's world of science, I knew that being perfect by my father's definition was no longer possible. I remember feeling like I had to choose between being myself and being loved by my father. Even as I have grown, and my relationship with my father has improved, I still fear the rejection that may come from feeling “not good enough.”

My mother was the one who always gave me unconditional love, even when I know she sometimes struggled to understand the choices I made and the path I was on, especially through some of my unfulfilling relationships. While she loved me and my siblings so generously and gave us everything she could, I know she struggled so much to feel good enough as a mother. Twenty years after my parents' divorce, she still talks about feeling guilty about putting her kids through the pain of separation, even though all of us kids were more than clear it was the right thing for the family, and we wished it had happened sooner. Above all, I

think my mother has honestly wished she could protect her children from suffering, and felt somehow guilty that she could not.

On this Mother's day, with Father's day coming up around the corner, I know this is a fraught time for many. I was nervous to climb into the pulpit this morning knowing how difficult it is to speak to the wide spectrum of mothering. Instead of falling into platitudes or sentimentality, I have decided to try to take these times of the year to look back honestly on the ways that my parents shaped me, the gifts they have given me, the wounds I still bear, and where I am healing. I hope this is in service to you as well, and if it isn't, I pray that you will come back another time and discover something that speaks to you.

This year in particular, I have been thinking a lot about this idea of being good enough.

As an adult, I am now so aware that my mother, so generous with her love, still sometimes feels that she has not been good enough as a mother.

I know my father, more reserved and withholding, didn't feel good enough as his father's son, and is trying so hard to be a good father to me, even if I don't always experience it that way.

And now, as an adult, I sometimes struggle in these times of the year where parenting is in the spotlight. I struggle to feel like a good enough daughter. As I enter into my own season of marriage and family, I want to be a good enough spouse, and someday parent too. (And yes—there is news—Sam and I are happily engaged!!!)

The psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott dedicated his life to understanding the complicated relationships between parents and children. His theories have been extremely helpful for me in my ministry and in understanding my own family.

The reason I find Winnicott's theories so compelling, reassuring and important for us today is that child development fundamentally requires parents to be imperfect, in his words, parents need to fail, albeit to fail well, to actually encourage their children to grow. You might remember his famous theory from the early 50s—the "good enough mother" In his essay *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott writes:

The good-enough mother...starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure. (Winnicott, 1953)

In his essay "Communication Between Infant and Mother," he writes: The baby doesn't hear or register communication unless it is in failure. This is where the difference comes in between mechanical perfection and human love. Human beings fail and fail; and in the course of ordinary care a mother is all the time mending her failures. Successful adaptation thus is a sense of security, a feeling of having being loved."

Winnicott names the most important thing for the "good enough parent" to provide, is a safe and loving environment for the child to develop and grow. He used the word "holding environment" refers both to the actual "holding" of the infant, but also is a general concept to describe the environment of care the parent (s) or caregivers provide for the physical, emotional, spiritual and material care. A holding environment needs to be reliable enough for the child to feel secure, but isn't a protected bubble. In fact, the holding environment needs to be just uncomfortable enough for the child to be motivated to grow and develop. The mother, or the parent, gradually transitions from providing for every need and shielding the child from want to allow the

child to develop their own sense of self, with both needs and, eventually, resources to provide for those needs.

Scott Cormode, a professor at Pasadena's Fuller Seminary, uses this example. He writes:

A holding environment is a psychological space that is both safe and uncomfortable. Picture the stereotypic dad running alongside the kid learning to ride a bike. The kid is safe in that the dad is there to catch her if she falls. But the kid is uncomfortable because she is the one doing the work—the balancing, the pedaling, the steering. She is the one learning the new behavior. So long as Dad is holding onto the bike, it is not a holding environment because he's doing the work. But if he is only there with his outstretched arms not quite touching her, then it's a holding environment. Specifically, a holding environment is uncomfortable enough that a person cannot avoid the problem, but safe enough that the person can experiment with a new way of being.

When I think about this image, I can imagine the different feelings of being both the child and the parent. If I were the child, I might feel that my Dad failed me by letting me swerve and fall, and he may feel guilty for not holding on tight enough, or feel terrible that I got a skinned knee. But in the Winnicott model, both falling and letting go were necessary for the child, and the parent, to be able to grow into a healthy relationship together. I wonder if this resonates with you at all. I wonder if any of you who are parents might struggle with this concept of creating a good enough “holding environment” for your kids—at home—at school—or at church. As parents, you want spaces that are safe and loving, but with enough space to encourage growth, which can come, painfully, from failure sometimes—mistakes and missteps. It's hard to give up ideals of perfection even if it is necessary for healthy relationships. Some of us have internalized the need for perfection from our own parents, but also from our faith and cultural traditions.

The other day I spoke to one of our long term members who has lived a fulfilling and wonderful life. She was reflecting on her accomplished career and modest success by her account, and wondered what she had done to deserve it. She still felt guilty about enjoying all of the goodness in her life, the gifts of family and friendship, comfort and beauty that surrounded her. She grew up with a strict Episcopalian background that she had strayed from to become the independent, accomplished woman she was. She still internalized a sense of personal failure for not conforming to the church's ideas of belief and gender roles.

Just as Winnicott talks about the parent's power to shape the child's feelings of security and worthiness, he talks about religion's power to shape one's feelings of worth. For some of you who I know grew up in more conservative traditions, the church was like the stern parent. Maybe your religious tradition punished and shamed you into feeling less than good enough for making mistakes, being human, or daring to think differently. While you may not believe that anymore, and yet somehow that belief still remains with you. While you are sure you don't believe in a punishing God anymore, still, you may feel like you still deserve punishing. You have internalized that you don't deserve goodness and happiness.

Winnicott talks about religion and human development in his essay entitled “Morals and Education”, particularly in how religion can play a role in either nurturing a sense of goodness in the child, or eroding it.

He writes

Religions have made much of original sin, but have not all come round to the idea of original goodness.... man continues to create and re- create God as a place to put that which is good in himself, and which he might spoil if he kept it in himself along with all the hate and destructiveness which is also to be found there. Religion (or is it theology?) has stolen the good from the developing individual child, and has then set up an artificial scheme for

injecting this that has been stolen back into the child, and has called it 'moral education'. Actually moral education does not work unless the infant or child has developed in himself or herself by natural developmental process the stuff that, when it is placed up in the sky, is given the name God. [p.94]

Just like we need good enough parents who can both nurture and challenge us, we need our religion to do the same. On this day of both child dedications and senior bridging, we are one of the rare faith traditions proudly proclaiming original goodness. We don't believe that love should be withheld and fed back to our children nor our parents as a reward for perfect behavior. The truth is, our faith affirms something many of us struggle to know deeply and claim for ourselves-- we don't need to "do" anything to be good enough, goodness is inherent in us, it is our birthright.

The first principle of our faith calls us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, not the inherent worth and dignity of every perfect person. Sometimes I think this principle is hardest to apply to ourselves, especially in the roles that we play as parents and children. To me, this it means to be a good enough Unitarian Universalist.

Just like we need imperfect parents to grow into healthy adults, we need our faith to be good enough to hold us and to nurture our inherent goodness. We don't need a perfect church that shelters and protects us from the suffering in the world, but a "good enough" church that helps us to safely develop resilience and confidence to embrace the very real struggles we will inevitably experience in life. We love our children enough to give them deep roots of community and tradition, and we trust them enough to bless them with wings of independence.

This mother's day, let us look to one another to share honestly about our real experiences of parenting and being parented, to help heal the wounds we've experienced from our parents and name how we want to heal, for ourselves and the next generations. Let us help one other to know, deep in our bones, that we are good enough. And that we don't have to "do" anything, we are loved and lovable just as we are, in all of our perfect imperfections.

Amen, Happy Mother's Day, and blessed be.