

## FOR WHAT BINDS US

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
Senior Minister, All Souls NYC  
May 12, 2024

Mother Earth, Mother Nature, mother lode, motherland, mother ship, mother tongue, mother hen, mother's milk, Mother of God.

God the Father, Father Time, Founding Fathers.

The most ancient root of the word “father” appears to make reference to a supreme deity, hence the first line of the Lord's Prayer, which reads, “Our Father who art in heaven.” The English word “mother,” in contrast, is based on the ancient Iranian word “ma,” meaning breast, which formed the root of *madar*, meaning breast-haver. *Madar* became *mater* in Latin and eventually *mother* in our language. The long-standing cultural practice of viewing fathers as godlike authority figures to be feared and mothers as nurturing figures to be adored has grown from primordial roots.

There are exceptions to this rule, which serve to subvert these ancient paradigms — Mother Superior and mother church, for example, and Father Christmas. With both mothers and fathers, however, the connection between ancient patterns of procreation and modern modes of parenting remains tenuous at best. In recent years, we've learned that gender identity is more a spectrum than a pair of opposites. We've also learned that two people or even one can balance authority and nurture in the life of a child.

Even so, the ancient view that men should be godlike, powerful, and judgmental, and women should be warm, compassionate, and nurturing persists even today. The fact that people often react with disdain when a woman embodies an authoritative role rather than a nurturing role suggests that mother figures symbolize something profoundly important to us. In my view, it represents a fundamental desire that pervades every aspect of our lives. We want to be loved unconditionally. We want to be cared for — especially in times of need.

If you look at the state of the world today, and especially the proliferation of violence on one hand and the epidemic of loneliness, depression, and despair on the other, you could make a compelling case that our biggest problem is too much authority and not enough nurture. Regardless, all of us encounter times in life when we feel vulnerable and insecure. It's then that we need someone to hold us close and care for us.

One of my all-time favorite collections of photographs is a series taken by the photographer Sallie Mann of her three children, Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia. The photos were made during warm weather over a period of seven years on their family farm in rural southwestern Virginia. As befits the summer season, the children in the photographs often wear bathing suits or no clothes at all. The photographs document the moments most photographers and parents prefer not to see. We see images of anger,

disappointment, confusion, insecurity — a technically brilliant visual chronicle of the challenges of growing up.

One of the most compelling of Sallie Mann's photographs, titled "The Wet Bed," shows her daughter Virginia at the age of two, lying in bed fast asleep. Her arms are raised above her head like angel's wings, her legs stretched out in blissful relaxation. The night is warm, and the bedspread has been pushed to the foot of the bed. Virginia is the picture of beautiful, trusting innocence.

Yet there is danger in the photograph as well. The child on the bed fills only the central portion of the image. Around her lies the night, full of foreboding, and the pale stain that spreads over the sheet foretells the time when her instinctive trust in the world will be broken. The photographs of Sallie Mann remind us, in the words of one critic, that "children will suffer, no matter how lovingly they are brought up."

Sallie Mann titled this collection of photographs "Immediate Family," which I first saw as an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1992. The book by the same title became a national bestseller and catapulted Mann into national acclaim as a photographer. She also became an object of controversy. The religious right objected to images of unclothed children, and others questioned whether such photos should be published of children who, because of their young age, could not give consent.

Mann has gone on to produce seven more volumes of photographs affiliated with exhibitions at the National Gallery of Art and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, among other venues — exhibitions on landscapes, Civil War battlefields, and death, among other themes. In 2001, Mann was named "America's Best Photographer" by TIME magazine, and her bestselling 2015 memoir, *Hold Still*, was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Bringing up children always happens in that awful and awesome human tension between innocence and suffering, between love and despair. When our children awaken early, and we sit quietly holding them as they rest against our shoulders, there is more joy in our hearts than we can ever capture, though we wish we could store them for coming years when our children awaken far away, either in fact or in spirit.

But when our lack of attention allows them to take a tumble, there is almost more guilt in our hearts than we can endure. Bringing up children, it seems, is always an interplay of love and suffering. This is what it means to be immediate family.

Most children today share substantial parts of their lives with stepparents, caregivers, and other adults who are not their biological parents. Some children are related to the adults in their homes by birth or adoption, others by love and suffering alone. Whatever the biological or legal connections or lack thereof, those adults who are present in the life of a child are the ones who can make a difference.

In the sense that really matters, one need not be a parent at all to be immediate family. Whether teacher or friend or coach, mentor or neighbor or care provider, they are family who love and suffer with the children of us all. If we take seriously the reality

of how children develop, we will recognize that no one makes a greater contribution to the future of humanity than anyone who loves a child.

Children need someone there, up close and in person, to tend their banged-up elbows and change their soiled sheets, to help them with their homework and to guide them through the minefield that is adolescence. They need someone to hold them tight when the thunder rumbles and read *Goodnight Moon* when the daylight fades. They need immediate family — but the emphasis is on the first word of the phrase, not the last. Those who are immediately present in the lives of our children become family for them. Raising children is more a matter of love and suffering than of genetics and physiology. It is being there that counts.

The same dynamic holds true in other phases of human life. In 1994, Sallie Mann's husband Larry was diagnosed with a rare form of muscular dystrophy, an incurable disease that over time causes muscle tissue to atrophy. As the disease began to progress in the 2000's, she began to document the transformations to his body caused by the disease. She called this series "Proud Flesh," a term for the scar tissue that forms over a horse's wounds.

A 2008 feature film about Sallie Mann's life and work, titled "What Remains," was nominated for an Academy Award. In the film, Mann reflects on her husband's disease and the ways it drew them closer together. Their early relationship developed, she says, based on mutual attraction and mutual passions. As they grow older and his disease progresses, she adds, it's also based on need.

Her series of photographs about her husband, "Proud Flesh," calls to mind a poem by the contemporary American poet Jane Hirshfield. She invokes the same metaphor in explaining how life's wounds can strengthen the connection between two people.

In her poem "For What Binds Us," Hirschfield writes:

There are names for what binds us:  
strong forces, weak forces.  
Look around, you can see them:  
the skin that forms in a half-empty cup,  
nails rusting into the places they join,  
joints dovetailed on their own weight.  
The way things stay so solidly  
wherever they've been set down—  
and gravity, scientists say, is weak.

And see how the flesh grows back  
across a wound, with a great vehemence,  
more strong  
than the simple, untested surface before.

There's a name for it on horses,  
when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,

as all flesh  
is proud of its wounds, wears them  
as honors given out after battle,  
small triumphs pinned to the chest —

And when two people have loved each other  
see how it is like a  
scar between their bodies,  
stronger, darker, and proud;  
how the raised cord makes of them a single fabric  
that nothing can tear or mend.

I've spoken to you before about University of Chicago philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum's analysis of what she calls extreme dependency. These are situations in which children or adults have mental, physical, or social disabilities that require extensive and even hourly care from others. Nussbaum points out that the way we think about the needs of children and adults with disabilities should not be treated as a special department of life, cordoned off from the needs of average people. Quite the contrary: when life as a whole is taken into account, dependency looks more like the rule than the exception.

Nussbaum concludes, "As the life span increases, the relative independence many of us enjoy looks more and more like a temporary condition, a phase of life that we move into gradually, and which we all too quickly begin to leave. Even in our prime, many of us encounter shorter or longer periods of extreme dependency on others — after surgery or a severe injury, or during a period of depression or acute mental stress."

Most of us, especially those of us who are aging baby-boomers, don't like to hear that independence is a temporary condition. Our physical dependence on others — whether intermittent in life or constant throughout it — serves as a reminder of our enduring emotional dependence. Occasionally we may be self-reliant and independent, but mostly we are not. We depend on the nurture and compassion of others to help us make it through. None of us can survive alone, which is why our friends and family should never be taken for granted.

To be sure, most of this nurturing has traditionally been done by women — and still is, whether by family members, nurses, or elder caregivers. The gendered division of labor between men as authority figures and women as nurturers has historically been insisted on by patriarchy and buttressed by religion. The good news is that our recent progress to overcome the gender binary has begun to thwart this false construct. No matter your gender identity, you can either wield authority or provide nurture,

depending on what's needed. It's everyone's duty to nurture those in need, whether at the beginning of life, the end of life, or somewhere in between.

On Mother's Day, we give special tribute to the nurture that gives each of us hope and courage, sustains all of us through hard times, and celebrates with us when times are good. At its best, Mother's Day is not primarily about being a biological mother. It is about making strong those connections that unite us with each other, those necessary relations that give life its meaning.

Even as we acknowledge our debt to those among us who have given birth to a child, we also acknowledge our debt to all those who have helped create the fine-spun web of human love and connection that makes life worthwhile. More than anything else, this world has been bound together by love, and it will be sustained by nurture. In the deepest sense of the term, we are all immediate family.