

"A Mother By Any Name"  
May 10, 2009

A couple of years ago, there was an article in *The Washington Post* about Rebecca Walker, the daughter of Alice Walker—the author of *The Color Purple*, and other writings. Apparently, mother and daughter do not speak, and haven't for some time. According to the younger Walker, "My parents did not hold me close, but encouraged me to go. They did not buffer, protect, watch out for, or look after me. I was mostly left alone to discover the world and my place in it."

That's a pretty hefty indictment of those we assume to be the primary caregivers for children. After all, parents are the ones we expect to "buffer, protect and watch out for" our kids. Now, I don't know how accurate Rebecca Walker was in her accusations, nor is there any way to know. All we can tell is that her "take" on their relationship—right or wrong—has led to alienation.

I tell that story because I suspect there may be some here this morning who have or who have had similar strains in family relationships. They are not all that uncommon. While we tend to glorify families and the love of families, if we're really honest, we have to admit that no family is perfect, and no individual is perfect. So, while it's Mother's Day and time to honor those who are often associated with the task of caregiving, I'm aware that there are some who are in a place similar to that of Rebecca Walker.

Frankly, Mother's Day is always a tough one for me. That's because there are so many situations that impact how we hear and receive discussions about mothering. I know that when Mike and I were going through all the infertility studies, and discovering that we were unable to bear children, a Mother's Day sermon at church was incredibly difficult for me to endure. Some of you may be in a similar place. The same kind of thing happens if we've recently experienced the loss of a parent or of a son or daughter. There is something bittersweet about the day as we rejoice in what once was, and mourn that which can never be again. Mother's Day is just plain difficult.

That's why, at The Garden, we try to acknowledge that all of us are in very different places, and wherever we are is deserving of respect. And that's also why we try to be pretty inclusive when it comes to this whole parenting, nurturing, caring and loving thing, because frankly, every single one of us has a role to play in that; it's not just something that falls to biological or adoptive parents.

I've recently had several conversations with our daughter, who, as many of you know, is a new mother. She was sharing how she felt so inadequate, and unsure of herself, not knowing what to do with the baby much of the time. I could smile and nod my head, because I remember feeling like that when she was a baby. Yes, we wanted to have this child and help her grow up into the fine woman she is, but neither Mike nor I was very sure we knew how to do it.

As I told Erin, "Babies don't come with a 'how-to' manual." There's no prescription or formula that works, and it's not 'one size fits all.' It's been my experience that no one is a born, natural parent. Sidney J. Harris described it quite well with these words: "The commonest fallacy among women is that simply having children makes them a mother—which is as absurd as believing that having a piano makes one a musician." How true that is—at least in my experience!

So what is it all about—this loving, caring, nurturing thing? I believe our Bible passage for today describes it fairly well. It's the prophet Isaiah echoing the words of God, and using an analogy of God having mother-like qualities. It reads like this: **God says, "I will bring you lasting prosperity; the wealth of the nations will flow to you like a river that never goes dry. You will be like a child that is nursed by its mother, carried in her arms, and treated with love. I will comfort you in Jerusalem, as a mother comforts her child. When you see this happen, you will be glad; it will make you strong and healthy."**

The way I read and understand this passage is that the mothering nature of God and of us wants that which is good for our children; we want what feeds, carries and loves those in our care. What we yearn for our children is that which will make them strong, healthy and happy beings. In other words, those of us entrusted with the care of future generations need to prepare them for life and for their turn to nurture the well-being of those who follow them. Elaine Heffner put it like this: **"The art of mothering is to teach the art of living to children."**

Teaching children the art of living does not require a certain gender, age or stage in life. It's something of which we are all capable, and to a large extent, have the responsibility of doing. I've seen this played out with our daughter and son-in-law. Tim has been right alongside Erin the entire journey of their pregnancy, and has shared equally in the caregiving of little Maddie. When Erin goes back to work, he will be the primary caregiver, and I can't imagine there being anyone else who could be as loving and caring as he is. Now, technically, he's not the mother of this child, but he is living that role with skill and grace.

One of the things I've heard from many of you is just how special grandchildren are, and to be honest, I didn't believe you. Yeah, I know our daughter had a very close connection with her grandparents, and I know their deaths were very difficult times for her. And I've heard from others of you just how important your grandparents have been, until now, I didn't get it, but I think I'm beginning to. In fact, I so want to be with our granddaughter and help her grow and flourish that I hate it when a day goes by and I don't get to see her and hold her! I know how fortunate we are to have them here in town, but still.... Yes, grandparents, too, have an important role to play in the nurture and care of our young ones.

And there are so many others who play some of that role—neighbors, for example. Our former next door neighbors were very important to our daughter, especially when she was small. The woman of one household was Austrian, and had met and married her husband during the war. Their children were quite a bit older than anyone else's in the area, and she lavished her time and attention on the neighborhood kids.

She enthralled them with stories of Austria, with gifts of Austrian Christmas ornaments. Every once in a while, she'd call and say she was missing her little girls; could Erin come over to bake some cookies? Since Erin's mother wasn't any good at baking cookies, Erin was delighted to oblige! Yes, the people in our neighborhood can provide positive role models and be shaping influences on our kids today, and so can every single one of us!

But what do we mean when we say that we all have a role to play in nurturing our young? What is it to teach children the art of living? Dorothy Canfield Fisher gave us a hint, I believe, when she said, "**A mother is not a person to lean on, but a person to make leaning unnecessary.**" Obviously, we want to substitute a word like "nurturer" in place of "mother" since we're not just talking about the female species here, but aside from that, I believe she has a good point.

I know some, and perhaps you do, too, who so want and need to be loved and needed that they create a sort of dependency in the children in their care. They keep them as close to home as possible, not really wanting them to spread their wings and fly on their own, because then they just might lose the love they so desperately need. That's a relationship built on fear and co-dependency, and it's just plain unhealthy, and not good for the child, nor actually, for the adult.

You may be familiar with the quote attributed to Holding Carter II that says, "**There are two lasting bequests we can give children. One is roots. The other is wings.**" Both roots and wings are essential to have the kind of life our Bible passage talked about. When we talk about roots, we are talking about the importance of instilling certain values in children, and we do that not by preaching to them or lecturing them, but by modeling them, living the values we revere.

One of those values has to do with honesty and a sense of integrity: it's knowing what's right and wrong, and learning to honor other people. Roots also have to do with trust—both the capacity for trusting others, and the ability to be trustworthy. I happen to believe that one of the most important values we can instill in our children is some awareness of and connection with the mystery that we/I call God. Having a sense of spirituality in our lives really helps us find our purpose in being, and our mission in life, and that begins early on.

There's a lot more that's necessary for a child to have deep roots, but that rootedness does not mean being tethered too closely to any of those caring persons in our lives. Like the mother bird, we may sometimes have to shove the baby bird out of the nest, so he/she can learn to fly. That's one of our responsibilities—to prepare our children so well that they have the confidence and ability to fly, to follow their dreams, to live their own lives, to be their own person.

At one of Erin's baby showers, I found a Hallmark card that says much better than I what I'm trying to convey today. It began with the words: "She Will Dream Her Very Own Dreams," and then it said:

Maybe she will look like you, talk like you, smile like you...

Maybe she'll sing, paint, or dance like you...

but she'll dream her very own dreams.

You've given your child so much already...

Including the precious gift of life.

And through the years,

You will give her so much more—

Not just food and clothing

But laughter, ideals and love.

You cannot give her her dreams, though, for those will be hers alone.

May they lead her to all that is beautiful in life,

And with your loving help and support,

May she make every one come true.

That's who we are honoring today—all those who have are helping lead our children to all that is beautiful in life—to teach them the art of living. We are honoring those who give our children both roots that ground them, and wings to help them soar. To all our mothers or those who have mothered us everywhere...thank you.

Closing:

I find it interesting that Alice Walker, who is estranged from her daughter, wrote about the influence of those who nurture our young ones in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. She said this: "**And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.**"

That's what it's like to love and care for our children. It's planting seeds of a flower we'll never see; it's passing on a zest for life and creative energy; it's loving and loving and loving, no strings attached.

Have a Happy Mother's Day! And go in peace. Amen.