

A NEW PSALM FOR MOTHERS
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: "The Lanyard" by Billy Collins

**The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.**

**No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly -
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.**

**I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.**

**She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light**

and taught me to walk and swim,
 and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
 Here are thousands of meals, she said,
 and here is clothing and a good education.
 And here is your lanyard, I replied,
 which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
 strong legs, bones and teeth,
 and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
 and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
 And here, I wish to say to her now,
 is a smaller gift - not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
 but the rueful admission that when she took
 the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
 I was as sure as a boy could be
 that this useless, worthless thing I wove
 out of boredom would be enough to make us even.¹

You know you are a mom when:

- You automatically double-knot everything you tie.
- You find yourself humming the Barney song as you do the dishes.
- You hear a baby cry in the grocery store, and you start to gently sway back and forth, despite the fact that your children are in school.
- You weep through the scene in *Dumbo* when his mom is taken away, not to mention what *Bambi* does to you.
- You are so wrapped up in craft projects that you are planning to write a book called, *101 Craft Projects with Dryer Lint and Eggshells*.

¹ Billy Collins, "The Lanyard," *Five Points: A Journal of Literature and Art*, <http://www.weddelso.com/FivePoints/issues/v7n/collins.htm>. Downloaded 5/12/2006

- You are out for a romantic evening with your spouse, enjoying a real adult conversation for the first time in months, when you suddenly realize that you have reached over to cut up his steak.²

Now, if you are a father and find some identity with these characteristics, it's OK. The *Bambi* scene gets to me too.

These domestic images of motherhood are the norm for the celebration of Mother's Day. We look for and want to find the warm and comforting prototypes of maternal care. Even in situations where dear old mom was hard crusted, alcoholic, abusive or neglectful, we latch on to faint memories of affection or laughter.

We keep telling ourselves that the roles of mothers have changed so radically in the past fifty years that we can scarce define the term anymore. Career mothers and the expanded roles of fathers in domestic responsibility have also changed the vision of motherhood. Homosexual parenting is another variable. But I question how significant these changes are. Well into the 1930's most of this nation remained agricultural. If you have ever lived on a farm, even a small one, you know what a working mother is. During War World II many women went to work in factories. Perhaps what has really changed is the location of mother's work.

² Source: *Aha Jokes*, www.ahajokes.com.

The concept of blended families is not new either. If you have ever read the personal stories of families throughout American history you know that childbirth was one of the top three causes of death of women. Men, therefore, might have three, four, or more wives during their reproductive years. Stepchildren were integrated into multiple family configurations. Diseases, like consumption, often left children orphaned to aunts, uncles, and cousins. Many a story is told of older brothers and sisters playing the roles of fathers and mothers to their young siblings. For better or worse, children have had to learn how to survive in whatever familial circumstances life has placed them.

The much ballyhooed nuclear family is no guarantee of a safe and nurturing environment. I believe in strong families for the benefit of children. But I do not delude myself thinking that the gender orientation of parents or the social configuration of the family is the foundation of strong families. Character, moral guidance, loving discipline, attentive listening, humor, and an openness to explore and learn together are far more important.

As we have romanticized the nuclear family we have neglected the larger story of families found not only in different cultures of the world, but in subcultures of our own society. We have also isolated families in our assertion of privacy. We have lost the community sense of parenting that is more typical of indigenous peoples and the strong relationships that are built with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even neighbors. Many of us live hundreds, if not thousands, of

miles from our family of origin. We have come to believe that what we do in our homes is no one's business but our own. I think the consequences are multi-fold. Privacy is often confused with secrecy and secrecy is the common denominator of abuse. Privacy isolates us from the wisdom and experience others could share with us. Privacy isolates our children from the broader knowledge of our community. Privacy isolates us from the political forces that will shape the policies that will directly impact the safety and well-being of our children.

Privacy removes one from politics. Isolation takes one out of the social conversations and therefore out of the process of making social policy. This was a truth that was understood by Julia Ward Howe in 1870. You may recall that Howe was the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." In 1872 she proposed an annual Mother's Day for Peace. Mother's Day was organized with the goal of abolishing all war. Hear her words:

"Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or fears! Say firmly: "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall 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.

We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, "Disarm, disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."

Blood does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plow and anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel. Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.

Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after their own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace.

I will bet that no one found that sentiment in their Mother's Day Hallmark card.

Howe was convinced that women and mothers must break out of their isolation and privacy and enjoin the political process toward the end of all warfare. She was convinced that the men won't do it. The military industrial complex won't do it. The government won't do it. The United Nations won't do it. There is only one power in the world that Howe believed could put an end to war. That power is the power of mothers.

Is it possible that Howe's vision for a mother's movement to end warfare is hopelessly naive? Is it not the case that there are extremely powerful political, economic, and military interests that are well established institutions? How could a mother's movement possibly engage such powers successfully? Is it not the case that women remain a minority of our elected officials and do not have the political

clout to change military and foreign policy? And don't mothers have more important things to do like bearing children, motoring kids to soccer practice, leading Cub Scout and Girl Scout troops, attending PTA meetings, cooking and cleaning house? And besides, wouldn't they rather be shopping?

You see, that is just the point - the point that Julia Ward Howe understood all too well. If we wrap mothers into sentimental stereotypes, much like the Chinese used to bind the feet of women, the political system does not have to change. Keep them out of the the public square - out of policy and politics - and the status quo of violence and all its profit mongers does not have to change. Howe believed that if mothers would create their own peace movement in the house and in the streets militarism might be diminished. In the house she meant that men would not be granted the pleasures of the flesh or emotional applause as long as there was blood on their hands. No sex and so respect as long as their husbands were the gigolos of violence.

The political organization of women that Julia Ward Howe envisioned began with a process of reconciliation. Let all of the mothers who have lost children in warfare gather first for bereavement. Let them tell the stories of their children, who they were and how they died. Such stories will be a long time in the telling. But tell them they must. And as mothers share their stories of loss and sadness, let them bless their children with the baptism of tears.

And when due memorial has been given, Howe urges the mothers to counsel. Vacate the United Nations buildings of its ambassadors, diplomats, special advisors, experts, and aides. Gather the mothers of Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Darfur, the West Bank, Israel, the United States, and any land where the blood of sons and daughters has been shed. Charge them with a new vision, a just and peaceful vision of international community. May they take authority to forge a new world that gives honor and respect to every human being on the planet. May they take authority to hammer out a world economy that provides every man, woman, and child with food, education, shelter, and health care. May they take authority to gather every sword, rifle, rocket propelled grenade, nerve agent, biological weapon and nuclear bomb. Beat them into plowshares, homes, hospitals, books, and schools. May they take authority to remold every trade agreement into an economy that will both sustain local economies and shelter the earth for deeper ecological devastation.

Now some of you might be thinking, "It's just like a man to leave a mess and then tell the women to clean it up." Or more importantly, you might wonder that such a radical vision of peace and justice must be engaged by the whole human race, men as well as women. I will not argue either count. Rather, Julia Ward Howe saw in mothers a wisdom that men will never fathom. There is in the nature of mothers a drive to secure her children, keep them safe, nurture them, and prepare them to enter the world as adults. Now I am not talking about cocaine

addicted mothers or some other deviance. I am talking about the norms of motherhood. Mothers will do all within their resources to promote the well-being of their children. Howe believed that a mother prepares her child for the work of “charity, mercy, and patience.” That is the very kind of energy that needs to be brought to the counsel table of brotherhood. That is the dynamic that is too often missing from the technicalities of trade agreements, national security policy, and foreign relations.

There are some who will think that these words are sentimental or far-fetched. Others might complain that with all of her responsibilities it is unfair for me to suggest more work, more commitment, or more of anything else from mothers who are already over worked and over committed. Fair enough! I admit that like Billy Collins, I have little to show for my life but a red and white lanyard. But this much I know: Relationships in communities and amongst the nations have yet to enjoy the full force of wisdom that mothers bring to the table of life. I also know that the one person that a dying soldier on a battlefield calls for is “Mom,” “Mother,” and “Mommy.” So, I pray, “Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of fears.”

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