

Mothers' Day 2017
Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

Though I admit it may be difficult, imagine I'm elementary school age (that's the hard part), and then someone asks my mom, where's your kid—where's Steven during the day and evening? Maybe she'd reply by saying, well, he's at school a good deal of the time. I have to go to work at 7:30 in the morning; I return about 5pm, and then tutor special needs kids for an hour or two. I go out into the driveway and call for him—he's out there somewhere—and we end up eating dinner together. Then he goes back outside with his friends until it's time for him to come home and get ready for bed.

Was my mom, was Iris, a negligent parent, a bust by the standards of our day? I mean, think about it: after breakfast, she left me in the morning in the care of our dog Rusty, who'd trot with me to the bus stop, wait patiently until the bus arrived and drove away. Rusty'd return to the same place when the bus deposited us back in the neighbourhood in the afternoon, and then trot at my side back home where I was left to my own devices. "Left to my own devices" mostly meant going back outside, hooking up with the kids in my neighbourhood for late afternoon and evening rounds of hide and go seek, playing war, "red rover red rover," epic bone-breaking football games, or sneaking into our neighbour's nearby field where there was a pond rimmed with cottonwood and willow trees from whose branches we hung and dropped into the water.

Most of the time, Iris didn't know about what was going on. Along with the other kids in my neighbourhood, I wandered in gangs all over the 'hood and engaged in all kinds of behaviour. Did my mom's laissez faire parenting, not atypical when compared with her neighbouring peers, constitute neglect and warrant a visit at her doorstep from a caseworker or a cop? *Just asking.*

When you think about it, my mom's approach to parenting sounds downright antediluvian when you compare it to the kind of titanic pressures placed on parents in many places all over the world—pressures to closely monitor and shape their children's behaviour in home, school and play. I mean there are places where you can get cited for neglect by Family Services for letting your kids walk home unsupervised from bus stops and playgrounds.

And we all may have read horror stories of cramming schools in East Asia and of curricula in the English speaking world. Both ruthlessly focus on year end assessment exams that are reducing kids to nervous, panicky wrecks; endless cramming and of curricula that are emptying creativity and fun out of learning, and creating a high-stakes, selective system pitting children against each in a rat race from the beginning of their lives; and co-opting and shaming parents into being hyper-vigilant accomplices.

“We live in a perfection society,” writes Anna Quindlen, “where it's possible to manipulate our faces so the lines of laughter and distress are wiped out.... Where [we're told] little minds are infinitely malleable, even before birth. So don't get tense: for tense moms make tense infants.” “Where every moment is a teachable moment—and every teachable moment missed is a measure of a lousy mom.” Where “moms bounce from soccer field to school fair to play date until she falls into bed at the end of the day, exhausted, her life somewhere between the Stations of the Cross and a decathlon.” “In my religion,” Quindlen concludes, “martyrs die.”

Recently, Diana and I saw a movie called *Tallulah*. It features three women in present day New York City whose lives fatefully interact due to an impulsive, desperate decision. There's a freewheeling character in her twenties who's living rough in her van; a woman in her late thirties with a collapsing marriage who tried to rescue it by having a baby—only to discover she's not cut out for mothering at all; and a 50ish Upper West Side Manhattan woman whose ex

left her for another man. Her only son, who she'd held on to too tightly as a result, has run away from her and home to live on the road, and ended up with the girl in the van.

An accident of mistaken identity leads the young woman to babysit the neglectful mom's toddler. Though not cut out for mothering by any stretch of her imagination, or so she thinks, this girl is so appalled by the other woman's neglect of her child that she kidnaps it, goes on the run, turns up at the doorstep of her boyfriend's mother, and passes the toddler off as hers and the older woman's son's child; which makes the urbane divorcee, at first hesitantly, and then warmly, whole-heartedly, both a mother-in-law and a grandmother—or so she thinks..

Meanwhile, a city-wide search is on for the abducted child and the kidnapper; the bad mom realizes oh-my-god! I really do love and want my child back; the identity of the kidnapper is revealed which leads the police and the frantic, guilt drenched toddler's mom to the Upper West Side apartment of the woman who thinks she's a grandmother. All is revealed, though toddler and the young feral woman, who discovers all these surprising, wrenching maternal feelings and instincts welling up and taking over, those two are still on the lam; the city's breathing down her neck, and things are getting desperate. .

I'm not going to tell you what happens. Only this. Picture the two older women awkwardly thrown together in the Manhattan apartment swarming with police. They sit at the counter holding drinks in the quiet that pools around them in the kitchen. All the mayhem's just an arm's length away. The 30s something woman, the abducted toddler's mom, confesses that she really hadn't wanted the baby, wished that she had disappeared; but now she'd hoped if she'd only found the baby on her own, her husband would forgive her, but confesses the marriage and her life now truly are in ruins.

“Am I a horrible person,” she asks.

“We’re all horrible,” the older woman replies, “and we’re all just people.”

Which is another way of saying what was said 2500 years ago in the Psalms where it’s written that we—women and men—are a “little lower than the angels;” which is another way of saying what Unitarians say when we affirm our “*search* for truth and meaning” and encourage one another to spiritual growth. We’ve not arrived in the Promised Land; fact is, we’re still mostly wandering around in wilderness, always have been. But I don’t know how well this goes down in what Anna Quindlen calls “living in a perfection society,” which all-too-often, if you scratch and sniff, means children being driven from anxiety-drenched pillar to post and guilt-soaked parents who can hardly be vigilant enough, conscientious enough, hard-working enough in the exhausting scramble of the production of perfectly poised, conventionally successful children and the achievement of one’s duty done to the rising generation.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, there was a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst named D. W. Winnicott who made a proposal I think worth considering on this Mothers’ Day. The leading doctor at Paddington Green Children’s Hospital in London for forty years, Winnicott observed thousands of babies and their mothers. In 1953, the year before my birth in the wilds of Utah, Winnicott developed and wrote up a theory called the Good Enough Mother. In a nutshell, and in Winnicott’s own words, it went like this:

A mother is neither good nor bad nor the product of illusion, but it a separate and independent individual. 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 failure. Her failure to adapt to every need of the child helps them adapt to external realities.

The failure referred to is the perception of the child, as the child grows and develops, that Mom is no longer able to fix everything or make it all better. In spite of what we may be pressured to believe—no parent can do that. To be sure, we try to be available constantly and respond immediately when infants cry for food and need their diapers changed—it teaches them they are safe and will be cared for. But who can, or should, sustain this kind of attention and response forever? That’s Winnicott’s point. The way to be a good mother or primary caretaker, is to be good enough. Mom’s not a goddess, she’s a gardener. Carla Naumberg, a family therapist, writes this: “Children need moms to fail them, and we need in our turn to fail our kids in tolerable ways on a regular basis so they can learn to live in an imperfect world.” I think that may be what my spouse was driving at when, back in the day, she questioned my slavish duty, or so I thought, to prepare our children’s lunches in minute detail every morning. “Steven, don’t you think they should start fixing their own lunches?” *Duh*. But I still kept on doing it; I guess I wanted to be the perfect mom. (see Carla Naumberg, “The gift of the good enough mother,” www.seleni.org/advice-support/article/the-gift-of-the-good-enough-mother)

Children need to learn, in small ways every day, that the world—including mom and dad—doesn’t revolve around them; that every request won’t be honoured; that behaviour impacts other people; and when life doesn’t always go their way, (our way!) chances are—they’re still going to be basically OK

In a perfection society, perfection, actually, shouldn’t be the only option. The reality is... we’re both good enough and not good enough most of time. “We’re all horrible,” the older woman says, with hard won wisdom in the movie *Tallelah*, and “we’re all just people.” We mostly get it right, and sometimes, many times, we get it wrong. When our kids twig to the fact that we’re just people who occasionally fail them, and ourselves, and survive OK in spite of it all, they, and hopefully we, grow just that much stronger. Which may be the gift of a good enough mother, a good enough parent, and something to embrace this Mother’s Day.

