

Mothering Ourselves and the World

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Opening Words

We are here...

after a week of glorious sun and some showers that caught us by surprise

after a week that included the excitement of the B.R.E.A.D Nehemiah Action Meeting

where we shouted again and again

“We are ONE”

Here to hold up what we find worthy

to honor the maternal in us all.

We join with one another in seeking to include more and yet more people in who we mean when we say “we.”

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

COMMUNING

Sequence:

STEVE: I see a young man who likes one Mom but has a hard time with his other mother.

ERIC: I see a 14-year-old girl crying with her mother after they exchanged sharp words.

JOLINDA: I see a mother gazing at her newborn and wondering if she will know what to do in the next moment.

STEVE: I see a 5-year-old boy sitting in his mother's lap, delighting in Dr. Seuss as his mother reads *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*.

ERIC: I see a 6-year-old girl learning how to make potato pierogi with her mother. She says it's like clay.

JOLINDA: I see a mother with tears in her eyes as she struggles to explain to her 6-year-old son why an adult hurled a racial epithet at him.

STEVE: I see a 10-year-old boy playing baseball on his school's mother-son team.

ERIC: I see a 12-year-old girl slamming things around in her room because her mother has been on a business trip and only called once.

JOLINDA: I see a mother awake and alone in the middle of the night - afraid of what the divorce will

mean to her daughter.

STEVE: I see a 12-year-old boy locked out of the house for most of Saturday with one glass of water and a sandwich because his working mom wants to make sure he gets the yard work done.

ERIC: I see a 12-year-old daughter bouncing around in her excitement to hold her new baby brother just born to a surrogate mom.

JOLINDA: I see a mother holding her twin 8-year-old sons, kissing their heads, saying "I love you" as they squirm to be off to play games.

STEVE: I see mothers and sons, daughters and grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, all finding a moment in their lives to be quiet....together.

[gong]

Naming

ERIC: I see a congregation before me with a thousand stories of mothers, fathers and grandparents whom they love, with whom they struggle, whom they miss, whom they wish were different. Stories of those who, by their presence in our lives, have made us who we are. We bring them into this company now by calling their names in a whisper, or within the silence of our hearts.

Music:

I see mothers in countries around the world dreaming dreams that their children may live life to its fullest, and singing lullabies to sooth their own fears for their children.

READINGS

JOLINDA: The first reading is taken from *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* written by Father Homan, the Prior Major of St. Benedict Monastery in Oxford, Michigan, and Lonni Pratt, a lay person who organizes retreats there. It is based on the hospitality required in the Rule of St. Benedict, the oldest governance document still in use in Catholic orders.

ERIC: "Hospitality involves accepting responsibility to care for the strangers...The biggest obstacle to hospitality is not the state of the world, it is the state of our minds and hearts. It is the comfort we crave so badly that we will do almost anything for it.

"...Hospitality requires not grand gestures but open hearts. When I let a new stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me. When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to stretch myself open to the world, and this opening of my heart could change everything. That's pretty frightening stuff. You can't ever be the same if you start doing that kind of thing.

"Maybe you are one of those people who find hospitality easy...If you have experienced abiding and strong relationship, hospitality comes more easily...

"....[It] is the overflowing of a heart that has to share what it has received. It takes a whole person to open up, it takes a secure person to be available, it takes a strong person to give yourself away.

"...It is possible to serve meals in a nursing home, to cook in a homeless shelter, to read stories to children in an inner city library and never let others into your heart. It is possible to do the good thing and end up feeling satisfied with yourself and even just a bit superior. It is possible to do the good thing and not be changed for the better by it. Hospitality includes cooking the meal, reading to the kid but it

demands that you let the people that you are serving into your heart. Only when you open yourself wide to another are you transformed by the power of love."

Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love by Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt

2. JOLINDA: The second reading is an excerpt from a sacred text found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945 among 50 or so other Gnostic documents. It is written in Coptic and represents the voice of Hokhmah or Sophia, a female divine being from the Hebrew and Christian traditions. It is said that she danced the world into existence, making her the mother of us all.

The power sent me.
I appear in the minds I make restless.
If I disturb your mind with images, why not look at them?
Don't deny you've seen me,
You cannot fail to "know" me, anywhere or anytime.
I am both what knows and what denies knowledge.
Don't claim ignorance of this mind.

For I am first and last,
honored and dishonored
experienced and virginal.

I am the silence not grasped by the mind,
the image you can't forget.
I am the voice of every natural sound,
the word that always reappears.
I am the intonation of my name – hu-khm-ah
the breath returning from form to its source.

I am knowledge and ignorance.
I am timid and bold.
I am shamed and shameless.
I am strength
I am fear.
Listen to me:
I am infamous and renowned.

Listen to my poor voices,
Listen to my rich ones.

Do not turn your back on my weakness
or fear my power.
Why despise me when I am afraid,
or curse me when I am inflated?

I am the "within."
I am the "within" of all natures.
In the beginning all spirits claim my creation.

In the end, all souls request my presence.

I am the Hokhmah of my name:
earth-wisdom,
breath of the mother,
source of all livingness in form.

You would like to forget me,
but I am everywhere in your mind.
I am uneducated but everyone learns from me.
You despise me
but you cannot remove me from your mind.

Embrace me from the place in you that understands and that grieves,
from the place that seems ugly and in ruin,
from the self that steals from its neighbors
though they are really no better off.

From the place that feels shame,
embrace me shamelessly.

Advance together to me:
you who know my unity and disunity
the One Self or my separate selves.
Bring the "great" the spiritual Self
to live among the small, the animal selves.

Advance together to childhood:
the small, the simple, the poor
living with
the great, the complex, the rich.
Don't isolate "great" from "small,"
"rich" from "poor" within you.
By one you know the other,
and none can live in health divided.

The Thunder, Perfect Mind, interpreted from the Coptic by Neil Douglas-Klotz

SERMON

When I say the word "mother," what do you think of?

For some of us, the memories of our mothers are strong, sweet, basic and unclouded.

For some of us the memories are painful, very difficult. For many others the feelings are complex and conflicted.

You can count me among that last group and my own motherhood made it much worse. At 21 I gave birth to a wonderful daughter without benefit of marriage. Furthermore I refused to even consider

marriage. We celebrated Heather's birthday just two days ago.

As a result of my actions my parents severed connection with me because it would "harm your father's ministry." I can't tell you how often those words were used to control me as I was growing up. As usual, it was my mother who pronounced the sentence. My mother and I didn't speak again until two years before my father died. I initiated the rapprochement, but it was not a very complete or satisfying one. My mother died two years later.

Yet, every evidence is that in my youngest years I was cherished. It was only as I began to ask questions, starting at about 7 - about our fundamentalist theology, about the balance of power between the genders and the races - that I became a disappointment and a problem.

Even with all that passed between us, and all that didn't, two words that are close to the top of my list when I hear the word "mother" are food and care. I suspect that's true for many of you.

And, those two words relate directly to two of my spiritual practices that I would like to share from this morning. My definition of spiritual practice is anything that helps me grow in my ability to be aware of my connection to that which is greater than me.

Hokhmah, the voice in the second reading, is a Hebrew word. She is a divine being, or goddess, if you prefer. In Greek she is called Sophia or Wisdom. According to some scholars [Cady, pg 15] there is more written about her in the Hebrew scriptures than about Abraham, Sarah, Joseph or Adam and Eve. Only the various names for the god presumed to be male (as well as Job, Moses and David) receive more attention.

Hokhmah in her Greek form of Sophia also appears in the Christian Bible but there is major gender bending going on when she does. Jesus is thought to be the embodiment of Hokhmah. But the beginning of the Gospel of John with its chapter featuring the concept of "the Word" neuters the female divine.

Furthermore, the descriptions of Hokhmah in the Hebrew Bible are often contradictory, resembling the contradictions you may have noticed in the reading *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*. It seems clear that she played a role in creation, according to Hebrew tradition. But the exact role is confusing. In some places the male God, YHWY, does all the heavy lifting, while Hokhmah plays around and adds the creative touches. In another she alone dances the world into existence. In another, YHWY searches for her first, so that he can then begin creation.

But one of her defining characteristics is unequivocal. It is as the hostess, calling to her table the "first and the last, the honored and the dishonored, the small, the simple, the poor, the great, the complex and the rich."

This is the strongest tie supporting the idea that Jesus was the spiritual embodiment of Hokhmah. Jesus told the same story of going into the streets inviting people to dine as was told of Hokhmah. Remember? He ate with those who were despised. The successful, despised by the peasants for selling out; the peasants, despised by the powerful for being weak; the tax collector, despised by everyone.

The story of Jesus feeding the 5000, or the miracle of the loaves and fishes, is the most oft-told story in the Christian Bible. It is repeated six times. (Brock) Whom you hosted and with whom you ate were powerful political and spiritual acts during the time from 500 BCE to 100 CE.

In the breathtaking book *Saving Paradise*: Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker and co-author Rita Nakashima Brock emphasize again and again the importance that feeding everyone played in the ministry of Jesus and in the worship of early Christians. The Roman Empire maintained its power by distributing bread to the poor. So an act of feeding 5000 mostly poor people was a powerful challenge to Roman control. It was a testament that Rome was not the source of sustaining life.

In the Christian catacombs lies evidence of the central place that the table and the loaves and fishes had in early Christianity. Everywhere are drawings of the loaves and fishes. In Priscilla's catacomb it is all women who sit around the table calling for more bread. "The early church framed its most important ritual meal as this act of feeding. They called it the Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving, the meal that celebrated the bread of earth, blessed by heaven, and shared in community," say Parker and Brock. It was this sense of the Great Thanksgiving that Rev. Mark shared with us a few weeks ago with the Socinian Communion.

Of all these images of feeding it is the act of bringing to the table people who are radically different that spoke to me so strongly a few years ago, and helped me get through a very difficult period in my life. My mentor, a Minister of Religious Education, introduced me to the work of Neil Douglas Klotz at that time. When I explored the Beatitudes through Neil's eyes in *Healing Breath*, I found a spiritual practice that spoke to me on a very basic level. Eventually I applied to study with Neil, and I'm not quite at the mid point in a four-year interspiritual leadership program. One of the attractions of Columbus for me is the fact that the US administrative headquarters for this work is just north of us on High Street.

In the fourth Beatitude I learned much more about Hokhmah than I knew before. A part of the practice is to learn the words of the Beatitudes from the Peshitta, the Aramaic Bible that has been in continuous use since the 5th century. Its version of Aramaic, a middle Syriac, is close to the Aramaic that Jesus spoke.

Now many scholars don't believe that Jesus actually spoke the Beatitudes, although many accept the Lord's Prayer as authentic. I feel about that the way I feel about some learning theories that seem to work in practice - Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, for instance - but don't have a lot of data to back them up. If it works, then it's valuable.

Here are the words of the fourth Beatitude in Syriac. Tubwayhun layleyn d'kaphneen watzheyn l'khenuta d'hinnon nisbhun. Blessed are those who are starving for justice, for right relations, for they shall be filled.

At this stage in the healing path laid out in *Healing Breath* one meditates on a Jungian idea of bringing together all the warring parts of ourselves around a common table, Hokhmah's table - the parts of ourselves that we are proud of and the parts that we despise, the ones we consider childish, and those that we honor as mature.

There are parts of ourselves that we starve. Often our most creative parts have been ruthlessly starved because they don't support gainful employment and the acquisition of the symbols of prosperity. Many times we starve parts of ourselves that we fear are evil or uncontrollable, so we lock them away in dank basements of our psyche. They never see the sunlight or receive decent food or water.

Many forms of psychiatry indicate that while this practice is common, it often has very negative results.

People living like shadows of their true selves and people exploding with all that hidden and repressed anger and energy are two examples. What are all these neglected and maligned parts of ourselves starving for? The word "L'khenuta" suggests it is not righteousness, not an impossibly high standard of purity, but something rather more relational. Right relations or justice. That's what they need. And when they are fed this justice, when the many parts of our psyche come into community with each other, there is "nisbhun." A fullness. And that suggests the ancient Middle Eastern idea of perfection as a fullness of the end goal of our lives.

We often think of attaining righteousness, or purity, or just ordinary self-improvement as a sort of pruning process, ridding ourselves of all those parts that are imperfect. The end goal in the middle eastern mind of Jesus' time was closer to becoming more full of our authentic selves, of adding to what we already have. In a similar vein, our mother in the Ingathering Story this morning, dreamed that her children would live life to its fullest.

When we fear and despise parts of ourselves there is another result. We project our fear and disdain on to others, often others whom we don't even know. It is only when we can bring ourselves into harmony, and love all of ourselves, that we love others.

And this brings us to my second spiritual practice - Radical Hospitality. It is bringing the internal version of Hokhmah's Table out into the world. It is inviting those whom I meet into my life. That is very hard to do. First, I am an introvert. Just meeting strangers is difficult. Developing a casual friendship takes thought. And, as our first reading indicates, radical hospitality involves letting strangers into my heart and, with the rejection of my own mother, it is an extra challenge.

Possibly as little as 10% of UUs are extroverts. I remember telling someone that. They said it can't possibly be true. You can't **ever** get UUs to shut up. We are constantly talking. But we are talking about our ideas. OUR ideas. We aren't listening to get to know another. Our IDEAS. We talk a whole lot more about ideas than about feelings.

The basis of the book *Radical Hospitality*, from which we took the first reading, is that the monks are to see God in every human they encounter. They are to offer food and lodging and the space to find peace to everyone, as if offering it to God.

In Unitarian Universalist terms it might be equivalent to our first principle - promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person - except that our principle is a bit removed and somewhat cold when compared to offering shelter, food and a place in one's heart. It is closer to the idea of the Universalist, unconditional love, that Mark Morrison-Reed challenged us with two weeks ago. Both Radical Hospitality and Universalist love come with a promise, a promise that their practice brings about a transformation in us and leads us to richer, fuller lives.

True hospitality can flow from us in a consistent way only if we are at peace with ourselves. As long as we believe that parts of ourselves are evil, or inferior, we are going to project those on to others, particularly those whom we don't know.

But coming into harmony with ourselves is not enough. Radical Hospitality takes practice, it takes the acquisition of skills, it takes changing our hearts. Fortunately, as with most spiritual practice, actual practice leads to a heart change which increases our ability to practice, which leads to yet more change. We can make a conscious decision to practice, and, as we follow the practice, our transformation

becomes a gift of grace.

Yet, radical hospitality is not easy. It involves risk at many levels. Homan and Pratt put it this way. "The stranger next door, and at our door, is particularly frightening...People have been hurt by strangers ...When we speak of the depth of hospitality, we are proposing something scary and radical. But it's worth the risk. Unless we find a way to open ourselves to others, we will grow even more isolated and frightened. If we do not find and practice ways of hospitality, we will grow increasingly hostile. Hospitality is the answer to hostility."

The dream of the mother in our story was not without struggle and sorrow. She sees, as a part of a full life for her children, that someday they will hear something so sad that they will fold up with sorrow. As we open our hearts more and more, we open up to the discomfort and the sorrow more fully. But that is the price of a life lived to its fullest

There are many people who come through our doors seeking Radical Hospitality from us. Our faith calls us to provide it to all. Our faith also calls on us to go out from here to live in Universalist love. We have taken up that call through a focus on anti-racism, anti-oppression work. We committed to B.R.E.A.D., a coalition of many churches across the spectrum of races and ethnicities dedicated to seeking justice. Now we are proposing to formalize that focus by adopting new Mission and Vision statements that put anti-racism, anti-oppression, multi-cultural work front and center.

Let's look at the proposed Mission:

"We are here

- to learn and practice authentic hospitality,
- to revere both the reasoning mind and the generous heart,
- to claim the challenges of our diversity as a source of spiritual strength,
- and to relinquish the safety of privilege for the freedom to engage in transforming justice."

This is crucial work. This is life saving work. This is exciting work. This is a work that will bring us to fullness. This is hard and sometimes painful work. It is the kind of work that requires a spiritual component to inspire and heal.

I didn't decide to study with Neil Douglas-Klotz because his work spoke to me and helped me through a difficult time. I undertook the study because I believe that *The Healing Breath* can be an important support in anti-racism and anti-oppression work. Hokhmah's Table, the Welcome Table, is a powerful symbol for the work that we seek to do at First UU.

But I thought less about the whole community, when I chose this study, and much more about members and friends who are people of color. People who carry an unequal emotional burden whenever we do anti-racism work. Even when the work is done with an equal number of persons of color and white folks, the burden is unequal. Within our congregations there are nowhere near equal numbers and the emotional load can be overwhelming. We European Americans can wound again and again in our naiveté. We say, "but they should just get over it, they should heal their hurts."

My younger daughter is African American. When she was barely four we moved from the inner city to

the suburbs. Our neighborhood was not very welcoming and when she finally got an invitation to play, she was excited. Her welcome lasted only a few minutes. The grandmother in the house informed her that black folks weren't allowed in their house and put her outdoors. That was the beginning. Many more incidents followed. Some obvious. Others harder to deal with because they were covert and she could never be quite sure. Do they hate me because there is something wrong with me or because they hate black people? she always wonders in those situations. It seems that the hurts never get a chance to truly heal. The scabs are constantly being ripped off.

Let us commit ourselves to preparing our hearts to open to others without unreasoning fear, to feeding our minds with an understanding of how racism and other oppressions operate, and to learning and practicing skills that will make us effective in our work. Let us gather together and be open in both giving and asking for support and advice in this work. If we do this we will place less of a burden on our members who are more vulnerable because of past experience. As Audre Lorde says: "The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives."

In the end we will find fullness. When we relinquish privileges in the interest of justice we will see it not as a true loss but as a release from a burden, in much the same way that a heroin addict who overcomes his addiction is released from a burden, or in the same way that Voluntary Simplicity would have us release from consumerism. Like kicking drug and consumerist habits, giving up privilege is not easy.

One of the hardest privileges we will need to give up is the privilege of being the Decider. Within the larger society European Americans somehow have the idea that we are disinterested when it comes to deciding on what is racist or discriminatory. We have a very hard time recognizing our own bias about the subject. We also have a hard time allowing others their experience if it differs radically from our own.

Another difficult privilege to relinquish is the idea that we can engage in anti-racism work only when we are comfortable.

I agree that the motivation for anti-racism work should never be guilt, just as it should never be noblesse oblige. If it is to carry us through the many tough times and the long stretches when we feel we are not making any progress, the motivation must always be the sheer joy of becoming more full of who we most authentically are, of the promise that the radical gospel of Unitarian Universalism holds out.

There is much we can do immediately and in the next few months to take these next steps. Those of us who have not joined B.R.E.A.D and First UU Allies can do so now. This Saturday First UU Allies will be attending a statewide anti-racism conference at OSU. There are two more films in the year-long series on race called The Other Friday Film Series. Next fall the Adult Enrichment Committee will offer an anti-racist, anti-oppression, multi-cultural curriculum called *Building the World We Dream About* and we will offer other support for the learning, skill-building and reflection portions of justice work.

If we are faithful to this work eventually something close to the dream of the mother in our story will be true for us at First UU. Someday we will be full of a joy so deep that we shine.

PRAYER

O Deep Mystery of our lives -- voice in our hearts and light in our minds -- in the joyful freedom of our fellowship, we are here together as adventurers called forth in spirit, men and women moving, yearning, questing, pushing the limits of our lives outwards to what is more loving and just, more beautiful and true.

O Source and Spirit of our lives, may we respond boldly to your call to adventure -- for justice, for love, and for joy. Amen and Blessed Be.

Sheldon W. Bennett (excerpted)

Singing: #407 We're Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table – This started out as a spiritual, probably called “Someday,” like our story. The welcome table as a verse came somewhere in the middle. Then, in 1964, the students of the McComb, Mississippi, Freedom School adapted the spiritual, featuring the Welcome Table. It includes verses about getting our civil rights and sitting in at the Woolworth's lunch counter.

BLESSING - May we hold one another in the deep and tender places with compassion, and may we grace one another by sharing our own vulnerabilities, being ever mindful of the divinity within that makes soulmates of us all.

Carol Meyer (excerpted)