

LIFTED LIVES

**A sermon given for Mother's Day
by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason
at UU Wellesley Hills on
Sunday, May 12th, 2019**

Motherhood is and is not personal, and that makes each Mother's Day such a complicated tangle of timeless themes, personal stories, deep heartache, boundless joy, year after year, May to May. We all have mothers, although we may or may not know who they are; everyone alive today was born of woman, because that's how we humans arrive in this world, from a womb that has held us. Some women become mothers through childbirth, others through adoption or intention, while still other women do not have any children of their own, although they may have children in their lives. Not every mother has a child or children who will survive her. Every woman is not a mother, but every mother is necessarily a woman, and that's something we cannot lose sight of, especially not today, when we pause to recognize our our universal debt to motherhood.

As co-chair of the largest philanthropic organization in the world, Melinda Gates has worked with her husband Bill to make the welfare of women and children a global priority. What she has come to understand through her outreach efforts is that motherhood does not happen — can never happen — in isolation from social and cultural and religious and political forces. She encourages us all to

acknowledge that reality and support women worldwide in their efforts to give their children the fullest possible lives — and to advance their own situations, too. She requests we uphold the personhood of mothers themselves.

In her recent memoir, The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World, Gates catalogues the experiences that led her to become what she calls “an ardent feminist” and a vocal advocate for women. Increasingly, she has become convinced that the most stubborn problems in the world could be resolved if women were empowered to be part of the solution themselves. “Gender equity lifts everyone,” she insists, not merely in a woman’s household but in her community and national economy, too. The hopes that we might harbor for generational progress have to include progress for women in each generation, too. We have to make that a common ambition; we have to keep all women in mind.

Part of the difficulty that Gates observes is the research itself has a sexist bias. “We don't collect data on women, and we don't collect data on their lives,” Gates told a journalist in a recent interview. Useful data should be qualitative as well as quantitative, she suggests, accounting for both the objective factors and subjective experiences in women’s lives. Good data gathering begins with basic curiosity about the experience of others.

When Gates is traveling the world working with her family foundation, the disparities between her and the women she in desperate circumstances are painful. More than once, women she has met abroad have asked her to take their children home with her,

children they obviously love. Closer to home, in south/central Los Angeles, a student asks her: “Do you ever feel like we’re just somebody else’s kids... that we’re all just leftovers?” No child should ever feel that way, she realizes, but so many of them are parented in desperate poverty. Educated and informed, Gates raises her own children with a male partner of considerable means; those children grow up with resources unimaginable to the vast majority of people; her three children are all healthy and well-nourished. Yet Gates seems to identify deeply with both the women and girls she meets and their individual plights, whether they are school-girls in Kenya, sex workers in Laos, or young mothers in India.

A large part of our honoring mothers is honoring their hopes for the future. Mother’s Day was born from a sense of urgency and outrage. In 1870, Unitarian author, abolitionist, and suffragist Julia Ward Howe issued her “Mother’s Day Proclamation” in the wake of the American Civil War. “Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts... Say firmly: ‘We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,’” Howe commanded. “Let them meet first, as women.... Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as the means whereby the great human family can live in peace...” Nearly a century later, just a month after her husband’s assassination, Coretta Scott King led a march of her own in Washington, DC, on Mother’s Day, calling attention to the crushing struggles of disadvantaged women and children in the African-American community. She brought attention to interlocking oppressions before the term “intersectional feminism” was well known.

In the past couple of years, we have seen countless mothers bringing their daughters on Women's Marches across the country, and in January, a contingent from UU Wellesley Hills rallied with other groups on Boston Common to call for greater gender equality nationwide. Clearly, we do want to rise up as women of our time and place; we sense that we ourselves may be developing a capacity to summon that moment of collective lift. Out on the Common, we saw signs protesters holding signs that read "Here's to strong women: May we know them. May we be them. May we raise them." and "The Future is Female!" and "Nevertheless She Persisted..." These signs all proclaimed the relevance and centrality of women in facing pressing social questions today, thorny problems such as the so-called "Heartbeat Bill" passed down in Georgia or the policing of low-income mothers of color nationwide.

Some of you told me just how important it was for you to have your own daughters witness this proud display of solidarity, given the setbacks that American women have experienced as backlash to the latest #WomensWave. Yes, we participated in the Women's March to raise public consciousness; but we also did it to lift our own spirits in the midst of uncertainty and a great deal of impatience. As psychologists have noted, a particularly female stress response is to "tend-and-befriend" under duress, to gather a collective for social support, to not go it alone, and to stop staying silent about the serious threats to our welfare.

Characterizing herself "a realistic optimist", Gates told one interviewer: "You have to take in the heartbreak, work through it, and metabolize it—and then use it to create action in the world.... It's a

better time in the world to be a woman than it has ever been — yet it's not getting better fast enough.” Convinced of the need for more rapid progress, Gates became increasingly insistent about the need to close gender gaps of all kind — in education and family life and the workplace, in developed and developing economies alike. She wanted to challenge both “what women can do — and think they can do” and took that challenge on herself, too.

“And then all that has divided us will merge; and then compassion will be wedded to power... And then both men and women will be gentle. And then both women and men will be strong,” feminist author and artist Judy Chicago wrote. “And then all will nourish the young. And then all will cherish life's creatures.” Chicago's most famous work is a massive installation called “The Dinner Party,” and in it, she sets a place at a giant triangular table for significant female figures from history and inscribes the names of hundreds of others, paying tribute to 1,038 women in all. Artwork such as hers helps to expand our knowledge about women and inspires greater interest in their stories — eventually prompting us to inquire why they are not better known. Members of this congregation recently began circulating a petition calling on the Town of Wellesley to be more intentional about naming women's history in the public sphere, and I was glad to add my name to it. Women need visibility; we deserve to be seen, heard, known. We need to name and reclaim our history.

When the #MeToo movement first claimed widespread media attention, Americans were struck not only by the bracing nature of women's first-person accounts of sexual harassment and assault, but also the sheer volume of them — soon there were millions upon

millions of posts. These disclosures could be controversial, and the confessional mode itself can be problematic, I understand, but we learned that newer information-sharing strategies can bring about quick social and cultural and religious and political shifts in the lives of women. Something powerful happens when women's issues are no longer considered their private or personal concerns alone.

“More than at any time in the past, we have the knowledge and energy and moral insight to crack the patterns of history,” Gates writes in her memoir. “We need the help of every advocate now. Women and men. No one should be left out. Everyone should be brought in.” We are agitating for the full inclusion of women, and not only the affluent and educated, as has been true for too long now, but also for ethnic and racial minorities, the overlooked as well as the disenfranchised.

What Gates and other social critics of gender disparity have noticed is that inequality and exclusion are mutually reinforcing. Particularly in the developing world, the demands of domestic life are consuming. If women begin childbearing young, they do not get educations; if they are denied access to contraception, they stay out of the workforce and the bulk of their labor remains unpaid. “When any community pushes any group out, especially its women, it's creating a crisis that can only be reversed by bringing the outsiders back in,” Gates writes. “This is the core remedy for... almost any social ill—including the excluded...” We argue that women's rights are human rights, and indeed they are; but women's abilities are human resources, and they are far too precious to be squandered. Communities fare best when women participate — this is a global phenomenon very readily observed.

“The supreme goal for humanity is not equality but connection,” Gates concludes. “People can be equal but still be isolated—not feeling the bonds that tie them together. Equality without connection misses the whole point. When people are connected, they feel woven into each other.” They feel secure and nurtured. Others have given them cause for hope and a strong sense that their individual lives matter, intimately and immediately matter, for the good of the whole.

Feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologies always remind of us of our interconnectedness. “Weaver of our lives, Your loom is love,” Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove declared. “May we... be empowered by that love to weave new patterns of Truth...” That seems to me as fine a prayer as any this Mother’s Day. When we speak of expectant mothers, we generally refer to pregnancies. But an attitude of expectancy continues well past the time that any children are born; mothers look to the world to provide their children a brighter future, and the world always has the option of responding kindly. What a wonderful thing it would be if we were to shift the sentimental expectations that now surround this holiday to a more generous feeling of shared expectancy.

Decades ago, the Women’s Liberation movement decades ago taught us that the political is personal, just as the personal is political, and showed us that simply connecting women can be transformative. The gains that women have made in the U.S. — around legal protections, reproductive choice, equal pay, educational access — have come under recent threat and women taking elected office in record numbers has been one positive response to that. Faith communities such as UU Wellesley Hills can also be pivotal spots; they gives women

places to tell our stories, share information, develop strategies, and offer encouragement to one another. They are places where tending-and-befriending becomes a common spiritual practice.

Our liberal tradition offers us models like Julia Ward Howe, author of that original “Mother’s Day Proclamation”, these passionate women who were activists, reformers, and advocates for the marginalized. In addition, it endorses the religious leadership and authority of women; it offers progressive social witness women’s issues; it embraces newer feminist theologies and gives newer generations novel visions of God that are inclusive and affirming; it asks that we listen for female voices and then believe what they are telling us. The first woman elected president of the UUA, the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray urges us now “to build something new in our communities” and to embrace “a courageous and fierce embodied love” that “nurtures what is best in us as human beings.... The promise of our faith means liberating ourselves from systems of dominance and exploitation that we all suffer under,” she writes. “The promise of our faith means making compassion a way of being.”

Soon, I suspect, liberation and inclusion will be indistinguishable in our eyes. “The goal is for everyone to belong. The goal is for everyone to be loved. Love is what lifts us up,” Gates declares in her memoir. “When we come together, we rise. And in the world we’re building together, everyone rises.... There is no wrong race or religion or gender. We have shed our false boundaries. We can love without limits... That is the moment of lift.” We have been anticipating it for a while now, so we know just how hard it has proved to time its arrival, which may not come in our lifetimes, or even our children’s, if we

have children. Maybe the dreams of our mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers will have given us wings; maybe we will not be celebrating without them. Ultimately, that moment of lift will include women everywhere, rising and raised. I can only imagine that it will be a giddy, glorious day.

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