

Mother Nature
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It is traditional on Mother's Day to sing the praises of mothers everywhere, to celebrate the joys and honor the challenges of motherhood, and to pay tribute to individual mothers as representatives in this sacred role. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of that...

Except that it is all too easy to extrapolate from a handful of individual experiences to the whole; to suggest that particular family scenarios are universal; to offer shining examples against which our own lives are measured...and often found wanting. In other words, it is all too easy to romanticize and idealize motherhood and mothers even though this only serves to distance us—inextricably caught up in our *real* lives--from the very thing that we seek to embrace.

Also, the tendency to romanticize motherhood does an extreme disservice to mothers. It puts a soft, fuzzy focus on just how hard it is to be a parent and, in particular, a mother. And if we carry an idealized notion of mothers, how many can really measure up? Any? And if they don't measure up to that vision we carry, aren't *they* to blame? The cultural backlash is evidenced in the cliché version of a visit to a therapist. "Tell me," looking over a pair of glasses, "about your relationship with your mother." Ever since Freud, we've come to assume that *that's* where the problems lie. That's where all my trouble began, right? If my mother had done this or been that or *not* done this or *not* been that...

Further, when we celebrate the powerfully inspiring, encouraging, and empowering influence that our mothers can have on our lives, we must also keep in mind the harsh reality of those who have suffered neglect, abandonment, and even abuse from their mothers. This is not to say that one can't speak of one's particular experience, be it positive or negative or placed somewhere in that wide open area in between, but only to keep in mind that not everyone shares in our experience and yet we have all found sources of encouragement and inspiration and nurture.

And with all of that said, I now want to move to the general, the universal, the archetypal mother. I know that I just said it's dangerous to call on the universal, and I believe it is, especially when applied to individuals and particular circumstances...and yet we carry a concept, a vision of motherhood, that allows us, across many and varied circumstances, to use Mother as metaphor for Earth, for the Divine, for unconditional love. We attribute values to motherhood such that, even if we did not experience them from our own mothers, we are able to say of another person, "She was like a mother to me." Mothers and motherhood are threaded throughout our art and literature, our religions, our understanding of the world and our places in it.

Maybe nowhere is that more evident than in the image of "Mother Nature." So I'd like to take a little time to investigate "Mother Nature," both in terms of a description for the natural world and in terms of which attributes of *human* nature we imagine are best exemplified in *mother* nature. What, in other words, is the nature of mothers that finds its way into our understanding of the world and our relationships with all of life.

To begin, I'd like to share with you a passage from [*Revelations of Divine Love*](#) by Julian of Norwich, a Christian mystic who lived from (1342 – 1416). She writes:

This fair lovely word Mother, it is so sweet and so close in Nature of itself...To the property of Motherhood belongs natural love, wisdom, and knowing; and it is good...Thus Jesus Christ that does good against evil is our Very Mother: we have our Being of Him—where the Ground of Motherhood begins—with all the sweet Keeping of Love that endlessly follows. As truly as God is our Father, so truly God is our Mother...

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Whatever your beliefs about God, I would ask you to recognize that for a great number of Christians, this is a radical statement. So wedded is the Catholic Church hierarchy to the construction of God as *exclusively male* that last year Pope Benedict rejected a gender neutral alternative that baptized people “in the name of the Creator, and the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier.” “[The invalid formula](#), the Vatican statement points out, arises from feminist ideology, and an attempt ‘to avoid using the words Father and Son, which are held to be chauvinistic.’” Too bad, says the Vatican. People baptized under this new formula need to be rebaptized.

So considering that this is such a risky theological area in which to dive, what are the attributes that caused Julian, a good Catholic, to risk the proclamation of God as not only Father of all, but Mother, too? “To the property of Motherhood belongs natural love, wisdom, and knowing; and it is good...we have our Being of Him—where the Ground of Motherhood begins—with all the sweet Keeping of Love that endlessly follows.”

We have our Being of Him...of *Her*. If we conceive of a God (so to speak) that gives us life, what more appropriate image than God as Mother?

It is understandable, following this train of thought and reflection, to move our focus of worship and reverence from, or at the very least to expand it beyond, Father God to Mother Nature. Are we not, after all, creatures of this planet, inextricably entwined with all other life, connected most intimately to our Mother Earth, indebted for our very lives to the substance of Mother Nature? But while it may be understandable that we follow this train of thought and reflection, while Pagan and Wiccan traditions have kept this focus alive for centuries, it is also undoubtedly heretical in some religious circles, as our ancestors the Transcendentalists quickly found out. And yet they, along with many others, made the leap and bid us to follow.

In a very general sense, and in a way that does not even necessarily touch us individually but does, I think, effect us culturally, we have grown used to feminine imagery for the Earth and the natural world, but because we have been thwarted from including this feminine imagery in our conceptions of what is divine, what is most sacred, what inspires our reverence, we have not found a way to truly honor that most intimate of connections: the giving and sustaining of life itself.

In much of Western religion, God, residing outside this earthly realm, promises *us* a home in the great beyond, too, so we decide that the Earth is not our home but, at best, a temporary residence; a comfortable apartment, but how much should we really put into taking care of it, you know? God, being separate from the natural world, suggests that we have “a life outside” too, which gives birth to phrases like: “We are spiritual beings having a physical experience.” Even popular environmental constructs of “man vs. nature” unintentionally imply that we are *separate from*. I really appreciated the reminder in

Tricia's sermon about the inherent worth of earth that *everything we see, everything around us, all that is* comes from Mother Earth...and that includes our very bodies, our very *beings*.

Understand, I am not commenting on the relative truth of any given propositions, but I am interested in the often unintended *ramifications* of our theological, scientific, ethical, and philosophical propositions. How do they lead us to act and respond to one another and to the world which we inhabit? And what would it mean to truly honor our Mother Earth? On this Mothers Day, how would we respond if we truly integrated the knowledge that *but for our mother, we would not be here*.

And I do understand that Mother Nature, like all metaphors, has its problems. By anthropomorphizing nature itself, we imply that nature may show love and concern for individual creatures when, from the evidence, we would have to say that this Mother is no respecter of persons. And yet, maybe even because of that, there is an unconditional acceptance of all, an opportunity for each of us--whomever we are, whatever we have done or left undone, however we feel-- an opportunity for each of us to, as Wendell Berry puts it, "rest in the grace of the world" and be free (483).

And if our reconnection with the values we associate with motherhood allow us to renew and revitalize our relationship with the Earth, might they also allow us to envision a new relationship with one another? Julia Ward Howe thought so.

As we reconnect with the precious nature of life on this earth and the irreplaceable nature of each of its many expressions, how can we continue to brutally, heartlessly, intentionally kill one another, whether we claim it is for freedom or liberation or safety? [Julia Ward Howe](#) made this connection explicit and called on women, on mothers, to give voice to it:

From the bosom of a 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 plough and the 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 solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace...

In [her memoirs](#), remembering the inspiration for this proclamation, Howe wrote:

The question forced itself upon me, "Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters, to prevent the waste of that human life of which they alone bear and know the cost?" The august dignity of motherhood and its terrible responsibilities now appeared to me in a new aspect, and I could think of no better way of expressing my sense of these than that of sending forth an appeal to womanhood throughout the world...I had desired to institute a festival which should be observed as mothers' day, and which should be devoted to the advocacy of peace doctrines.

It should be noted that Julia Ward Howe's proclamation of 1870 did not provide the Mothers Day celebration we recognize each year. The traditional Mother's Day celebration that we know was started by [Anna Jarvis](#) of West Virginia, who created a memorial to her own mother in 1907 and then pushed for a national holiday which was instituted in 1914. It should also be noted that by the 1920's, this same Anna Jarvis felt that the holiday had become so commercialized, empty, and frivolous that she actively campaigned against it, going so far as to be arrested at one point for disturbing the peace.

Sad to say, we, as a culture, have continued along this path of trivialization. We have not stayed true to either Julia Ward Howe or Anna Jarvis in their visions of Mother's Day. Though strides have been made, we have not confronted nor admitted the sexism that persists in our society; we have romanticized motherhood and condescended to mothers; we reward those who are gentle and mild and frown on those, like Anna Jarvis, who disturb the peace and attack those, like Julia Ward Howe, like Cindy Sheehan, who disturb the war, who speak their minds clearly and ask uncomfortable questions from the firm Ground of Motherhood. We claim to be the pinnacle of evolution, yet treat our Mother Earth as if we were the most vain, self-centered, and thoughtless of adolescents.

We could reclaim this holiday in the spirit of Julia Ward Howe. There is a possibility, after all, that we can mature into healthy adults if we would but listen to our mother.

[A man once consulted](#) the Prophet Muhammad about taking part in a military campaign. The Prophet asked the man if his mother was still living. When told that she was alive, the Prophet said: "(Then) stay with her, for Paradise is at her feet." (Al-Tirmidhi)

I read that and thought to myself, would that each person's mother would live forever. If that is what it takes to keep us from war, may we keep the spirit of the mother alive, that spirit that says:

Our sons and daughters shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the people of one country,
Will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons and daughters to be trained to injure theirs.

Now that would be something to celebrate!