

9 May 2010 * Callings
© Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Reading: “The Lanyard” by Billy Collins in *The Trouble with Poetry*

The other day as I was ricocheting slowly
off the pale blue walls of this room,
bouncing from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
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 more suddenly into the past –
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid 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 teaspoons of medicine to my lips,
set 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 archaic truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hands,
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.

Sermon: “Callings”

I’ve always loved the few moments of connection with our young ones that the Message for All Ages affords me. When the children come forward on Sunday mornings – as you know – I prefer talking *with* them than talking *to* them or *at* them. In one of my previous congregations – this would have been about seven years ago – I remember asking the kids the classic question *What do you want to be when you grow up?*

The children’s answers came fast and furious, and fell into predictable categories. A zookeeper, said one. A teacher. A dancer. Then 8-year old Angela raised her hand: “A mom,” she said. I fielded a few more career goals from the ten-and-younger crowd, and then went on to make my point (whatever it was that day).

I didn’t give a second thought to the conversation until after the service, when a woman sought me out. I knew Laura only vaguely; a woman in her late forties, she her husband, and their son weren’t very active or visible in the congregation. That morning, I got peek into her heart.

“I need to talk to you about what you said to the kids this morning,” Laura said to me, “and more specifically, to Angela.” (These are not their real names.)

I quickly scanned my memory. Had I accidentally used a four-letter word in front of the kids, or taught them how to make fart noises in their armpits? I had not. I had no recollection of saying anything out of the ordinary to Angela or to *any* of the children, and the blank look on my face told her so.

“Angela said she wanted to be a mom when she grows up,” she explained, growing agitated, “Do you remember what you said?”

“No. What’d I say?”

“You said, ‘Good – that’s good.’ You asked what she wanted to be, she said ‘a mom,’ and you said ‘that’s good.’” Laura surveyed me triumphantly, waiting for the penny to drop.

The penny wasn’t dropping. “And what... um... Can you tell me more about why that upset you?”

My parishioner needed no further invitation. “It’s good if she wants to be a mom? It’s *not* good. You shouldn’t be encouraging little girls to be mothers. We’ve fought too hard for that. If we had been born couple of decades ago, I wouldn’t be a physician, and you wouldn’t be a minister. We both would’ve been stuck being wives and mothers. Women have achieved too much for you to be telling girls that they should be moms.”

All of thoughts that went through my head (silently) began with the words “But... but...”

But... but... Angela’s only eight years old. Just like our future zookeeper, she has years of growing up to decide whether that’s what she still wants.

But... but... even if she does become a mom, motherhood is an honorable path, and a valid choice.

But... but... Laura, you're a mother.

I didn't say any of these things, of course. I listened to her until our conversation ended. I'll always remember that morning, because Laura's distress revealed that – somewhere in the tapestry of her identity as a woman, a daughter, a physician, a wife, and a mother – there were threads of pain and resentment, or some longing for a life she didn't have.

I still wonder it was that she was asked – or forced – to sacrifice, in order to hold these pieces together. What part of herself did she have to carve away to make them all fit?



As I muse out loud in front of you, I do so from a comfortable distance, perched on the edge of history's blade. For the record, I'm crazy about children – especially *your* children. And I am childless by choice. So far. If and when my partner Gordon and I have our own children to be crazy about, that will also be a choice.

I belong to Generation X; we thirty-somethings rode on the coattails of feminism and plucked the juicy fruits – gorged on the fruits – that our mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers (and so on, for as many “greats” as you can add) planted at great cost. My cohort, and the twenty-something women and teens following us, have been gifted with the power and the privilege to shape our lives with more intention than almost any other generation of women.

When I speak of the privilege to shape our lives as women, I'm not necessarily talking about family planning – although it must be mentioned that the birth control pill witnessed its fiftieth anniversary this week, and The Pill certainly allowed women to channel their fertility from the biological realm to professional and creative ones.

The power that I'm speaking of is our relatively modern freedom, as women, to define ourselves beyond our biology, with all of its imperatives, and to broaden our notion of what our lives might look like.

How many of you mothers here today can say that you have been the architects of your lives?

How many of *our* mothers could say that? How many of our grandmothers?

What did your mother or grandmother want to be when she grew up? Did it matter?

When my grandma Lillian was eight years old, I'll bet that no one asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up – women still couldn't vote; that right was still two years away. By the time she was my age, Lillian had borne three children. She buried one of them and sent the other two to be raised by her sisters because her alcoholic husband couldn't provide a home or even food to eat.

It was a tough life. It was a common life. Some of you have stories just like this, hanging from the branches of your family tree.

The meditation I've been holding a meditation in my heart all weekend goes like this:

I give thanks to you, mothers in all places and across all times who – whether you wanted to be moms or not – stepped into that role and did your best. I give thanks for your lives, even as I grieve for all of your dreams deferred.

I give thanks to you, mothers who continue to take your place in the unbroken line of motherhood – you women who use your bodies to create new life, and your love to create new beings even when you *could* do just about anything else.

Let us be glad for the women who crave motherhood (and the men who make it possible, biologically and emotionally). The willingness to take on parenthood is, after all, nearly inexplicable. As my friend Rick explained to me, “If you make a list of pros and cons for having kids, you’d never do it – the “con” list stretches on forever.” And yet, he and his wife welcomed a daughter five months ago, because – inexplicable thought it may be – there’s also something compelling about parenthood.

Most of you mothers who are here today had a choice about how to fill the pages of your life story. You could have had prestige, money, clean floors, quiet homes, and hours of uninterrupted sleep – and still, you chose (some more actively than others) to take the path of tending unconditional love to your child, for as long as they live. The beauty of that choice is that, rather than feeling like you’ve given something up, it feels like you won the Prize of All Prizes. And you did.

Mothers give us life and milk from their breasts, Billy Collins reminds us. They nursed us in many a sick room, lifted teaspoons of medicine to our lips, and then led us into the airy light and taught us to walk and swim.

*Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.*

*Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world...*

What shall we offer in return? On this day of women who gave themselves to motherhood, and therefore to us, their children, let us give strong praise, deep appreciation, and everlasting love.

Hallelujah!

So may it be.