

Lisa Steele-Maley

Message for Durham Meeting, May 12, 2024

When Leslie invited me to share a message this morning, she offered, “It’s Mother’s Day. You could just show a slideshow of your boys...” It made me laugh. She’s a big fan of my children and I appreciate that. I am too.

Being a mother is by far my most important and most difficult role. The love is so big. The stakes feel high... And I happen to have a challenging relationship with my own mother. And she had a challenging relationship with her mother... And my mother loved me – and still loves me as fully and absolutely as she can and I love her back as fully as I can. Just as her mother loved her as fully and absolutely as she could. And still it is difficult.

I know I am not alone in having a difficult relationship with my mother – and it’s really no wonder that our relationships can be a little difficult with the one who physically brought us into this world. After all, our relationships with the Holy Mother of all Life can be a little spicy too.

So this morning I am going to riff on the Mother’s day theme but I don’t have a slideshow for you – partially because Thomas and I have been terrible documentarians and partially because I’d rather tell a few stories.

The stories will introduce you to Duncan (21) and Thatcher (20) and some of the lessons in love that I have learned from them. I hope that my stories will connect you to your own experiences of mother love...received or given.

Mother love shows up in the ways that we birth and care for children of course.

It is also Mother love that births new possibilities, cares for neighbors, tends projects, builds communities, grieves injustice, transcends boundaries...

When I was pregnant with Duncan, I oriented myself toward parenthood with the song On Children by Sweet Honey in the Rock, adapted from a poem by Kahlil Gibran.

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, they belong not to you.

You can give them your love but not your thoughts,
They have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You can try to be like them, but you can not make them just like you.

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.

At a heart and spirit level, I have recognized my children as “the sons of life’s longing for itself” since the beginning. They are so clearly their own people... yet, humans are born naked and helpless. I can’t just love these beings frivolously, I have to love them with intention and care. Mother love is not a simple emotional state of being, it is also an active and intentional state of doing.

A few months after Duncan was born, I walked to the grocery store with him in the stroller. Standing at the crosswalk with traffic whizzing by, I realized, maybe for the first time, how tenuous his life was in my hands. How tenuous our lives were. In a moment of inattention, I could step into the traffic and we would both be dead. Or my grip could fail and the stroller could roll away from me. We were so vulnerable.

Lesson 1: Hold on tight.

When he was 2, Duncan required surgery. The surgery was smooth and the recovery was uncomplicated but painful. We did not know if he could understand why he was so uncomfortable but we knew we could not take it away and he did too. One day we walked down to the beach. As I sat down to nurse Thatcher, he walked to the water’s edge and threw rock after rock into the ocean with fierce dedication. When he was done, he collapsed in the grass next to me. “Wow. What was that about?” I asked. After some misunderstanding, I came to understand that it was about his surgery. He was healing himself, releasing the pain and frustration.

Lesson 2: We have what we need within ourselves. That is true of our children too.

When the boys were young and playing on playground equipment, learning to cross the monkey bars was a big deal. It came in stages - first hanging, then crossing each bar one at a time and finally swinging from bar to bar all the way from one end to the other. Through each stage, I was called to service, “Mom - watch me.” That instruction meant to come closer, pay attention, and stay close but not too close. I needed to be close enough to lend confidence, but not so close that I robbed them of the courage to try on their own.

Lesson 3: Stay close but not too close.

When he was 16, Duncan volunteered for a summer on a white mountain trail crew. As I drove out of the parking lot after dropping him off, I had a distinct feeling of having dropped him off to meet his real mother. It was bittersweet and I was perplexed. After all, I knew I was his real mother; I had been there through the pregnancy, the long labor and the last 16 years. But in that drop off, I recognized a mother beyond my mothering. Living and working in the forest, Duncan would come to know and love Mother Earth. Her mothering would sustain and support him throughout his life – in ways that human mothering can not even touch.

Lesson 4: Let go.

Deciding when it is time to hold on, let go, or hover nearby requires ongoing discernment. It becomes a dance. This dance is what relationships are made of.

Late last summer, after several weeks at home, Thatcher went down to the garden to see what was growing. He returned stunned. “What happened, mom?” I knew what he was referring to – the garden was chaos, a nearly impenetrable mass of vegetation and insects. I tried to explain that at the beginning of the season, there had been a lot of plants coming up and I was curious to see which were volunteer flowers and which were weeds so I left them all. And I knew the pollinators would enjoy the milkweed so much that I had left a bunch of them. Eventually, milkweed, weeds, and volunteer flowers

took over the vegetable beds. I stopped trying to get into weed or harvest. I gave the garden over to the flourishing of life.

Last summer's garden was beautiful and it offered very little to the dinner table. He offered advice. "Next summer, mom, less love and more care. If I'm home, I'll help"

He won't be home for long this summer, but I get his point and I will follow his advice. I don't think that less love is really part of the equation but more care absolutely is.

In her book, "all about love" bell hooks leans into a definition of love offered by M. Scott Peck in his classic self-help book *The Road Less Traveled*. Peck defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."

hooks goes on to describe love as a practice that includes "openly and honestly expressing care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment and trust."

Those definitions are helpful. Love is not passive; it is something we do.

And if love is a will and a practice, I think that Mother Love calls that will to the forefront, makes the practice continual and ongoing, and amplifies the commitment. And, as I mentioned at the beginning, Mother Love is not just about birthing and parenting human children. It is about creation and nurturance in all of its forms.

Whether that Mother Love is inspired by a child, a project, or a cause, it invites us into deep relationship, to a place where we can recognize ourselves and all life as interconnected with All That Is.

And so I leave you with a question. What person, being, or cause inspires you to Mother Love at this time?