

Heart to Heart
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“It’s the hardest job you’ll ever love,” that’s what my mother said to me when I called to ask her this past week what it was like to be a mom. I was stumped with my mother’s day sermon, and I decided to ask the Supreme Source for some guidance.

Mom was quick to counter that statement with artful elaborations about the nature of motherhood, but it was that one phrase—the hardest job you’ll ever love—that sticks with me.

Of all the many, many memories I have of my mom there seems to be a common thread running through the most poignant of those memories. My mother’s heartbeat was often the rhythm of my life that kept me steady and safe in a sometimes chaotic and daunting world.

It was my mom who rocked me to sleep as a baby when I was inconsolable and screaming. Her heartbeat formed the very measures of the lullaby. It was she who picked me up after I ran my tricycle into a mailbox. Her calm voice that told me to get back onto that bike after my bruises were bandaged and kissed! In junior high after I fell madly in and then out of love, it was she who provided the hug and heart to heart conversation.

There was something, despite all the things that she didn’t say correctly or mistakes that any parent is bound to make, there was some ineffable source of comfort that survives in my memories.

As I’ve grown older, I realize that it was through her rhythm that I found my own way in this world. It is with these memories that I humbly attempt this morning to understand the transformative power of a heart to heart, the universal application of a mother’s calming presence.

It isn’t a new revelation that mothers can often calm their children. In fact, the commercial market has devoted expensive resources in an attempt to replicate a mother’s soothing voice, her touch, and indeed the most important feature of all—her heartbeat. These toys called sleep sheep, cuddle bears and tender tones, exemplify the innate impact of the heartbeat upon the human condition.

And what makes the mother’s heartbeat so comforting for babies? Scientists have studied this, concluding that babies may be able to tell the difference between the mother’s heartbeat and a stranger’s! Yet, this is complicated by evidence that babies out of the womb are comforted by any heartbeat.

It may be that the mother’s heartbeat soothes the child because of a characteristic that is distinctly unquantifiable-unconditional love. It is the experience of calm grounding—the awareness that we are not alone—it is this experience that transcends biology and gender. It is this gift, of the heartbeat, that is the universal application of motherhood.

So the question before us then is what value could this heartbeat, the presence of sacred calm, be to our world today? Is the universal application of motherhood important outside of child rearing or church walls?

It seems a heart to heart is desperately needed in our nation, in our city, and even in our own homes. Lately, there has been a lot of talk about the pervasive anxiety in this country over the war, economy and environment. Political pundits and religious zealots fuel the flame, and we seem too to fuel this anxiety with our thirst for the latest story, the latest primary results, the latest voicemail or email that we must respond to. We are literally wired. Sometimes just reading the paper, it feels as if there is a screaming child begging to be rocked somewhere amidst its pages.

And with each coming day I am afraid we are losing our God-given gifts to think creatively and constructively in these uncertain times as the anxiety envelopes us.

We desperately need a mother to embrace us, to hold us in a common love and transform the chaos with the steady pulse her heartbeat.

In the Gospel of Luke 13:34-35, Jesus bemoans:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you are not willing!”

Do we not kill our own prophets in these times? Jesus’ words, which are harsh and off-putting are in fact the words of a mother who so desires a heart to heart with her children so as to save them from themselves. Do we not push our mothers from our side?

I remember hearing a story recently about a successful Baptist minister who was driving home one night from a church conference in the rain and ended up in a serious car accident. His healing would include months of physical therapy, and this once dynamic man was brought to virtual infantile dependence. While church members and friends tried to help by cooking meals, and taking care of his children he fiercely resisted all assistance—even from his wife. Finally a colleague stopped by the hospital one day and it became apparent that this minister was freezing. His colleague grabbed a blanket from the chair and moved to wrap it around the minister who stubbornly asserted, “I am just fine. Leave me alone.” His colleague and friend looked at him, and said, “You know, you’re being a real jerk here. By refusing everyone’s help you’ve denied their ministry to you.”

Sometimes we are the children refusing to be held or calmed. Sometimes we are the mothers like Jesus desperately seeking to embrace the world. Both are inevitable roles as we encounter the chaos of daily living.

In order to be sources of transformation we must be willing to embrace that which terrifies us, that which stirs our heart, that which seems unyielding, and inconsolable.

When I lived in Upstate New York I worked at an institution devoted to providing counseling as well as research for children who had experienced violence or abuse early in childhood. My job at the center was to help teach children ages 7-13 social skills as well as techniques for non-violence. These were angry, violent children who often were expelled from school because of their behaviors.

Throughout my time at the program I saw many children fly into a rage. Our training as counselors and researchers was meant to instruct us on how to effectively protect these children from hurting themselves as well as others in the program. We were trained in physical restraints, which were often the equivalent of a bear hug utilized as a last resort to hold children and protect them.

I still remember one little boy, Jacob who was about 9 years old. We had worked together all semester in our social skills training. Jacob had entered the group as a silent, fearful and angry child. He had made a good deal of progress throughout the year, but on the last day of program was not ready to say goodbye. Another student in the program teased Jacob. Jake picked up a chair intent on throwing it at him. His behavior grew worse, and the last resort—the bear hug—had to be used.

I held Jake rocking him as he tried to break loose. He swore and kicked and screamed. Then suddenly Jake started to cry. He sobbed and he sobbed and he sobbed. And I rocked him, aware of my own heartbeat pounding trying to breathe deeply and remain calm.

We rocked like that for twenty minutes on the floor littered with his sneakers, sweat and tears, Littered too with my relief. I felt his breath starting to slow, matching mine and his heartbeat coming in sync with my own (which had ceased pounding).

It was a heart to heart that I will never forget.

I often wonder about Jake and how he is doing. That was his last day at the center and while I do not know if he was transformed by that day. I know that I stand here today because of Jake's courage and heartbeat, because of the hope that a radical embrace could transform the world, one person at a time.

This is at the center of our faith. Religions used to be defined by what you believed. Creeds and dogmas that divided humans according to right belief and heresy. Our religion is one of covenant, of a sacred relationship that is developed heart to heart. In this regard, we are all called to be mothers. We are called to the spiritual task of unconditional love.

But- we are not called to agree with each other all the time. Indeed I am sure when children decide to finger paint the living room, or make a cake before mommy wakes up, or flush a bear down the toilet or stay out until 2 am without calling their parents do not condone, agree with or like their behavior. I recently heard that mothers of teenagers know why animals eat their young.

We are called to unconditional love not unconditional agreement. For it is unconditional love that will survive our recessions, will emerge from the desolation of war, and will cure our quaking earth. It is the love that is met when one face acknowledges the humanity in another. It is the love that is born of the courage to embrace the chaos, to hug what we fear most, and to hold it dear until it is transformed. If we do not have love, Corinthians reminds us, we have nothing. This love is made evident in the sacred embrace.

This is not an abstract spiritual practice, but rather a very real life-saving act of embracing the "other" in our world. Embracing the other has recently come to light as a radical approach to non-violence in the work of Desmond Tutu as well as other prominent peace builders such as Miroslav Volf who has worked in Croatia as well as the United States. His book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, was recently selected as one of the 100 most influential religious books in the 20th century. Volf argues that the necessary opposition to embrace is exclusion. It is this exclusion that leads to violence in our world and conflict. Furthermore, according to Volf when we exclude others and push them either literally or figuratively away from us we deny a piece of ourselves. For the other holds the key to our humanity, another piece to the divine puzzle.

The mother who embraces the screaming child does in part because that child's suffering is her own; because that child is intimately a piece of her. Imagine a world where we felt so intimately connected to the cries of the poor, and suffering?

This spiritual act of entering the chaos in order to transform it is not limited to Christian contexts.

Early Buddhism and traditions in India, held that enlightened beings, arhats, left this world shortly after enlightenment as they were freed from the karmic cycle of death and rebirth—the inextricable suffering that is part and parcel of living in this world. As Buddhism developed, the concept of the arhat was challenged in Buddhist scriptures. Slowly, an idea of the bodhisattva emerged—an enlightened being who unlike the arhat returns to the world in the hope of bringing enlightenment to other beings.

This is how the chaos of the world, its eternal suffering can be transformed, by an embrace of that which seems disordered or irrational.

This is no easy task. Perhaps the hardest job a human could take, and yet the one to which we bring our best selves—being a source of healing in this world. I struggle and fail everyday. We are never done embracing this world or being in need of embrace. And I know I certainly have moments when I stubbornly assert that I don't need help, or that I dig in my heels and refuse to embrace a friend or neighbor because of my pride.

It is then that I return to my heartbeat.

Embrace is a task that begins within our own hearts. Recognizing the fear, praying into the calm. It is developed through spiritual care. Whether you be an atheist, humanist, Christian or Jew this spiritual practice—the active embrace of love and connection with another human being is a task that is not limited by creed or belief.

This is what our hearts beat for, the connection the child longs for, the prophet the world desperately needs.

This is the essence of the challenge before us—to take up the opportunity to heal the world one heartbeat at a time. To measure the beats of our heart as we would the steps we take to work, the words we speak, the very breath we inhale. As the gospel group, Sweet Honey in the Rock proclaims in one of their hymns, “We are the ones we've been waiting for.”

Jesus' words to the city of Jerusalem ring in our ears: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you are not willing!*

Oh America how we long to hold you to our hearts as a mother rocks her child, and you are not willing.

It's time for a heart to heart. It's time to take the pulse of this nation and live out the legacy left to us by our mothers.

It's the hardest job you'll ever love. And this morning I preach in gratitude for the countless mothers listening on the radio and those sitting among us: your hearts have graced us with immeasurable gifts.

Your wisdom has taught us that our greatest instrument of transformation is beating in our own chest.

The world is filled with a frantic pulse bespeaking of fear and chaos. It begs to be rocked, to be held, to be loved .

Do you hear the heartbeat of a mother spirit resting in your soul waiting to be called upon?

Seek the rhythm of your heart.
Dance to it, sing with it, move in its sacred beat.
May it be so. Amen.