

# What Thanks Would Be Enough Thanks?

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## Meditation

On this Mother's Day, may we be mindful of all that has gives us life,  
that sustains our lives, that keeps us going...

Our mothers themselves...

Supportive family and friends...

Each breath...

Food of the earth... water springing from the earth...

Our mother the earth...

The mysterious source of all –

goddess, god, the nameless life-giver and sustainer...

With each breath, in each moment,

may we be mindful of and grateful for all that has given us life,  
that sustains our lives, that keeps us going...

## Sermon

I, like poet Billy Collins (as he notes in his poem “The Lanyard”), attended a summer camp near the shore of a deep lake in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York.

I, like poet Billy Collins, wove at least one lanyard from narrow strips of plastic.

And I, like poet Billy Collins, quite likely gave my lanyard to my mother.

Did I, however, believe, as the poet imagines his boyhood self believed, that this gift of a lanyard made us – my mother and me – “even” for all that my mother had given to me, paraphrasing the poet: thousands of meals, a good education, healing medicine and cool face cloths in the sickroom, and of course life itself – legs and arms, eyes and ears, mind and heart?

I don't know. And Billy Collins may not really know either. But he does catch our attention. He does get us pondering for ourselves (he gets me pondering anyway) the nature of the gift of life, and the question of how or if or whether we can repay our mother or anyone else or the gods and goddesses for this gift...

Collins' poem is, whatever else it does, is arresting in its poignant reminder of all that a child so naturally takes for granted – life itself after all, and all that a mother (a father too of course) has made possible for the child.

A child simply cannot understand and is not meant to understand all this.

An adult does though, or ought too. And then we well might wonder. Now what? We have been given so much – beyond any counting or accounting. How can we possibly repay the gift?

In his poem, Billy Collins notes “the archaic truth / that you can never repay your mother.” But I wonder.... We *can't* repay our mothers? I'm not so sure. Maybe it's not a question of *whether* we can repay our mothers or not, but in what currency. Maybe *not* in the currency of lanyards. Maybe *not* even in the currency of words, thank yous, Mother's Day cards or flowers. (Which is not to say we ought not to give the lanyards, the words, the cards, the flowers. But it *is* to suggest that full repayment may well be in different currency.

What am I getting at? (Aside from love... of course love... lanyard, cards, flowers, chocolate... given with *love*.) But what else?

Oddly, a challenging, counterintuitive passage from the Gospel of Luke 14:25-26, suggest, to me anyway, a different currency of repayment:

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

Upon first reading we might quite understandably be inclined to scrap this passage altogether. Why would we follow a man or a message or a whole religion that required us to *hate* our mother, our father, sisters and brothers, even to hate our very lives?

I, for one, will not sign up for that one.

So if I'm going to get anything from these words attributed to Jesus, I've got to go to some symbolic or deep psychological level.

Now, to begin with. Jesus was a Jew. He knew the Commandments. One of which is to *honor* your mother and father. Hating sure doesn't sound like any kind of honoring. So why would this good Jewish boy say we should *hate* our parents?

Well, we need to remember that Jesus had a flair for the dramatic, for the exaggerated phrase or story to make a point, to get our attention.

Okay, then, he has our attention. But still, what might be his point? Can you in some strange way hate and honor at the same time? Can you honor by hating? It sounds quite impossible.

But here is one way I can make some sense of it:

Life is not meant simply to replicate itself ad infinitum. We are not meant to be clones of our parents. Life, even at the bare biological level, is a creative, ever-changing process. After all, to make a new human life (at least up till now...) two different sets of genes have to come together in order to make, to create, something new, something never before seen in the world.

So I begin to see that that dramatic word “hate” might simply mean that we are not meant to slavishly or unconsciously imitate our mothers and our fathers. Maybe, after getting our attention, Jesus is simply telling us that we are meant to become

ourselves, like a seed becoming a flower, blossoming and blooming each in our own way and each in our own way in service to Life.

So this doesn't mean that we need literally and evermore to turn our backs altogether on our mothers and fathers. Young people do seem to do this at that natural stage of human development that we colloquially call adolescent rebellion. Yet whether an adolescent is dramatically rebellious, or more gently rebellious, what this is about is just a young person struggling to become who she is, who he is – by putting aside at least for a time, even rebelling against, at least for a time, the model of the parent, the advice of the parent.

But then, as we grow beyond adolescence most of us discover that living into our own lives is a sort of balancing act. Not turning away from our parents altogether. For maybe, we discover, just maybe... that some of our mother's advice and counsel was actually pretty good advice and counsel! Maybe some of our mother's example was a pretty good example from which to learn!

Maybe, when all is said and done, we can find ways of integrating all we have learned from our parents, all the ways in which they have influenced us, into our own unique creative growing and flowering.

Maybe, in the end, as a human being it is only out of the soil of our mothers' and fathers' genetic gift and advice and influence that we can then manifest our own unique gifts and spirits.

So, a shorthand way of putting all this would be to say that *we honor and thank our mothers in the currency of our lives: by being the best human beings we can be*, however imperfectly using our unique gifts just as our mothers and fathers uniquely used theirs. Learning from them. But becoming ourselves.

My mother, for example lived and lives the words of wisdom she frequently quotes: Be kind.

We saw and still see her kindness to friends. We saw her kindness through her various volunteer efforts, tutoring and literacy work. I could make a long list. I expect that my brothers and I simply absorbed all this as we grew up; but probably for a long time as we grew up and maybe for too long afterwards took the gift for granted, just as we (like the poet) took the gift of life itself for granted.

Then, for me anyway, a time came – I was already in my thirties, you'd think I'd have figured this much out by then – when all the ways in which my mother had influenced me through words and example suddenly dawned on me (I remember the day, even the moment of this what should have been obvious epiphany) and I realized that a huge part of who I had become was due to her. Of course! (How often do we miss seeing what is right in front of us...)

And as I became more *conscious* of this huge influence, I also knew – as you all know – that it is the task of my life (as it is for all of us) to discover how *I* can best manifest the spirit of life: the higher calling if you will, the “follow me” of Jesus' message. For I choose to interpret his message to mean that we are to strive to follow the deepest calling of love, the deepest calling of life's spirit of compassion and creativity – not a selfish “my way” but a paradoxically selfless “my way – *my* way (not my mother's or father's or anyone else's) through my unique gifts and passions to follow this deep call of life. To serve life. To help others. To be as kind and compassionate as I can be.

And – noting that today is not only Mother’s Day but also our New Members Sunday, we can keep in mind that our Old Ship Church and our Unitarian Universalist faith (mother church, mother faith?) are here to support us, hold us, nourish us, encourage and challenge us, as we strive to heed these deepest callings of our lives, the universal call of life and love, the call for the seed that was present at our births to flower into our lives of creativity and service.

How do we thank our mothers? How do we honor our mothers – whether they are still with us or whether they have passed from this world?

A lanyard clearly isn’t enough. No *thing* is enough. Only our lives are enough.

In the end, it is a simple message for Mother’s Day:

Our lives having been freely given to us, may we freely give life to others – whether as parents ourselves, and also in so many other ways – through our service, through our authentic being, through our unique shining of the universal light of life and love, shining through our work, through our daily kindness, through our lives...

*That* thanks, *that* living currency... would be enough thanks, and thanks overflowing.

So may it be.