

*Step by Step*  
*Stepping Stone Sunday and Mother's Day*  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo  
Sunday, May 13, 2012  
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

I have been discovering that spring is an amazing time here in Buffalo, and at this church. The skies are a deep, penetrating blue, crossed at high speed by fluffy white clouds, the budding and flowering and chirping and singing are all around us, the church gardens are graceful and lovely, the church members are graceful and lovely, and the world feels new, reborn. And in the spring, just like the birds and flowers emerging from wherever they all spent the winter, the young people of the church emerge from their classrooms to take their place up here before us, with their Coming of Age Credos, their youth group songs and stories, the fourth grade stepping stones, and next week, the graduating seniors crossing over the metaphorical bridge into adulthood. And in the middle of it all, Mother's Day. How completely perfect.

When I think of the rising energy of spring, when I think of the power of the mother energy, I don't think about the Hallmark card holiday or the bouquets of pink roses in the grocery store. I think of the roundness of the earth, the generative potential of the darkness, the strength of the warrior, the patience of the educator, the wisdom of the guide -- I think of the deep power of the feminine principle, drawing us deeper and wider, bringing us step by step into the place, the purpose, the person we are meant to be.

In Taoist teachings, there are two basic forces in the world, the feminine or yin principle, and the masculine or yang principle, constantly complementing and completing each other, weaving the world through the interplay of their power. Yang is the bright, high-energy power, the sun, the bright, the rising, the progressing, literally meaning the sunny side of the hill. Yin, the feminine principle, is the dark, the yielding, the grounding and shielding, the quiet presence and power of the shadow side of the hill. Yang is sky, yin is earth. Yang is the weapon, yin is the womb. Both are positive, both are necessary, and if you know the Taoist diagram of the bright and dark curved halves of a circle, you will remember that each holds a small piece of the other in its center. They are not separate, but two aspects of a dynamic, living whole.

And so I reflect upon the yin energy of spring, the resilience of the awakening earth, the deep places from which life emerges, the mother spirit rising to draw us close in comfort, to draw us forward in possibility. I remember the roundness of my mother's arms as she held and rocked me in the night when I was small and not feeling well. And the roundness of my own arms, cradling the softness of my young son in the middle of the night through yet another ear infection or fever, rocking and singing, roundness of love. The mother energy of comfort, patience, safety.

And yet, there is more to the feminine principle. When I think of the warrior power of the mother energy, a term that comes to my mind is "fierce love," the love that will stop at

nothing to accomplish what it is called to do. The American celebration of Mother's Day began, not to honor mothers, but to mobilize them. Julia Ward Howe, horrified by the carnage of the Civil War, issued a mother's day proclamation in 1870, that called on women with words of exhortation:

*Arise, then, women of this day!*

*Arise all women who have hearts,*

*Whether your baptism be that of water or of tears*

*Say firmly:*

*"We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,*

*Our husbands shall not come to us reeking of carnage,*

*For caresses and applause.*

*Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn*

*All that we have been able to teach them of*

*charity, mercy and patience.*

*"We women of one country*

*Will be too tender of those of another country*

*To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."*

*From the bosom of the 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."*

One does not have to be a parent to engage in the fierce passion of the feminine principle, but I will admit that before I had a child, I did not really understand so deeply why someone would arise against violence, or even run into a burning building to save someone else. Once I was a mother, I knew. The mother energy can express as fierce love, protective, even combative, the power of the caring for another person, caring for the world. The power to do whatever it takes, the drive of the birth contraction, the will and focus to accomplish the impossible. Mother love is also fierce love.

Mother energy, nurturing love, fierce love, is not about sex or gender. It is not about being a female parent – it is part of any parenting, nurturing role, whether we are talking about a biological parent, an adoptive parent, or a volunteer who steps into the developmental nurturing role of “parent” to anyone of any age. It does not even have to be a person, it can be a creature of another species, or even an organization. It is the energy of love that is deep and round and generative and protective; it is the energy of love that educates and draws forth wisdom from our deep places, that encourages and supports our children and our adults as they cross the stepping stones into their faith identity, as they seek within themselves to articulate a credo, drawing them into maturity and across the bridge into a more mature faith perspective.

This church is a fount of that mother energy of the yin principle, supporting us all, from the infant in the nursery to the wise elder who leads the church. The mother energy draws us

onward, step by step, to develop our own resources to live our faithful life in the world, to learn what we may offer in the transformation and healing of the world, and how we may best bring it forward, to be part of this caring network of supportive community, this collective warrior power for justice in the world.

And at the same time, it is vital that we remember that motherhood is not always a safe place for women in this world. Today we also celebrate the Rachel Sabbath, an international interfaith celebration named for Rachel, the wife of Jacob in the Book of Genesis, who died giving birth to Benjamin. This is a day of prayer for the 1500 women around the world who die each day in childbirth or of the complications of pregnancy, and for those millions more whose children die in infancy, or fail to thrive, because these parents are in poverty and isolation, because these parents cannot provide for the children they have. We lift up our prayers as well for those parents who lose their children to violence, to the drug trade, to the ravages of war, to famine, to exploitive industries in the fields and mines and factories around the world. There are so many lives in which possibility is cut short, in which the fierce nurturing love of parenthood is not enough to keep the children safe, in which the forces of hatred and greed, power turned to harm, overwhelm the love.

On this day, we pray for a world in which pregnancy and childbirth are safe, where every child is wanted, where every home and community is a safe place to grow up; a world in which all women and mothers and parents of any gender have the means to plan their families so that every birth may be anticipated with joy, a world in which every mother, every parent, may be healthy, and where every family may have the resources to thrive and flourish. We celebrate all the many ways that people create families and become parents in our communities. For all women, for all parents, for all those born into this world, we lift up a blessing and hold them in love.

On this Mother's Day, we call for a commitment to honor the deep and universal feminine principle that brings forth life from the fertile darkness, that we may celebrate every day as a day of love for the giving and receiving of life. On this Mother's Day, may we pledge to do what we can to give the gift of life, to do what we can so that every child, every person, may thrive and grow into his or her full potential. On this Mother's Day, may we celebrate love, and may love guide us always as we turn our energy toward fulfilling the promise of universal love in this world. So may it be, and amen.

Sources:

*Rachel Sabbath* retrieved 5/11/12 from <http://www.religiousinstitute.org/rachel-sabbath-initiative-resources>

*Taoism Yin and Yang* retrieved 5/11/12 from <http://taopage.org/yinyang.html>

*Mother's Day* retrieved 5-13-12 from <http://www.mothersdaycentral.com/about-mothersday/history/>