

Prayer Flags for a Mom

Fourteen months ago my partner Darin's mother died. She died under the most tragic and heartbreaking circumstances. It is so painful to think about her death. Darin and his mom were very tight. Grieving has been vigorous and intense.

Her most personal and intimate possessions now fill our basement and garage; just as the void of her absence continues to fill our days. When Darin returned to California this past January, he was once again surrounded by the objects that symbolize that void. He decided to put them to an honorable and beneficial use.

He created an artistic memorial to his mother. He took all of her purses and bound them together by their handle straps to create a 90-foot long "kinetic sculpture" that he called Prayer Flags for a Mom. It was on exhibit last weekend on the University of California at Berkeley campus. Many people viewed it.

Some friends and family saw the work as a memorial to Darin's mom, but many others found in it memories or depictions of their

own moms. We had a blank journal book and we invited people to write a prayer or message or meditation, to or for their mothers, and to place it in one of the prayer flag purses, that were blowing in the breezes that day.

We never looked at any of the writings but we knew from what some people told us and from how others were writing that, for many, this was not necessarily a Hallmark moment. We knew from some of our friends' stories that what they might have said or felt about their memories or experiences with their mothers there were not all going to be all warm and fuzzy.

I think for all of us it seems that as often as we hear about wonderful mother/child or parent/child relationships we hear about others that are painful, horrible or even unspeakable. Yet no one of us can escape that we were born of a mother. We might know and love her or know and not love her, or we may not know her and not even know whether we love her or not. We may not even care one way or the other.

Mother's Day is complex and it is not easy for a good number of us; and for a good number of reasons. We know how to remember mothers who love and nurture and make us feel like we are the

most important person in the world. And it is right and proper that we honor and remember them. But how do we remember those mothers who did not, and those who mother without having given birth, and those who long to mother and are unable?

Rev. Katie Lee Crane, of First Parish in Sudbury, says,

There are no cards on the rack for the women who gave up children for adoption, never to see them again. No cards for women who faced the painful and difficult choice to end a pregnancy. No cards for women who desperately want to conceive and bear children and cannot. No cards for women who have lost children of any age or for the women whose children have abandoned them in anger. There is little consolation for them on a day so full of “motherhood and apple pie.”¹

Well, I like to think of Darin’s prayer flags as those “cards.” They quite literally held some of the mystery, the complexity, the painfulness and the joy that can characterize motherhood’s many forms and textures.

I think of my first partner Scott’s mother, from here in the greater Boston area. Scott and I lived together in San Francisco for many

¹ <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2003-05.html>

years. While he was visiting New York City he became gravely ill with Pneumocystis and was hospitalized for a long time there.

When he was released from the hospital he was much too sick to fly back to California so his parents brought him back here, to his childhood home to recuperate. But all he really wanted for the remainder of his short life was to return to San Francisco, the only place he had ever loved and felt good about himself; and to be able to die there, with our friends, and me.

His mother and father did everything they could to get him to change his mind, but he could not or would not. So a few months later, Scott and I drove out of his parents' driveway – I will never forget the sight, in my rearview mirror, of his mother standing at the doorway sobbing and shaking, knowing she would never see her only son again. So many people – so many other mothers – said to us, condemningly, “What kind of mother would ever let her son go off somewhere far away to die without her?” What kind of mother indeed.

With our faith, we bless the mother whose love is strong enough to let go.

A middle-aged man at the art exhibit told of his mother's continuing inability to accept him as a gay man. He knows so many other gay folk with accepting mothers and families so he refuses to abandon hope that his mom might someday come around. He saw in the prayer flags a way to manifest his hope, no matter how remote it might be.

In response, there are the stories of those mothers who mightily struggle with their own prejudices and orthodox worldviews to eventually allow the light of love to breakthrough. Sometimes that light of love breaks through in a way that allows the child to offer back to the mother, what the mother cannot offer in return.

With our faith, we bless the mother for whom the light of love has yet to breakthrough.

And some more from Katie Lee Crane, "I have two mothers to remember: my adoptive mother (the one I knew and lost) and my birth mother (the one I lost and never knew)." A friend who is in the same position as Katie says "I only have one mother and she is my hero, the one who has stood with me through it all." He insists that all of his energy, interest and love goes only to the mother who has raised him.

With our faith, we bless the mother for whom adoption brings great pain. With our faith, we bless the child for whom it is the same.

Then I think of the many different mothers for whom I served as a chaplain at a state mental hospital incarceration facility in California. And then, of course, I think of those who had mothered them. They gave the gift of life to their children but often with a legacy of great turmoil. Some even took the lives of those they had created and deeply loved. And they, too, are still mothers.

With our faith that commands us to see the inherent worth in all, we bless the mother for whom motherhood was terror. With our faith, we bless those who suffered that terror.

I have an aunt who died recently, after living for almost 40 years as a military widow and single mother of four. My aunt was one of 13 kids in a very close Irish Catholic family, in which most the adult children settled within a few miles of the place of their birth. But she married a military man, so she never lived near her family as an adult. When her husband died, while she was in her early

30s with four small children – she was universally criticized and condemned for not returning “home” to raise her kids.

But to hear my cousin eulogize her mother last month, we learned that Aunt Betty stayed where she was when Uncle Jack died because she refused to snatch even one more familiar and secure comfort away from her small children right after their dear father had died.

With our faith we bless the mother for whom the call to nurture supersedes all other calls.

There is another mother that I carry so dearly in my heart. She is a mother who made the decision to provide for her child by entrusting and making a sacred gift of her to another family. Now I don't know what circumstances brought about her decision or how voluntary or involuntary it was. All I know is that seven years ago, in Youngzhou, in the mountainous area of Hunan Province, China, a mother committed a felony to give her daughter the best life that mother could possibly imagine.

Back then – I don't know if it still is now – it was a felony for a woman to abandon a child, even for adoption. I was there six

years ago to receive the most precious and beautiful one-year old baby girl. With six other adoptive families we assembled in the provincial government offices to receive the babies' medical files, citizenship and adoption papers. For each child, the government official read in English the circumstances by which the child came to be a ward of the state. Because leaving a child for adoption was a crime, it was very difficult to hear some of these stories and to know that none of these children would ever know the actual dates of their birth.

Then came the file for my little niece Tessie. The government official just grimaced and flipped back and forth through the file - her dad and I trying to not visibly freak out - until he pulled out this tiny slip of red paper from an envelope and a huge smile broke over his face. Tessie's mom had left her at the very front door to the orphanage, with this little piece of red paper pinned to her blanket. On it was written in the tiniest but neatest Chinese characters the date and time of Tessie's birth, a fact which is so very important in Chinese culture. Since the slip of paper was red - for good luck - the orphanage folks named her Dan [don], red, in the local dialect. Tessie's middle name is now Dan, but I like to pronounce it Dan.

With our faith we bless the mother who loves and provides even through her absence.

You know I could go on and on with mother stories; some beautiful, some devastating. Yet as I said earlier, we all share in the experience of being born of a mother. These mothers, of every stripe and every variety have given us life. And life calls upon us – especially as Unitarian Universalists - to redeem itself through acts of love. Love allows us to redeem all. We might not know how or why they did it, but they created us and it is up to **US – it is up to us** – to redeem our experiences and relationships with our mothers through **OUR** love. Be that love of mother or love of self.

Lest anyone believe that my mother is not in this sermon, know that her love, compassion and sense of justice is the very essence of the words I have spoken today.

The greatest possible gift of love is letting go. Let us love ourselves and those around enough to let love be our redemption.

I close with this invocation from Starhawk

Nameless One of many names

