

What Would Mum Say?

Mothers' Day

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Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship

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Heidi tells me that you don't really spell it MUM here, but that's what my ear hears when you speak of your mothers, and so I titled the service thusly. Take it as homage to the Queen's mother, take it as a reminder of that which is most proper and goodly, or take it as yet another of my misinformed American bumbings. Whatever. I just find it charming to say 'Mum.'

I remember an evening long ago when my 'mum' asked me to go outside to ask my older brother (who was shooting baskets) if he would like to come in to do the dishes. This was my mother's way. She rarely asked or ordered anything directly, but preferred to rely on our malleable consciences to guide our behaviour. But that night, my brother, who was generally compliant, told me to tell her no, that he would not like to. It was really unfair to have put me in this triangle, and I felt really stuck. I had no power to get my brother to obey, and what on earth would mum say if I went back inside and told her that my brother had said no. I was in a moral dilemma...one that my young heart couldn't resolve. I spent a seemingly endless time in adolescent angst until finally, my brother apparently heard that little internal mother's voice, did what was expected of him and went in to do the dishes.

I wonder about that little voice. Traditionally mothers are the ones who teach us manners...reminding us to keep our elbows off the table, to say please and thank you, to address our elders with respect, not to stare, to treat others kindly. It was under my mum's watchful (or evil) eye that I learned how to sit still in a pew. She didn't have to say anything, or to touch me...She'd be sitting in the choir loft, and we 'Pastor's kids' would be sitting all in a row near the front. If I was fidgeting or goofing off, she'd catch my eye, and just by looking at me (and my brothers and sisters,) I could hear that voice. Now mind you, it wasn't always only my mother's influence...sometimes my father would stop in the middle of whatever he was saying and give us that shame look from the pulpit. We clearly heard him.

At the last Pie in the Sky discussion, something was said that reminded me of Women in Black, a worldwide organization begun in Israel. Each Friday at noon, women dress in black and stand silently on busy street corners, holding signs and banners protesting war and violence. Another of their practices is to stand quietly watching at the checkpoints between Israel and the West Bank where Palestinians are routinely harassed and abused by the young Israeli soldiers (usually 18-20 years old) who are responsible for monitoring and controlling the border. Women in Black have found that just the presence of women, women who are old enough to be the soldiers' mothers, changes and softens their behavior. Perhaps before they act, a little voice goes off in their heads, asking, What would Mum say?

Indeed. What would Mum say? As we have already heard today through song and word, the voice of a mother potentially takes many forms and carries diverse messages. In the story of The Runaway Bunny we heard about a little rabbit who wanted to run away from home, to find adventure, or perhaps to get away from expectations and his responsibilities. But the mother rabbit that she will always do whatever it takes to be with him. He could not escape her loving presence. It's a comforting, nurturing message, one that befits perhaps the perfect, if a bit overbearing, mother. Many of us didn't receive this kind of mothering, but we all know that the early imprints of mother messages (by anyone and of whatever quality) continue to be present with us as we grow older.

What would Mum say? Mothers play a key role in the family group, and the voice of mum goes on playing a key role in all of our future groups. I'd like to talk today about what our mums (or maybe more generally, the voice of love) would say about how we act in our relationships. What does that voice say that can guide us in practical, everyday interactions and decisions? Can we hear a voice that might help us to counteract the default position in our culture of individualism and competition? Can we be reminded of our manners?

I read a little book this week by Lynn Truss called *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today*¹...in which she analyzes six areas where our dealings with strangers seem day by day to be getting more unpleasant and inhuman. Her thesis is these bad manners are so

¹ Truss, Lynn, *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door* (Gotham Books: New York, 2005)

prevalent that it is cause for one to just stay home and bolt the door. Truss lists these inexcusable lapses in manners in six chapters:

1. Was that so hard to say? On the absence of those little words that mean so much...words like thank you, please, excuse me, I'm sorry.
2. Why am I the one doing this? On meeting each other half way, and on the dearth of friendly customer service.
3. My bubble, my rules. On living in virtual private bubbles when we are in public and the constant invasion of our privacy when we are at home.
4. The Universal Eff-Off reflex. On vulgarity and competitive self-interest.
5. Booing the judges. On the lack of respect for authority, and
6. Someone else will clean it up. On the obsolescence of any idea that we have a relationship with something bigger than ourselves.

Though humorous, hers is a rather depressing outlook, one that could indeed send us scurrying home to bolt the door. But that's not a solution; it doesn't work to change it, so what should we do? Many would say the answer lies in restoring, or remembering, good manners and civility. Immanuel Kant thought that while manners are not virtue itself, they are a means of developing virtue.² In other words, while we are not always inclined to make the virtuous choice, we can choose to use polite manners. And as we repeat civil behaviour, it forms patterns and ultimately creates that internal 'voice of mum.' So while my brother had to 'test out' alternative behaviour by refusing to do his chores, he ultimately obeyed the voice of good manners and responsibility. I believe that he still hears that voice today. It became his default position.

In his book *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations*,³ consultant Gil Rendle speaks of a behavioural default position. I won't go into the details here (I'd be happy to lend the book to anyone) but he makes a good case for cycles of values and behavior within cultures. He claims that we are currently in an 'unraveling phase,' marked by weakened civil habits and an individualism that seeks to win, without concern for others.⁴ Rendle's premise is that without something or someone or some voice to lead us in another direction, we tend to default to the cultural norm, which right now, unfortunately, is that unraveling of manners described by Lynn Truss. We become the ones who don't say please and thank you, who behave as if we exist in a bubble

² Truss, 14

³ Rendle, Gilbert R., *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* (Alban Institute, 1999)

⁴ Rendle, 17.

where we can make our own rules. Without clear messages to the contrary, we easily become the ones without a concept that we are part of something much larger than ourselves.

Rendle describes how people used to travel in groups, on public transportation together, and had to learn how to get along in close proximity. So, they purchased guides to proper behavior, such as *Politeness on Railroads* and tried to follow its rules. One of these rules was “Whispering, loud talking, immoderate laughing, and singing should not be indulged by any one passenger.” It was an understanding, born out of respect, that those riding were in it together, and that any behaviour should take into account the good of all. It was a way of seeing oneself as part of a group, and therefore, group behavior was necessary.⁵

But today we travel mostly in automobiles, alone, which lends itself more readily to the “my bubble, my rules” kind of behavior. As we increasingly see ourselves as isolated individuals, we practice civil behavior less and less. Yale professor Stephen Carter defines civility as “the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together,”⁶ but I fail to see why anyone would choose to make those sacrifices without the understanding that we are in this together. How can we burst the illusion of traveling alone? For indeed, it is an illusion.

My concern, of course, is how we act in the world, because I believe that what we do, in small and large ways, matters. Manners have a moral content, necessary when we see ourselves in relationship. And, of course, I am also concerned with how we treat one another within this community. Relationships are the currency of any congregation, and without strong and respectful relationships, true community cannot survive. LUF is in a time of eminent change, as the Fellowship examines options for its future. Change creates anxiety, fear that we will be displaced or upset, and in this state, we tend to behave badly.

I wasn't here to witness this, but I have been led to understand that during recent times of big decisions (one dealing with a decision about whether or not to continue a ministry and the other a decision about whether or not to buy a building,) you behaved badly one with another. Sure, it happens. It's human. It's even understandable. But we can do better than that. Rendle

⁵ Rendle, 28.

⁶ Rendle, 29.

would say that in such situations we default to the cultural norm (that of unraveling values) without paying attention to the fact that we are here to be in holy relationship with one another. We, in fact, are riding on a train together, and if we are to get anywhere, we need to be willing to coexist in a spirit of love and respect, especially if we expect to make any potentially contentious decisions or big changes.

Both Rendle and Truss refer, in their books, to Lord Moulton's speech on "Law and Manners" in which he divided human behavior into three domains.⁷ The first is the domain of law, where our actions are determined by laws that must be obeyed. At the other extreme is the domain of free choice, which includes all those actions where we claim complete freedom. In-between, Lord Moulton identified a domain in which our action is not determined by law but where we also aren't free to behave in any way we choose. This he called "the domain of obedience to the unenforceable;" this area is the domain of manners.⁸

I find this a particularly interesting proposal for UUs to consider. We are founded upon the right of freedom of religion and freedom of thought. We have perhaps been particularly susceptible to living in that domain where we have the freedom to act or believe in any way that we choose. We get caught up in debating the polarities of law and freedom and we ignore the more challenging grey area in the middle, where we have to determine the right thing to do, where the individual exists in community, the space between conformity and personal freedom, where we must freely choose to exercise a certain discipline that benefits more than just ourselves. I believe that this intersection is where being part of this community can help us to change the world. This is where we understand that freedom comes with responsibility and good governance comes with respect for all. This is where we simultaneously hold the inherent worth and dignity of each individual alongside the use of a democratic process that serves the common good. This is where our faith should help us. Because if not here, if not in religious community, where can we expect to find antidotes for the meanness and selfishness in our society? This is where, when the bunny meets the road, we need to listen to that 'mother's voice' for direction.

⁷ Rendle, 31; Truss, 13

⁸ Rendle, 31

And just what is the common good as far as manners are concerned? Truss describes manners as something of a balancing of the books...that for every good deed there is a proportionate acknowledgement which repays the giver, and that the aim is to emerge with no one in the red.⁹ Manners are certainly not about agreement, but about a true honoring of our differences, of playing fairly. Yet it's not about simply honouring differences and disagreements, but about practicing manners and civil behaviour through and beyond those disagreements, as we live together toward beloved community.¹⁰

I'd like to suggest that we consciously, intentionally, work toward changing our default behaviour, that we create a covenant with one another that challenges us to a radically different interpersonal behaviour than what we experience in the world, one that dares us to actually live our values. Such a covenant is something that we'll need to create together. It is something that will give us a framework to depend upon when we don't understand one another and when we don't agree. Such a covenant would be a promise to each other, made with an intention to be kept. I believe that we should have this in place before trying to make other big decisions together. Not only would it make those decisions possible, such a covenant would provide each of us with an opportunity to practice faithful behaviours with one another, and would allow us to depend on each other to obey the unenforceable. Such a covenant would require that we would, in everything, do to others as we would have them do to us¹¹, for the simple reason that it is the right thing to do.

We could certainly consult Miss Manners, who has recently published an 800 page guide to *Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*.¹² But that's not really our style...I'm more inclined to think our kind of advice might come from Robert Fulghum's book, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten."¹³ I imagine his list to be very similar to one that your mother, or some idealized version of mother, would make. It also might also serve as a model for a behavioural covenant in this Fellowship. He says:

- Share everything

⁹ Truss, 21

¹⁰ Rendle, xvii

¹¹ Matthew 7:12

¹² Martin, Judith, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2005)

¹³ Fulghum, Robert, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things* (Ivy Books: New York, 1986)

- Play fair
- Don't hit people
- Put things back where you found them
- Clean up your mess
- Don't take things that aren't yours
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody
- Wash your hands before you eat
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life – learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
- Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup – they all die. So do we.
- And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned – the biggest of all – LOOK.

Fulghum says that everything we need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living. We could take any one of those things and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to our life in this community. We're already pretty good at having milk and cookies together. Most of us put things back where we found them and clean up our own messes. We know how to share joys and concerns, but not always how to share time and listening and responsibility. We might not hit one another, but we're not always careful about not using words that can break hearts.

Miss Manners believes that it is misguided to believe that home (or church) is a place where you can relax because you needn't bother to be polite. Home, she says, should be a place where you can relax because you know that there, unlike the rest of the world, no one will be impolite to you.¹⁴ Even if we're not always polite here at this church home, at least we should be able to trust that we promise to do better, that we are each willing to work toward honest, open, non-judgmental, and loving relationships.

Mum, home, church...there is a quality shared by these three that suggests that place where you feel safe to love and be loved. We're in this together. The voice that is the vision of this

¹⁴ Martin, 251.

Fellowship, the promise of our liberal faith, has something to say to us. It reminds us each of our place as a part of this community, and gives us messages that guide our behaviour. Look. Listen. I bet you can hear it. What would mum say?