

The Tapestry of Care: Reframing Mother's Day

Rev. Arlin Roy —May 10, 2026

“To mother is not a biological imperative. It is a verb—a choice to nurture, to protect, and to witness another’s growth. It is the work of holding a heart until it is strong enough to beat on its own.”—Anonymous

When I walked into any drugstore this week, I was enveloped in a cotton-candy fog of pastel pink, glittery cursive, and sentiments of uncomplicated bliss. It felt like emotional sugar shock. Unless I looked very carefully, the sweet greeting cards expressed a simply benign desire to worship at the maternal knee. But for some of us, we know too much. Sometimes, our mothers were not uniformly attentive, loving, or helpful. We can, however, strive for depth of understanding. Our mothers were not simply great, perhaps, but they probably were not nurtured by a simply beneficial family in a simply beneficial world.

Today, we can have both deep gratitude for love received and a quiet ache for love we may feel is missing. Both can be true. We hold in great regard the dedication, exhaustion, triumph, hope, and/or helplessness of the parent. The phrase “children raising children” is only too accurate. Last weekend, as I held my 16-day old great grandson, I fell in love with him and my heart ached for his dedicated, sleep-starved, loving parents and my gratitude to them. And if you did not live with parents, could not have children, or chose not to, that does not exclude you from expressing your kindness to others, your service to the poor and oppressed, that is always crying out for attention—the very genesis of Mothers’ Day.

Mother's Day was forged in the aftermath of the Civil War. Ann Reeves Jarvis organized Mothers' Day Work Clubs" to improve sanitary conditions for all and bridge the divide between Union and Confederate families. Ann Reeves Jarvis's daughter, Anna Jarvis, later pushed for a national holiday as a day of **radical peacemaking**. It was a revolutionary call for women to use their social influence to end the carnage of war.

Sadly, that was a good idea that didn't make it to where I grew up in Nebraska, which saw the highest civilian-on-civilian violence of the Civil War period. My father's favorite hymn was "Battle Hymn of the Republic;" he was very proud of his several ancestors who had fought for the Union. When I was twelve, he fought the Klan with his lever-action Remington rifle. We had a gun in every room in case the Civil War erupted again. Radical peacemaking didn't make it to the grass roots. Very soon after Anna Jarvis apparently succeeded in installing Mothers' Day as a national holiday, the flower shop owners and greeting card printers traded that radical communal vision for a narrow consumerist focus. The broader public bought it. A critical change took place that was little noticed by the general public. The spelling by mother and daughter Jarvis indicated a plurality. Mothers'—with the apostrophe after the "s" indicating that it was about every mother joining together—was quickly replaced by the merely sentimental, singular placement of the apostrophe in front of the "s" indicating that your mother or my mother was to be honored, not that all mothers could unite to accomplish a noble goal. The founders of Mothers' Day intended it to be a day for public justice and mercy, not simply private sentiment.

For too many this is a day of feeling judged concerning womanhood, motherhood, or family success. Those whose mothers were absent, abusive, or simply unable to provide the love a growing child needs may feel that this is a conditional day of celebration. My own mother tried to instill in me the virtues of careful devotion to hard work in menial positions, where I was forced at the age of twelve to work long hours as a janitor and delivery person. That would have made me a reliable factory worker, since my grades suffered, but I rebelled. She didn't like it, but her mood softened. She was also very protective. When I applied for conscientious objector standing to the Selective Service board, she asked me what she should write to the board in support, despite my father not wanting me to do that. She wrote very effectively about her raising me to be peaceful, in a church with a strong pacifist heritage. When I attended a very expensive private college, she supported me all the way. She got a job as a cashier in a local diner.

Mothers, for their parts, have carried their own traumas and conflicts, their own struggles with financial and personal limitations. The intricate dynamics of need, expectation, and environmental limits contribute to a complex relationship. The idealized mother of unconditional love and selflessness is unrealistic, if attractive. The love that we feel, the yearning for connection, is also important to acknowledge. This dissonance can result in apprehension today, as the pressure to celebrate can feel insincere or forced. To heal this day—and ourselves—is an effort toward forgiveness of our mothers that may never be complete and forgiveness toward ourselves for still feeling wounded. It's complicated!

Therefore, I am redefining the holiday to celebrate not a singular anchor in a biological relationship, but including other caring figures, such as grandmothers, aunts, teachers or mentors who have provided support and guidance. And since we are an inclusive congregation that recognizes the principle of the inherent worth and dignity of all people, I am including uncles, grandfathers, and mentors at whatever level of need. As we redefine who we celebrate, we honor caregivers' experiences and complexities. This enables us to create new rituals or personal traditions whereby we can express feelings of gratitude and attachment authentically.

We create these new attachments in a social and economic context where the game is rigged; the context is not benign neutrality. One example of many is Sarah Smarsh's memoir entitled Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth, where she describes how she worked up from terrible, grinding rural Kansas poverty to become a tenured university professor with a fine house. The price she paid was not developing an intimate relationship with a loving partner and not having a child. Her memoir is addressed to the child she never had (and I quote):

To experience economic poverty in a country famous for its abundance is to live with constant reminders of what you don't have, like running a hot marathon next to a cool reservoir from which you're not allowed to drink. In the absence of certain securities, I had no choice but to go down, down, down, down, down to a taproot and then further down into places that material wealth is less likely to force you. There I often heard a voice. It was [the child I will never have], which is to say it was mine. . . .

You weren't my daughter, of course, but my highest self—less a guardian angel than my own power emanating from, necessarily disembodied from a body and a mind I had been told by society had little worth. . . .

This country has failed its children, failed its own claims about democracy and humanity. The American Dream, in particular, sometimes seems more like a ghost haunting our way of thinking than like a sacred contract worth signing toward some future.(Smarsh, Heartland, pg.281-288)

This may be a source of her strength as a teacher, in that she taught English and writing, and writing teachers need to have gone “down, down, down” themselves to bring out the authentic voices of their students. She is a caregiver, just not of her own biological child. She is a caregiver for all those women from her extended family who needed to tell of their painful experiences in that vast chasm between the official advice--“work hard, save, and you will get ahead”—versus the world of those who were blessed with affluence, legacy admission to prestigious colleges, legacy access to powerful social influencers, and legacy resources for security and hope. Sarah Smarsh wrote to speak for herself, but also to give voice to the mother, grandmothers, and aunts who could not speak for themselves, and thus to care for them. She grieved deeply upon realizing she would not have her own child, and who could read of her anguish without tears themselves, but also who could not celebrate her triumph that she honored the immense sacrifice her ancestors made for her welfare.

It is while keeping in mind that chasm between the poor and middle class vs. those privileged with great resources, that we need to appreciate Mothers'

Day, the millions of mothers loving their children. They love their children no less, for having modest means, or struggling to keep afloat during inflationary times, or being affluent. Almost all mothers do not want their children trained to kill. Whereas it was once mandatory for men ages 18 to 25 to register for the Selective Service System, registration has fallen to 81%. Starting this December, the government will automatically register names. This change is probably a prelude to a draft, since the United States seems to be perpetually at war.

Military experts and planners have been uneasy about armed services recruitment, relative to what they want. But automatic governmental registration does not change the size of the military, since only 75% of men ages 18 to 25 are suitable for the armed services. A re-energized draft system will not change that, but it will increase volunteering for the National Guard and ROTC at both the high school and college levels. The real point of a re-energized Selective Service is to teach more young men to be soldiers, to shoot and kill other humans, thus satisfying the MAGA focus on returning to bygone sex roles and relegating women to a subservient status. Mothers' Day has always opposed this. Mothers have always been terrified and wept when their sons have been drafted.

Consequently, consider that mothers have for many years been called upon to save their children from being taught to kill each other. Mothering, or—more widely considered—caring for others, happens in childhood by biological mothers but throughout the lifespan by teachers, mentors, spouses, partners, and simply good examples of what it means to love. May we carry

that forward in our own lives, trying to embody the spirit of peaceful acceptance across economic, geographic, and racial barriers.

I am looking for a way to acknowledge the “Mothers” (male and female) who have nurtured us at one point or another. One line of the Mothers’ Day Declaration stands out for me (and I quote):

”Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn

All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.”

I ask you, now, to close your eyes or focus softly on a point in front of you, breathe deeply, and recall a time when you saw someone enacting charity, mercy or patience . . .whether it was when you were a child, or even now as an adult—since we all continue to model for each other ways to be in the world. In the sharing time, tell the story as a way of marking that person’s contribution to your life, and as a way of passing on the teaching. Tell about it and why it touched you, or what you learned from being “taught” in this way.

Charity, mercy and patience is a kind of wisdom that we share with each other—not through dogma but through enactment, through experience. I have seen someone talk patiently and kindly to a person that I would otherwise find irritating but seeing that openness to this “irritating” person has reminded me that this is just someone who wants to be content and is doing the best they can. Or there are times when someone has been generous, patient, or giving to me, as I find my way through this cruel world, and this has helped me pass this on to others. (Judith Leipzig in a personal communication, gave me the essence of this exercise) Slowly return to this sanctuary, open your eyes,

and slowly re-connect to your fellow community members. Give thanks. So be it.