

Sermon The Lost Boy
The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough
May 10, 2015 Mother's Day

My niece graduated from college yesterday. I watched her claim her diploma, and the whole time I had this time-lapse photography running through my head. When she was born, her childhood dance recitals, having lunch with this lovely, grounded and sophisticated girl at a sidewalk café in Boston. She drives my sister nuts being super conscious of how our ignorant consumerism is affecting the well-being of the world. And my sister absolutely loves it. We marvel at the milestones our children achieve, and yet there is a little grief. Our children go from us. In body or in spirit, they leave us behind. I know, that's life. We go from our parents. Our parents go from us. It is the way of our culture that, barring ill fortune or because of it, we leave each other. Our children go away from us whether they're upstairs or across an ocean. They have ideas of their own, go to work or to college, have lives of their own, loves of their own and kids of their own. They dwell in the house of tomorrow. Humans have long childhoods, so parents have time to adjust. We glimpse little transformations from child to adult over the years until the future is made real. The adjustment is in how we treat our children and how we treat our parents. The perfect mother, like perfection itself, is a moving target. Motherhood doesn't mean the same thing all the time, and neither does childhood.

There is only one story of Jesus' childhood in the New Testament, and that's in the gospel of Luke. Luke's gospel is full of glimpses of things that are impending and inevitable, like scriptural sneak previews. We call them the "now/not yet." I know some of you are thinking – what's the big deal; I encounter the now/not yet every time I ask my kid to pick up his toys. But theologians mean something a bit different. They mean a bridge, a connection, between a child's present and the person he or she will become. This particular story is a bridge between Jesus's birth and his ministry. It's also a symbolic bridge between Judaism and Christianity and a glimpse of Jesus's "now/not yet" nature. He knows that his life is not for Nazareth, and in his head, he's already in Jerusalem. It's also a story about living in the "now/not yet," as a parent. Luke could simply have told a story about the *senex puer*: the wise and beautiful boy amazing his elders. Instead, most of the story is about Mary and Joseph's frantic search leading up to the great reveal. Jesus is not just any 12-year-old boy. They have their own frightening epiphany – a glimpse that this boy was not theirs; that he belonged to something bigger, and miles away, worlds away from home.

Put yourself in their place for a moment. The earliest listeners to the story would have. The Second Temple would have been familiar territory. They'd heard about it for generations. The Second Temple was a marvel of design. Herod had spent years restoring and expanding it. It was divided into a series of courts from the outer edge to the inner sanctum. These were graduated areas of proximity to God. They marked spaces for Gentiles, then women, then men, then priests. Jesus would have been in one of these courts, surrounded by a crowd. Mary and Joseph must have been exhausted and afraid of the worst. Maybe they heard his voice before they saw him. Maybe they stopped by a railing to catch their breath and to listen. Maybe they were relieved and furious. He was conversing with elders as if he had already mastered his studies. How dare he? "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." How could he not, says Luke. "Why were you searching for me?" Jesus asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" The three of them have this exchange that recognizes a little bit of our future is always in our present. And to make that future happen, we have to let go of the present. Of course, it's all in the timing. Did Mother Mary, meek and mild, have to stop scolding him and let her son go then and there? No. He came back home, obedient and biding his time until it was right to leave. Jesus embodied the now/not yet.

Let go of me, he said, as we all say. All parents must let their children go – just as all children must let go of their parents in some way, shape or form. Not all of us will be able to leave home, but we are not clones. We are born unique. Parents do not raise children to be copies of themselves. They raise children who can be self-reliant, self-sufficient, compassionate and ethical adults in the world they'll inherit, and the world they'll make better than what we have now. We parents need to be the place where children can learn to go far from us and thrive. They'll do this slowly, through their own trials, in their own time. But they are always a little outside of our time; both here with us and in a future without us. The trick is to see that glimpse of the now/not yet before we can start letting go.

Sometimes it's better that we don't. It's all in the timing, remember. This month's image of the number one mom is Toya Graham, who is neither meek nor mild. She's the unemployed single mom from Baltimore who marched over to the Mall to get her son away from the violence and saw him with a brick in his hand. She lost it and walloped him, yelling at him to drop it, saying 'You weren't brought up like this.' 16-year-old Michael said he understood that his mother was looking out for him. "She didn't want me to get in trouble (with the) law." She didn't want him to be another victim. She didn't want to lose him and he didn't want to be lost.

Too many of our children, black, white, latino, are being lost every day. Our children are in peril. Their physical abilities, and mental abilities and emotional abilities and judgment don't grow at the same speed. And while they're moving two steps forward and one step back, our children are exposed to a barrage of media, compulsion, racism and everyday cruelty. They can and do lose their way. They can and are taken from us. So sometimes it's better that we don't let go. These can be hard times to send a child out into the world. I know it and so do you. We want them to survive. But our ultimate concern is not to keep children safe and happy; it is to help them cope, and even thrive in the world in which they'll live. This is why we celebrate motherhood – not because it is ideal but because it is so hard and so courageous. Children must take risks, and tolerate unhappiness and failure, and learn to handle it all. Those moments when they handle it all are the moments we glimpse the “now/not yet” in our children. Life is a perpetual balance between experimentation and self-discipline and mothers have to manage the experience for all of us. Eventually, children understand that our ultimate concern in life is not to make parents happy, but to change the wide world, or their small part in it, into a better place.

This is where our faith community can act. Our hope is that we can equip our children to help make the world a better place than what we have now. We can surround them with friendship, camaraderie and affection and above all, purpose. As a community, we can see and affirm the “now/not yet” in each other's children. As parents we can let them drive us crazy and love them beyond measure. With every time we let go of what we were, we make possible what we will become. My niece will change the world and I can't wait.

Once upon a time we were

Now we are

And some day (Hallelujah!) we shall surely become

Amen

Amen (excerpt “Some Day” by Margaret Williams Braxton, *Been the Storm So Long: A Meditation Manual*, Mark Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James, co-Editors, Skinner House Books)