

## **“TURNING AWAY FROM EDEN”**

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### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

The 1983 astronaut movie made from Tom Wolfe’s book, The Right Stuff, opens with some footage of a fighter plane landing on an aircraft carrier. Alan Shepard, later chosen as one of the first seven astronauts for NASA’s Mercury space program, is the pilot. The camera angle is from inside the cockpit. The carrier is moving away from the approaching plane at top speed, in order to reduce the effective landing speed of the jet. The surrounding seas are choppy, causing the deck to pitch and roll. Gusty winds are making the airplane sway and dish back and forth, complicating the final approach.

It is a perfect visual metaphor for motherhood.

Picture a young mother-aspirant at a recruiting center. Suspend your disbelief for a moment and assume the recruiter, unlike most recruiters, gives the mother-aspirant an unvarnished rendering of ‘the mission’. “You will bear and rear this child,” he begins, “without formal training of any kind – other than the example set by your own mother and possibly a few others, who may not have had any idea what they were doing. The job will require a continuous modulation of judgments between strict and permissive, holding too close and letting go too soon. Sometimes the consequences of imprecision in such modulations will be severe, since mothering, like the aerodynamics of flight, can be extremely intolerant of small mistakes.”

“The cultural milieu for your mission,” he continues, “will provide little or no support, and in fact is likely to be a huge obstacle. You will be called upon to devote immense amounts of time and energy, often leaving you wondering whether your own identity as a person is being completely eclipsed by the demands of being a mother. There is no guarantee, or even any reliable prediction, of what kind of relationship you will have with your child either before or after he or she reaches adulthood – other than the fact, of course, that you will be expected to shut off the intense feelings of intimacy you experienced during the childrearing years, lest your offspring’s sense of independence and self-reliance be impaired.”

“As the central, larger-than-life figure in your child’s development,” he warns, “you will be blamed for virtually everything that goes wrong, irrespective of your inability to control or even influence many of the trials and tribulations your child experiences. The best available data,” he concludes, “indicate that the gratitude you can expect to receive from the child is likely to consist of a small handicraft made for you at summer camp.”

And the mother-aspirant replies, “Great. Where do I sign?”

Why would ANYONE sign up for such a mission? A job description like this would make landing a fighter jet on a thin strip of metal knifing through a swollen sea seem like child’s play. True, my depiction may be a bit exaggerated. But most mothers have had many, many days that resemble my maternal job description pretty closely; and yet, looking back, most say with great conviction that mothering was a profound fulfillment they wouldn’t trade for anything. What meaning can we find in the extraordinary experiences of mothers, and what might it show all of us about our own lives? Come, let us reflect and celebrate. Come, let us worship together.

## SERMON

When Aunt Lillian came to the fateful moment of telling Pat about Alma, her birth mother, she simply said, “I’m not your mother.” But like many literal statements, this one carried great figurative meaning. Another, undisclosed mother was present in the margins of this unlikely conversation on the beach in Maine – one who goes by many names: Mother Earth, Great Mother, Rhea, Hera – all of the mythic metaphors for the life force in the universe that gives and takes away, begets and destroys, gestates and annihilates; metaphors for the great circle of creation and destruction, of birth and death and renewal.

In human history, this feminine spirituality has been given shape by a rich variety of creation stories. It even insinuates itself metaphorically into both the Biblical and Darwinian ones. Adam and Eve are cast out of the womb-like Garden of Eden -- the domain of bliss, innocence, and forgetful freedom from want. They are born into the so-called real world, a place of wounding, challenge, and above all, consciousness of separation. Or, if you favor scientific myths, when the fish in the sea evolutionarily crawl up onto land, they too lose their innocence -- in due course becoming creatures who reason, remember, learn the difference between subject and object, and create the construct we call “time.”

And so it is with every individual human birth. Until the waters break, the child floats on a maternal sea of tranquility, savoring what the mythologist Michael Meade calls “an extended feast of subjectivity.” Time and space are at most mere shadows there. Birth changes all that, bringing us to the challenging path toward purpose – toward the meaning our migrant souls lost in the forgetful umbilical waters. The meaning we must carry as a gift to this world from that other and greater night than the one of our birth.

As the Jungian theologian James Hollis observes, thus are the “torrents of ancestry entrusted to the fragile vessel of a single person, a woman, who communicates the mystery of life itself and who, in the specific relationship between mother and child, embodies all sorts of messages about our relationship to the life force.” To give birth, to nurture, to accept gladly the utter dependency of a child, to maintain intimate connection with what was literally flesh of one’s flesh – these are intense participations in the

universe's continuous transformative drama of creation, and of the destruction that is always needed to make an opening for creation to be repeated.

Yes, destruction. One rarely hears it spoken of this way, but mothering involves the destructive as well as the creative side of this drama. The mother is both the garden from which the infant is expelled, and the companion waiting outside to take its hand and say, "I will walk with you. Now it is time to let go of this and reach out for that. You will not be alone."

On this long walk away from Eden, the mother is not only the giver of life but also the giver of death – the small deaths by which the child leaves behind what it has been and steps into what it must become, each time created newly. The mother's empathic hand-holding is a natural expression of the reality that she too must accept the small deaths along this road, letting go of being the mother of a two-year-old, reaching out to become the mother of a fourth grader, and then an adolescent.

Fathers engage in this mothering process too, just as mothers participate in fathering. I learned how hard these small deaths can be with my daughter, Marianne. Her creative imagination was such an interference with navigation of daily life. I would get a phone calls from school about some essay she had left on the dining room table. I would stop was I was doing and put it on the fax machine. If the homework couldn't be faxed, I'd hop in my car and drive the 25 miles to her school, arriving just in time, like some turbo-charged version of Mercury descending from the clouds.

These minor heroics made me feel good, but I should have let Marianne feel a nip or two from the pedagogical wolves who taught her English and math. With me around to bail her out, it's a miracle she ever figured out how to meet a deadline. By the way, that gentle breeze you may feel in the sanctuary right now is being created by my mother's head nodding up and down rapidly at this account. She was around to witness all this.

One way or another, the mothering does finally reach a destination: the point at which the child is too big for mothering and must accept a kind of transitional "orphaning" until it claims its own place in the world. We usually call this "growing up," but the philosopher James Hillman suggests that "growing down" is a better description. This descent into worldliness must put down four roots of maturity: acceptance of the gravity of being confined in an aging body; acknowledgement of ancestry – including the branches of the family tree deemed ugly and unwanted; marriage to a geography in which customs and duties can grow inward; and a loyal remission to the world of what the world gave as raw material for fashioning a life of larger commitment.

That transitional orphaning reveals how much is at stake in the "growing down". How well does the grown child know herself? How much capacity has she developed for translating self-knowledge into self-love? How grounded has she become in her own solitude, without which there can be no true intimacy? How conversant has she become

with the story of her own life and with the larger cultural drama in which it is embedded, so as to be ready for the responsibility of living authentically, of authorship?

This is the time for the mother co-pilot to clamber down from the cockpit of the jet, leaving the landed, grown-down man-child or woman-child to fly solo from then on. Or, things take a different turn, and there is no arrival, or only a tragically wounding one for everyone involved. The heroism and nobility of mothering would vanish if it weren't as risky as it is – if mothers weren't acting out the daring mandate to “risk everything for love.”

In fact, the one aspect of mothering about which there is no risk, but only certainty, is the certainty of wounding. Both mother and child will be wounded by the world, and each will be wounded by the other. How could it be otherwise? How could there be such intense intimacy between two people, beginning with their literal physical unity, without engendering the capacity to scald with just one look, to bruise with the lightest touch -- falling as these do on the most vulnerable parts of the other?

I want to suggest that the wounding is not simply an unavoidable side effect of mothering, but rather, is part of the essence of it. Pity the child who grows up without literal or metaphorical scraped knees, who has never experienced love as painful and confusing. Pat's daughter Erika came home from school one day, in the fourth grade, having picked up some information about how bad it can get between mothers and daughters. “Will we hate each other?” she asked, tearfully? Pat smiled and said, “Yes, but we'll get over it.” How cruel it would have been to say “of course not.”

Mothering is a grand opportunity to merge the particular and the universal, to make the largest possible meaning of existence. To mother to practice the art of creation and destruction in ways that are both literal, in a singular life, and representational, in the great cycle of the universe endlessly transforming itself by the same kind of making and unmaking. As Michael Meade has said, “the human soul longs to participate in the symbolic life, and needs to encounter the great passions in relation to mythic themes.” With its extraordinary physical, emotional, and intellectual demands, mothering is a profound reaching out for this unifying possibility, for wholeness in human living.

Bringing a child to adulthood would seem to be the end of the symbolic drama of mothering, but not quite. Whatever has been achieved up to that point, the hardest part remains. That is the ultimate letting go, the death of the mothering that is appropriate only during the dependency of childhood, making way for the birth of something new for both mother and child.

However mature the man-child or woman-child may seem to be in material terms, emotionally there is a tremendous gravitational pull toward mother that complicates this mutual letting go. It is the inevitable confusion of the particular birth mother with the mythic Great Mother or Earth Mother. At birth, the mother has occupied all or nearly all of the perceptual space in the life of the child. She has been his whole world. As the wounds and anxieties of human life come along, he continues to identify her with that

prenatal sea of tranquility. He feels a powerful longing to return to the Eden of the womb. Despite its obvious impossibility, in emotional terms he embarks upon an “Eden project” anyway.

The Eden project is a search for a relationship with a Magical Other who can recreate the experience of umbilical bliss. The Magical Other might be a deity, a community or institution, or even a system of thought – a magical book, if you will. Most commonly, though, this magic is sought through an intimate relationship. The project is certain to fail. The idealizations projected onto the one chosen as the Magical Other soon evaporate, exposing that person’s flawed humanity, and leading to disillusionment and even a sense of betrayal. As a strategy for creating fulfilling relationships, it is a disaster.

The child-turned-adult is not helpless in the face of these tendencies. The way out begins when he realizes he will never have a higher or better relationship with another than he has with his own self. From this it becomes clear that knowing and loving another absolutely depends on knowledge and love of self. The essential condition for cultivating these is solitude. Only real solitude can allow self to be truly self; and only then can anyone allow The Other to be not magical, but rather, simply and truly other – a respected “thou” rather than a manipulated “it,” an impossible vehicle for infantile longings.

The poet Rilke declared love to be two solitudes, bordering on and greeting and protecting each other. This may seem a little cold or distant, particularly in comparison to the cheesy warmth served up by our childishly romantic culture. But in the bordering on and greeting and protecting, we discover that intimate relationship is the sacred arena for an experience of awe. To turn away from Eden and toward this sacred arena is, in the words of James Hollis, “finally to free relationship for its highest service to us – the enlargement of our journey, through the unfolding mystery of the otherness of the Other.”

Would a mother want anything less for her child? Surely not, unless she became ensnared in her own longing to hang onto the vestiges of Eden. Like the child’s Eden project, this one too is certain to fail.

This is the message I take from the story of King Solomon in today’s reading from the Hebrew Bible. Although two mothers speak in the story, I read them as the voices of one mother who is of two minds. One expresses the maternal urge to hold close – so close as to be suffocating. The other expresses the wisdom to let go. Solomon’s wisdom is that ultimately the child must belong to neither mother, but rather, to the world, Mother Earth, the Great Mother. If the birth mother cannot remember this wisdom as she walks the child toward adulthood, the result will be to split the baby, leaving it impossibly caught between infantile dependency and a mature growing down -- into the world and into its true self.

In addition to all her other responsibilities, every mother must be the guardian of her child’s solitude. At the critical point of transitional orphanhood, the best way to assure this guardianship is for her to focus on her own need for the same thing. Solitude

is the way to continue her own part in the cycle of creation and destruction, letting go of being the birth mother and taking hold of being another symbolic embodiment of the Great Mother – this time, mothering communities and cultures. This is the role of elder, of the Mother of Inspiration, keeper of the well of accumulated wisdom. Cultures, like children, need to be taken in hand to move toward a noble destiny. The role of elder is never easy. In a culture like ours, which has lost sight of the value of elders, it is doubly difficult. But that only makes this kind of mothering all the more heroic, noble, and essential.

Ministers get used to preaching on a pretty wide range of subjects. The point of a sermon, after all, is not to apply expertise – not in the subject, anyway. And yet, it's hard for me to escape a certain "skating-on-thin-ice" feeling about preaching on mothering. Some internal voice keeps insisting that preaching on mothering should be reserved for card-carrying mothers – preferably one who is senior to most or all of the audience. It's pretty plain I don't fit that profile. Some of you are old enough to be my mother. I know for certain that at least ONE of you is.

And at the end of this exploratory, I honestly question whether I've said anything about mothering that the mothers among you don't already know. I strongly suspect that although they are worded in my words and these may be different from your words, the truths I've tried to unpack are so well known to you mothers -- so deeply experienced, that you may feel little need to articulate them at all.

So is our time together this morning serving any purpose? I think it is, in two important ways. First, we are celebrating mothers today. To celebrate, it is important to repeat old truths, but to express them in new ways, to look at them with new eyes. Otherwise, rather than being kept alive, the tradition we are celebrating becomes rote, dry, dead. Just another Hallmark holiday.

Second, whatever the birth mothers among us may know in their bones, the rest of us can stand a little consciousness-raising. That's good as a way of deepening our appreciation for our mothers, whatever the mixtures of tragedy and triumph we have had on our long walks with them. It's also good as a way of making our celebration more inclusive. If I ran the zoo, I think I'd try to rename Mother's Day "Mothering Day." Although birth mothers are the symbolic focal point of our celebration, mothering actually is something done by many who did not give birth to the mothered child – the father who breathed in unison during labor, the older sibling who gently showed the younger one how to be socially graceful, the aunt who embraced her sister's child as if she truly were her very own.

May we revere this high artistry again on this day. Regardless of age or gender, may we give the world our mothering gifts in all our days to come.

AMEN.