

**Mothers and Mothering**  
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Before creation a presence existed, self-contained, complete, formless, voiceless, mateless, changeless, which yet pervades itself with unending motherhood. Though there can be no name for it, I have called it the “way of life”.

Entitled in our hymnal, “the Tao”, these are the words of Lao Tse. Unending motherhood. The “way of life”. This reading states further: “Perhaps I should have called it ‘the fullness of life’, since fullness implies widening into space, implies still further widening, implies widening until the circle is whole. In this sense the way of life is fulfilled, heaven is fulfilled, earth is fulfilled and a fit person, also is fulfilled” ...Unending motherhood.

Mother. A powerful word. Mother can bring up so many thoughts and feelings. I once took a week-long art workshop. One activity involved quickly drawing responses to a series of spoken words: fish...tree...mother....I drew a blank. I drew a mental blank. I had no immediate image, thought or feeling to put on the paper in front of me. I did work on that later that night.

Mothers, as portrayed in the books Are You My Mother? and The Ugly Duckling are the sort who nurture and care give while the young learn life skills necessary for survival. Following and copying is how we all learn to do stuff. But there can be broader ways of experiencing mothering.

Of course, definitions of mother include: a female parent. Certainly the most common usage of the word. Another: a woman in authority, specifically the Superior of a religious community for women. A familiar usage, again. A third definition: an old or elderly woman. In some cultures an elderly woman is called “Mother” by all who greet her, as a title of respect. In this, and other instances an older person shares wisdom and experiences of life in the hope of easing the journey of those who are younger. Instruction and guidance of others is a very motherly behavior.

In Waking Up The Karma Fairy, Meg Barnhouse, UU minister in Spartanburg, North Carolina writes: “I knew I was in trouble when I found myself flipping on the TV as I passed through the room—just to see what Norm was making in his New Yankee Workshop. Ooh, he was using his miter saw. I sat down to watch. My breathing became deep and regular. All the things that had been occupying my mind just drifted away as I watched shavings curl away from his router. He talked so calmly as he worked, and he always reminded me to use safety glasses when I did any woodworking. That was a motherly touch. Nothing could go wrong with my life if I were as calm and thorough as Norm. Even his name was Norm. The Norm. I imagined his finances, his home life, his driving, calm and perfect. Measuring twice, cutting once, confident and productive.”

Other definitions of mother are: source and origin. One thinks of motherland, mother tongue, mother lode. But the Source and Origin. These words also speak of a much wider image. OUR source. THE Source. OUR origin. THE Origin.

In this widened sense of Origin one might think of the source of all life. Whatever you call it, God, Goddess, Supreme Power, Energy, this Great Mother of All is our greatest example of mothering. Creative, caring, nurturing, forgiving, healing.

These and many more are traits and behaviors of mothering that we can emulate. We each can practice these ideal mothering traits on ourselves. Regardless of the parenting we received as children, we can now create the support that we feel will best serve us to find peace and contentment in the midst of this journey we call life.

Do you keep a garden? Do you tend vegetables or flowers? Prune trees or shrubs? Every gardener mothers. Coaxing the treasured plant to thrive here. Trying hard to persuade the bittersweet NOT to grow here. Robert Fulghum, UU Minister, in All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten writes: "For a time I lived on a steep hillside in a decrepit summer cottage that had what a Real Estate agent called 'charm'. Which meant that it was a shack with a view. In keeping with the spirit of the house, I let the yard go 'natural', letting what wanted to be there, be there and take care of itself without any help from me. I remember announcing from the front porch to all living things in the yard: 'you're on your own. Good Luck'" Fulghum goes on to rhapsodize about the many wonders of dandelions---which he likes a lot.

My own gardening style is only slightly more sophisticated. I plan and choose by color and hardiness, trying to achieve a pleasing, somewhat natural look. No carefully pruned and raked Japanese garden for me---though I love the appearance. Too much work and too much effort for me. I tend to plant, and sometimes water, and then announce to all the living things in the yard "grow damn ya"---and then just let it go at that. What is meant to survive me will grow. What isn't---will become compost.

Now I do spend time gently moving discovered worms into my flower beds. I love watching butterflies flit about. I just introduced three new butterfly bushes to our yard in view of the front windows. I try to put in extra parsley for the caterpillars. But I am not overly attached to the outcome. When unidentified surprises sprout up I often leave them to see what gift has been presented. But, Oh, the time spent out there! Mothering. Creating. Caring. Nurturing. Forgiving. Healing. Sometimes for the benefit of the garden, but how often is this mothering for my benefit?

As adults we choose activities, hobbies, avocations presumably to occupy our minds, keep our hands busy. But are these activities actually a form of mothering ourselves? A way of connecting with The Source. A good and successful hobby soothes and calms one, like listening to music, reading, knitting or model ship-building. Or a hobby stimulates and grows one, like listening to music, reading, knitting, or model ship-building. We each come to an activity as an individual totally differently from every other individual, so we each get something different from each experience. We do these things with a purpose and a passion. We love what we love to do. And in doing so, we feed our souls. We nourish ourselves. We release tensions and stresses. We connect to intuitive places. On a good day, while we engage in our passion, we enter a "zone". We go to a place of consciousness or mindfulness where we totally let go, where our egos fall away. We become one with whatever we are doing. Even in competitive and team sports, when the ego is gone, the player is in the zone with the team, as a single entity. Be it skydiving or teaching a child a song, we lose track of time when in this place. We work out a solution to a problem and don't quite know how we did it. As an artist, I sometimes do a painting and think "Where did that come from? How did I do that?" The activity becomes a meditative experience.

As Rev Meg Barnhouse felt while watching Norm Abrams, "my breathing became deep and regular...all the little things that been occupying my mind just drifted away". Meg connected with the healing experience of watching wood shavings curl.

This deep and regular breathing, this letting go of all that occupies our minds, this connecting with The Source, Our Origin, Nurturing, Healing, Mothering moments, moments we can have at any time.

I received a letter from a friend who had recently returned from a one week silent retreat. He wrote: "I had been sitting [meditation] since 1994, but had never done a retreat...My newest practice is that I make my bed every morning, in mindfulness, to show respect for it and in gratitude for rest and a place to have rest. This is remarkable because I probably used to make my bed twice a year, only when expecting company."

Now, before you discount this as just so much contemplation of one's navel, consider this. My friend's mindful making of his bed, respecting and showing gratitude for it—isn't that self-mothering? And, yes, is all this caring for self, too much focus on one's self?

I think of the Holy Bible. Much read. Often maligned. Maybe, more often misinterpreted. One bit of wisdom I especially like is the phrase "Love your neighbor as yourself". An important part of this statement is "as yourself". If one loves oneself enough, then one is able to love one's neighbor. The reverse, of course, is that not loving oneself, one is not able to love the neighbor. How many "evil-doers" in the world do not love themselves? How many evil deeds are done by folks who were poorly parented? If only they could have found ways to parent, mother, care for, themselves, learn to love themselves, and then widen that love to include all neighbors. Mothering oneself at any point in life is a good thing. Whether it's actually intentional sitting meditation, or it's becoming involved in a hobby, or pausing to watch the sun set, or watching a teenager walk down the street proclaiming through hairstyle, clothing or piercings "I am! Look at me! I exist!"; life offers countless opportunities for each of us to, in some way, nurture and heal ourselves, care for and forgive ourselves. We once were that rebellious teen. The project that did not get finished, even after spending so much money on it, its OK. Forgive yourself, for wasting that money, for not following through and completing the task. The plants that died because you didn't get them into the ground soon enough, or because you didn't water them enough--they made more compost!

The unending motherhood that pervades life---embraces you...forgives you...holds you...and heals you. The unending motherhood, that presence that existed before creation, pervades and surrounds you. The way of life. The fullness of life. Widening until the circle is whole. Heaven is fulfilled. Earth is fulfilled. A fit person---YOU---are fulfilled.

Blessed Be. Ashe.