

REFLECTION FOR MUSIC SUNDAY/MOTHERS DAY

BUC, May 8, 2011

Ministers everywhere know the unique challenge that comes with preparing a proper Mother's Day worship service. Do you take the high spiritual road and talk of our saintly mothers, how much they gave us, like a Hallmark card but with some religious language interspersed? Do you take the hard realistic psychological road and talk of our problematic mothers, how many issues they left us with, like a therapy session but with some religious language interspersed? Do you bypass the day entirely and choose some other subject for the morning, pretending that mothers do not exist (for instance, could I get away with reflecting on music and spirituality this morning, making no mention of mothers?)

Since there is no easy way through this most prickly of holidays, this morning I will take several of the possible roads into, around, and through Mother's Day and hope in the process to get a true picture of mothers and our experience of them, in all their beauty and pain and presence and loss and possibility, not confining my reflections to literal mothers but expanding to include all who mother in some way. And yes, there will ultimately be a music connection in all this.

Mothers are traditionally charged with teaching us our first lessons of unconditional love. Some mothers are indeed up to that task; others simply cannot manage it, perhaps because of never having experienced it themselves. In those cases, we go looking elsewhere for that fundamental lesson, from other adults, from institutions like the church, from God. Billy Collins' poem "The Lanyard" describes an experience of coming up against the utter incomprehensibility and immeasurability of love without limits or demands.

"The Lanyard" by Billy Collins

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,

and I gave her a lanyard.
 She nursed me in many a sick room,
 lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
 laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
 and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
 and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
 Here are thousands of meals, she said,
 and here is clothing and a good education.
 And here is your lanyard, I replied,
 which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
 strong legs, bones and teeth,
 and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
 and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
 And here, I wish to say to her now,
 is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
 but the rueful admission that when she took
 the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
 I was as sure as a boy could be
 that this useless, worthless thing I wove
 out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

So much of Mother's Day is focused on flowers—and appropriately so,
 as mothers in many ways are reminiscent of flowers, varied in color and
 style and desirability. For instance, some mothers are like the forsythia
 spilling over a neighbor's fence: almost unbearably cheerful, energetic,
 doggedly curious, insinuating themselves into our lives.

Other mothers are like daisies growing along the roadside: modest, a bit
 ragged around the edges, fretting as they fuss with clothing and cleaning,

asking always, “Do you love me? Do you love me not? Do you love me?
Do you love me not?”

Some mothers resemble the irises in a formal garden: austere,
complicated, holding themselves back as we try in vain to discover what is
really going on inside.

Other mothers seem like roses displayed on a trellis: lovely, sweet-
smelling, sure of occupying a favored place in our hearts.

Some mothers are like thistles in a pasture: spiky and sharp, wounding us
whenever we try to get close.

Other mothers resemble violets peeking up through the lawn:
unassuming, tender in their loyalty, always there though we often take them
for granted.

Some mothers seem like ivy climbing a brick wall: holding us too
tightly, unwilling or unable to let go.

Other mothers are like beds of peonies: bursting out, overdressed,
embarrassing us with their lavish ways and the lipstick marks they leave on
our cheeks.

Some mothers resemble lilac bushes beside the kitchen door: welcoming,
familiar reminders that we can always come home again. (adapted from Judy
Welles and Max Coots)

Varied as flowers are our mothers, and the arrangement they make in our lives is endlessly complex. We can work with the arrangement—to a point. Then flowers and mothers can only be what they essentially are.

In 1995 Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage for a concert at Lincoln Center in New York City. If you have ever heard and seen Perlman in performance, you know the simple act of getting on stage is a challenge for him: stricken with polio as a child, he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. Once on stage, he settles laboriously into a chair, undoes the clasps on the braces so he can position his legs, then takes his violin from an assistant and nods to the conductor.

The same routine unfolded for this particular performance until something went drastically wrong. A few bars into the piece, one of the strings on his violin broke with a loud snap. Any of you who have played a stringed instrument or know music a bit know that such an event has only one possible solution. Perlman would have to halt the performance and either find another violin, take a violin from one of the orchestra players on stage, or have the audience take an unscheduled intermission while the broken string was replaced.

But Perlman did none of this; rather, he closed his eyes, signaled to the conductor to resume the piece from where they had stopped, and he began

playing. It should be impossible to play a symphonic work without the violin soloist having a full set of strings. That is just the way things work.

Perlman, however, has often refused to acknowledge the way things work, and he did this again that particular night. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head. At times it even sounded as though he was retuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before. The piece continued with all the passion and power it could ever have, perhaps even more than usual.

Perlman finished, and silence held for a few moments in the concert hall. Then the audience rose to their feet, cheering and applauding not just another wonderful performance by Perlman, but an extraordinary musical and human achievement. After acknowledging the audience response, Perlman waved his bow to ask for silence and signaled for a microphone. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he said quietly, almost pensively, “You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.” (story reported by Jack Riemer, *The Houston Chronicle*, November 1995)

As a mother, I have often felt not up to the task of raising a child in a difficult world, teaching values and honoring individuality and maintaining a necessary level of discipline and being patient, endlessly patient, never being

quite sure I was doing it right. As a minister, I have often felt not up to the task of leading a congregation in a difficult world, upholding values and honoring individuality and maintaining a necessary degree of direction and focus and being patient, endlessly patient, never quite sure I am doing it right. And simply trying to live as a decent, compassionate, thoughtful human being can be an overwhelming challenge many days.

But Perlman reminds us that no one plays with a full set of unbroken strings all the time. We can choose to give up, let someone else's instrument take our place, reschedule for a more opportune time. Or we can make music—as mothers, as ministers, as people with one precious life on this earth—at first with all that we have, and then, when that is no longer possible, make music with what we have left.