

"Matterhood"

Rev. Lynn Harrison

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

14 May 2023

I had never thought about the connection between the words "matter" and "mother" before.

But one day I was talking about a dream of mine with a very wise teacher.

My dream featured the symbol of a mother ... and it was suggested to me that that the symbol might not only refer to a biological human mother ... but instead to "matter" or "substance."

Now, this was something that had not occurred to me...
and you may need to bear with me here.

You see, I'm someone who finds a lot of meaning in symbols and in dreams...and this meaning of "mother" and "matter" really touched something in me.

I learned that the root word of "mother" is the Latin "matr"... from which the word "matter" arises, along with "maternal," "material" ... even "matrix."

So perhaps the symbol of a mother appearing in my dream wasn't simply about own physical mother, whom I love dearly, but also about the substance and "matter" of being.

The ground of life.

The matter-ing of being physically alive on this great ball of mothering matter called Earth.

Drawing from the website of the Merriam-Webster dictionary:

"The fact of the matter is this. The Latin word for "mother," *mater*, is this word's distant ancestor.

Mater was shaped into *materia*, meaning "physical substance" or "matter." *Materia* eventually developed into *matter*.

[And perhaps the word *mother* is connected to that word...]

...because *matter* is the substance from which something is made; and it is the *mother* from which we all are made.¹

And so today, I'm reflecting on "matter-hood," the state of being we all share, whether we are mothers to biological offspring or not, and no matter what relationship we have to the human beings who gave birth to us.

Today, like every other day, is "Matter's Day" a day in which we can find deep meaning.

This special day takes place in springtime, when so much is blooming and coming into focus.

Yet there are seasons of life, regardless of the calendar, when we feel disconnected from our matter-hood: from the parts of ourself which are generative and life-giving.

There are times in every life when we wonder what we can do, to bring more of what we value into the world.

Times we may be afraid we do not matter.

In these times, it is often helpful to return again to the Mother that is the Earth... through our senses and through our inner life.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/top-10-words-that-come-from-mother>

As the poet Nancy Wood wrote: "Hold onto what is good, even if it is a handful of earth."

Hold onto our senses...reconnect with our breath... return again to what the poet Mary Oliver called "our place in the family of things."

Indeed, just the other day when I was out for walk, feeling the heaviness of my thoughts and the events of the day...

I paused, and placed my hands on the trunk of a tree and allowed it to give me strength.

To remind me of what matters.

Far from the cultural messages that in order to "matter" one has to be noticed or "liked" by thousands of people...

When you get right down to it, "matterhood" is a very small thing... perhaps not so much an action as a simply being, as we are rooted in Life.

As we are living in concert with the much larger "Mattering"... the Mothering that can never be fully named nor fully understood.

When we quiet down into the simple nurturance of the life force, we notice the richness of our experience.

Matter-hood is an inherently creative force that is continually bringing new life into being.

If we ever doubt that this life-giving creative force is within us, we need only notice the rich and detailed storylines of our nightly dreams...

Our natural ability to create conversations by putting words into meaningful order...

And the way our bodies mirror other living things, as we are all patterned organisms in this extraordinarily vast and multi-faceted universe.

"The pattern of patterns, from rainbows to rust...
Maybe it matters, cause matter, it must."

Maybe mattering is the most natural thing in world...

Maybe it happens without our having to artificially amplify any one form of mattering over any other.

Maybe what matters the most is to return to the simplest levels of mattering... affirming the value of simple presence and kindness...

Recognizing that these are the ways we mother the world...

In small acts of love and acceptance... even or especially on days when we are cranky and fussy, acting in infantile ways, or seeming not to be thriving.

When we affirm the essential "matter-hood" that is our birthright, we strengthen ourselves for the mattering work that is ours to do.

The work of love, meaning and purpose in which we care for the physical earth and the physical beings around us... knowing that our intentional acts of care often matter more than we know.

Matter-hood means being-hood, being at one with the Great Mother... from whom each of us has sprung and to which each of us will return.

The Mother, Gaia, the Goddess... all of these are a few of the names of the Great Mattering: names we know are symbolic and never fully accurate... just as the Sacred Wholeness of Life will always remain beyond our complete and conscious understanding.

Yet as the human organism continues to learn and grow, what we understand of matter, and indeed of what we call "spirit," continues to evolve.

I cannot pretend to fully understand matters of quantum physics.

But I was captivated recently by this passage written by author and psychoanalyst James Hollis, in an essay called "Recovering Mature Spirituality in a Material Age."

“The chair upon which you sit
is a swirling assemblage of energy and open spaces
that presents as a state we call matter,
even as it is constantly in motion and transformation.”

It is difficult for the ego to imagine that it is not sitting on something permanent [and] fixed... but rather a passing energy congruence, as quantum physics has known for a century.

Perhaps paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin came closest to bridging these worlds when he said that "matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen."²

No matter which way we look at it, this matter we embody in the short lives we call ours... is deeply intertwined with the Great Mothering.

Indeed we are connected in ways that are so complex and often mysterious...

They can inspire a sense of childlike awe and wonder... that sparks the energized action of nurturing love.

This is the spirit-infused love that must be nurtured and nourished in order for us to do the work that matters most...

² James Hollis, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life* (Penguin, 2005), 188-189

In order for us to take the actions that protect others... Make the contributions that are ours to make... and recognize the moments that we are called to serve.

It is only through our connection to the Greater Mattering that we create lives of meaning and purpose:

Lives in which we fully give and gratefully receive... held in the embrace of the Mother of All.

Our task as we become more spiritually mature is to become more aware of what truly matters to us, the particular stuff of which we are most wonderfully made and then live, as best we can, according to that matter.

This may be quite different from our culture's view.

But our fidelity to our true nature, our "matter-nature" if you will, can make the difference between a life of meaning and one in which we feel perpetually rootless.

Such a life of matter-hood need not be described in any grand or formal way.

It need not be fully understood nor perfectly framed.

It simply calls for an openness of heart... a willingness to grow...and perhaps also an ability to quiet down and listen for the voice of what matters that is often found in unexpected places.

These places take the shape of our lives in all their quirky particularity.

Here at First Unitarian, our mattering takes so many shapes, through our life as a congregation and through our own individual lives.

And, of course, these shapes are always changing.

Today we're taking the opportunity to show a short video on how one of our members, John Cummings, is caring for a place that matters deeply to him.

It is but one example of the many acts of mattering that take place each and every day...

Many of which are not widely seen but are no less significant.

Let us now take a meaningful video trip through the Cedarvale Ravine, with our guide John Cummings: [John Cummings & the Cedarvale Ravine](#)