

“My Grandmothers’ Roses”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
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Every day now I look to see if there’s a bud, even a hint of green in a somewhat scrawny plant on our sun porch rising to the occasion of spring. “She loves me, she loves me not, she loves me, she loves me not,” echoes unexpectedly, a chant from childhood as I lean over the bedraggled prospect of these roses. It’s the third, maybe the fourth cutting I’ve taken from the backyard of our former home in New Jersey, trusting that they’ll find another in New England, maybe alongside the lavender and lobelia that I’m planning.

Here’s the story. Years ago, decades ago, actually the better part of a century ago, my Grandmother Edwards – Hilda Marie Carlsson Edwards to be exact – planted roses in her farmyard. By Grandmother’s birthday in early June, they awakened to the warmth of the Iowa sun. I believe she tended them almost as lovingly as she did her six children – and then, minus the baby who succumbed to influenza, her five children. I wonder how many times she turned to those roses for consolation, worn down by loss, or for respite, worn out with 5 AM breakfasts for my Granddad and uncles and the hired men as summer invited longer days in the fields. I wonder how many times she turned to those roses for peace and serenity after gathering the daily egg harvest from the clucking chaos of the henhouse. Sweetheart roses they were, just as my Grandmother once was, a fair maiden with an 18-inch waist – that’s right, I tried on her wedding dress once at the age of 12, slim and fit myself, and there was just no way. Yet there she is in that wedding dress, lovely alongside my handsome Granddad, both in photographed eternity atop a table in my Mother’s living room. There she is on her wedding day, with children yet to be born and roses yet to be planted.

I know why my Mother, soon after her marriage to my Dad in 1936, took a cutting from that rosebush, carefully wrapped it in damp towels, and carried it off to her first home as a married woman, there to plant it in her yard, tending it, pruning it, coaxing it, and taking the pleasure only roses can give in their soft-petal lushness and delicate scent. As my parents moved from Iowa to Illinois to Pennsylvania to Iowa to Nebraska to Kansas, a cutting was carried as gently as a baby and planted as thoughtfully as any child’s roots are nurtured by parents who hover and hope for the best.

How long ago was it that I learned the story of those portable rose cuttings? Maybe as a child, but it was seamlessly that I received from my Mother a cutting of the most recent offspring of that primal rosebush for my own yard, planted it with due maternal counsel, and summer after summer, gazed upon the most delicate pink buds and breathed in that long-ago fragrance. Yes, I’m coaxing along the most recent cutting. Maybe we’ll have to make another visit for another cutting, but that’s okay; sooner or later a willful shoot will sprout green and then pink and say yes to its status as the next generation of roses to lend beauty and scent and floral evidence of maternal lineage.

Then there was my other Grandmother, Grandmother White. My two grandmothers couldn’t have been more different – Grandmother Edwards, my country Grandmother – Grandmother White, my city Grandmother – city being loosely interpreted given the 5,000 or so souls who called Iowa Falls, Iowa home. As hardworking and deferential and bent with loss as was my mother’s mother,

so my father's mother was resolute, independent, and statuesque in her demeanor. Both bore roses. Grandmother Edwards grew them; Grandmother White wore them.

On occasions when this city Grandmother presided over an elegant holiday table, her dresses bore patterns of lush cabbage roses in blush pinks or subtle ivories or tawny apricots. On occasions when she strode off to church wrapped in her full-length mink, a silk rose or two adorned the requisite hat. They didn't carry quite the same scent as the sweetheart blossoms growing in the farmyard or in my Mother's backyard, but I perked up in early attention to this Grandmother's sense of style. Yet all was not easy and elegant for her. Gifted with a fine mezzo soprano, she had studied voice and performed professionally an impressive repertoire. It was when my father and uncle were young children that Grandmother White suffered an illness that permanently damaged her vocal chords. Her speech was left in tact, but she could no longer sing. Nonetheless she carried on, losing not an iota of panache.

What a hybrid blossom rises from my garden of generations as I reach back. Scent, sound, and sight meld into the memories of these two distinct women and again with the gift of my own still living Mother.

Move with me back into the here and now. In ceremonies of dedication in this Meeting House, we render mothers and fathers and godparents and the extended family of this congregation accountable to children newly born and newly adopted. In such a ceremony I use a small bowl of water and a long-stemmed rose. The water is an ancient symbol of dedication. The rose is an ancient flower and symbol for "the unfolding of a beautiful life." Now the trick is, roses have thorns, and roses are edible. Edible is fine, but thorns are not for chewing or even grasping, especially by babies and young children. So we scrape off those thorns, ensuring a safe stem just in case!

For dedications we present a rose without thorns, a rose without pain. We're exclusive in what we draw on from this flower. With roses as they grow in our gardens, however, thorns are in ample supply. Some of you probably have garden gloves that extend to your elbows and are marketed especially for rose gardeners. How many of us have reached for roses bare-armed and come away with a luscious bouquet and the scratches and cuts to prove where we've been?

So it is as we reach across generations to rediscover our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers. If it's our Grandmothers' roses that guide us there, we come away with visions of the most magnificent palettes and residues of the most fragrant scents and the sometimes still painful lacerations that tell where we've been.

Motherhood and grand-motherhood are about both, the beauty and the hurt. As we reach and remember, we find both. We feel both. We inherit from mothers who have borne us and raised us and grandmothers who have borne and raised them legacies of love and loss, abundance and deprivation, elegance and earthiness, and we plant them. Then we plant them in our own gardens. We coax the green; we hope for buds. We want so much for the beauty to emerge from whatever the past might have been and to leave the thorns behind as we do with our dedications.

But it doesn't work that way. I inherited from my Grandmothers a hybrid of love and loss, abundance and deprivation, elegance and earthiness. I inherited from my Mother the capacity to plant and nurture and the patience to wait and trust that those roots carry yet another generation of roses that I might pass on to my own children and to you also, my family of faith.

Mothers aren't perfect, and you know ministers aren't. So too, my theology doesn't hold the image of a perfect God, but rather a God who loves us beyond our imagining and leaves us to our own devices of free will and willfulness, a God who plants inside each of us the capacity for love

and loveliness and a penchant for thorniness, a God who perhaps waits and wonders as much as we wait and wonder about God and about our Mothers and Grandmothers and about our children and families from generation to generation.

Rose gardening is not for the faint of heart. Neither is mothering or fathering. Neither is ministering or being in a family of faith. Yet here we are once again in this House of Meeting, this sanctuary. Here we are once again discerning and discovering, coaxing and cultivating all that sprouts in our living, as individuals and in community. Here we are in community as exquisite as the rose bush with its clustered branches and its softness of petals and as replete with thorns that are simply inevitable.

May our gardens grow from generation to generation. May we tend them with grace and gratitude.

I love you and wish you the best of Mothers' Days. Amen