

Mother May I?

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

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Alison, take three giant steps forward.

Mother, may I?

Yes, you may.

Alison, take two baby steps backwards.

Mother, must I?

Yes, you must.

At the time I chose the title for this sermon, I had forgotten most everything about this game, except its name. But I looked it up. The person who is going to be the Mother stands facing away from a line of her “children,” who are all the other people playing. She yells out the name of a person in line and gives a command. The child must ask for permission to do what she or he has been told. “Mother, May I?”, to which Mother says “Yes, you may.” The goal is to reach Mother and become the next Mother. But Mom can direct you to go backward if she wants....

I had forgotten how powerful the “Mother” is in this childhood game! Not only does she have control over your advances, she also directs your retreats! And if the “child” forgets to ask “Mother, may I?” he or she goes back to the starting line. It is completely up to Mother who she calls on – who she allows to move at all. That’s a lot of power. Or maybe the Mother in this game is more like real life Chance. The luck of the draw. Some days you are called, some days you’re not.

I remember loving to play this game when I was young. Maybe I was always the favored one, called often to move forward. I was also taller than all my friends and brothers, so I could take bigger steps toward reaching Mother, which made me a frequent winner. I do remember being Mother a lot. My younger brothers like to remind me that I was a bossy child. Back then, I obviously did not think about the deeper symbolism and psychology of what was happening in this game.

I suppose it’s not entirely bad that the Mother May I game is so true to how it sometimes happens in real life. Real mothers *are* famous for their affirmation and encouraging little pushes in the right direction. “Come on Alison, take that first step. I know you can do it.” “Mommy, may I?” “Yes, you can and you may.” Little children try so hard to please their parents – when they’re not trying to get away with something, that is.

One of the hardest parts of being a mother, I think, is having to say no sometimes. It’s so good to be able to say “Yes, go ahead. That’s a great idea. Have fun and tell me about it when you get home.” But quite often we do have to say no – and more often than not our children will not understand the reason why.

In the Mother May I game (the real life one, too) another hard lesson we eventually learn is that of sometimes being the unlucky one – or the unwanted one – or the un-encouraged one. Or that sometimes we will be at the mercy of another person’s whim or at the mercy of someone’s unconscious desires to cause us to fail, or keep us around, or otherwise hinder our forward development. The author of this next little poem is unknown, at least to me.

*Mother, may I go out to swim?”
 “Yes, my darling daughter.
 Fold your clothes up neat and trim,
 But don’t go near the water.”*

Have you experienced this kind of permission in your life? Maybe the out loud answer to your question was yes, but you know that going ahead and doing this thing will cause more trouble than it’s worth. The answer seems to be yes, but there is a caveat, an unspoken restriction or disapproval. We’ve probably all received this kind of permission – and we’ve probably all given it, too. “Mother, may I?” “Yes, sure, go ahead. I’ll be fine here all by myself. Don’t worry about me. I’ll just take an old toothbrush to the grout in the shower – I’ve really been wanting to do that.”

When I say Mother in these little scenes, please substitute whatever or whomever is the authority figure in your particular story. Mother is a pretty figurative title in this case.

There are times in our lives when we know, inside, that we do not need to, and do not have to, ask for anyone’s permission. And yet, at the same time, we want to feel that our parents, and our spouses, and our bosses, and our friends approve of us and the choice we are making. We jump in and out of the Mother May I game all of our lives. Those of us with strong people-pleasing genes are in it more than we’re out.

As adults, it’s often more from ourselves that we need approval and respect – more to ourselves that we should look for permission. Of course there are times when we should ask other people for their opinions and suggestions. But not always necessarily, if you already know what the answer really needs to be – for you – and if your ethics are in the right place. I think of my decision to go into the Ministry as an example. Almost 50, kids grown and through college and with jobs, no one’s going to starve or become homeless if I close my gallery and go to theological school. I have to admit I did want my parents’ and my children’s support and encouragement, but I might have done all this anyway...

Here’s another way of looking at Mother May I psychology: (I read this someplace.)
 “Making people beg for what they already have is the Mother May I approach to life.”
 When our children are old enough, and responsible enough, and motivated enough, their struggle to achieve independence should not be something for which they need ask permission. It is the natural state of things in the world that the young will leave the nest. They even might do better with their lives than we did – or be more happy. Sometimes,

the most difficult permission we have to learn how to give is in letting our children be less happy or so-called successful than we have been. That is a very hard thing to allow for your own child. “Mother, may I have my own life?” “No,” we want to cry, “No, you may not – not if it’s going to be that life!”

Maude Meehan writes, in her poem “Mothers and Daughters,”

*There is a cord between us
not yet cut
On it we move
like tightrope walkers
novices
uncertain of the net
Take tentative steps
across the gulf
toward one another
Careful
not wishing to turn back
Hopeful
that keeping balance
we can meet
can then embrace
and pass each other
as we must*

We are the child in the game on some days, the mother on others – and it doesn’t always happen sequentially, or only change from one to the other one time. When you are part of a line of four or five generations of mothers and fathers, and sons and daughters, there are a lot of family dynamics going on. A lot of Mother May I games are happening out on the lawn, and in the bedroom, and over the dining room table at Thanksgiving

Mother May I doesn’t end with the family, though. You can find it being played in corporate board rooms and in school classrooms. A *minister*, man or woman, can be a figure of authority and permission – it’s a power that we try very hard to use carefully, and compassionately.

Finally, there comes a time in each of our lives when, despite any permission she may have given or resisted giving, we catch up to our Mother. That is the goal of the game, after all. And our roles become reversed, regardless of our prayers that it not be so – or at least not yet.

My last reading is called “Change of Season” and it’s by Miriam Pedersen.

*“Perk up,” your mother would say,
 her hand lifting your chin
 as if this gesture
 could elevate your mood
 or stop revelations about the world.
 And for a moment her magic worked,
 for she knew your heart better than anyone.
 To know and be known, that is what you lose
 as the middle of life
 edges toward the margins,
 as your husband falls ill,
 as sleep, shallow and tentative,
 threatens to abandon your nights,
 as familiar trees become strange,
 refusing to turn or allow their leaves to fall
 even in the depth of November.
 And now, your mother has nearly forgotten your name.
 Her face still cheerful and full of light,
 she thanks you for coming,
 takes your hand, and says goodbye. (“Change of Seasons” by Miriam Pederson, in
Essential Love, Ginny Lowe Connors, ed., Grayson Books, 2000, p. 105)*

Mother, may I tell you I love you?
 Mother, may I forgive myself for all the times you weren't perfect and I thought you
 should be?
 Mother, may I be happy?
 Mother, may I tell you that it is OK to say goodbye now?
 Yes, my darling child, you may.