

May 8, 2016

First Unitarian Church

Festivals and rituals, and even whole theologies, honoring mothers go back thousands and thousands of years. But the Mother's Day we celebrate in the US can be traced back to some specific people and events.

One of those people is the Unitarian Julia Ward Howe. If you took history class as a child in the US, you know her name because she wrote the words to the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.*

Glory glory hallelujah...

Unitarianism had a different flavor back then.

That's going to be stuck in your head.

But there was a lot more to Julia Ward Howe than a song.

Julia, who was born into a wealthy family in 1819, spoke six languages, and was a force to be reckoned with.

In 1843 she married Samuel Gridley Howe, a serious man whose work she admired greatly—he was a pioneer educator of children with disabilities—but his work positively obsessed him, and it turned out what he really wanted was not an intelligent, independent wife, but a helper to support his work.

When Julia had two poems published in 1848, he strongly disapproved, and that was devastating to her.

She tried to remain anonymous when she published a whole collection of her poems in 1854, but her identity was quickly revealed, and, it was one of those things, there was no taking it back.

The book was well received in literary circles. In the *New York Tribune* George Ripley called the poems "a product wrung with tears and prayer from the deepest soul of the writer. . . . They form an entirely unique class in the whole range of female literature."

But they were also raw and personal. Nathaniel Hawthorne said the book seemed "to let out a whole history of domestic unhappiness. . . . What does her husband think of it?"

Her husband was furious. He cracked down on her, refusing to give her money, and threatening to take the children.

But she kept publishing anyway: another book of poetry, a play, articles. Later she took up public speaking, too. In the 1850's she became an abolitionist. In the 1860's, she helped form and became the president of the New England Woman Suffrage Association. She stepped up to her potential and power.

"During the first two thirds of my life," Howe said,

I looked to the masculine idea of character as the only true one. I sought its inspiration, and referred my merits and demerits to its judicial verdict. . . .

The new domain now made clear to me was that of true womanhood—woman no longer in her ancillary relation to her opposite, man, but in her direct relation to the divine plan and purpose, as a free agent, fully sharing with man every human right and every human responsibility.

She continues:

This discovery was like the addition of a new continent to the map of the world, or of a new testament to the old ordinances.

She helped launch the women's rights movement in several states, and—though I think you wouldn't predict it from hearing the Battle Hymn of the Republic—she became a peace activist.

Mother's Day—the one we celebrate in the US—traces its roots back to Howe's pacifism.

Wikipedia lists fifty-five wars involving the US that happened in Julia Ward Howe's lifetime. But it was the Franco-Prussian war happening at a moment when Julia was finally comfortable owning her identity and power, that spurred her into action.¹ Seeing that it was barbaric and could have been settled peacefully, she began organizing other women to speak out against war.

In 1870, Howe wrote the "Mother's Day Proclamation." I invite you to get out your gray hymnals now and read an excerpt of it with me now. It's responsive reading # 573.

She is speaking for women, but whatever gender you identify with, if you have even one X chromosome, you should join in. (That's all of us).

Now, there is a typo in our hymnals. The second line should say, whether your baptism be that of water or of *tears*. Tears, not fears.

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_involving_the_United_States#19th_century_wars

I'll read the plain font, and you'll read the italics.

Arise, then, women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism of that of water or of tears!

Say firmly: "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,
"Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience.

We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.

From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, "Disarm, Disarm!"

The sword of murder is not the balance of justice! Blood does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession.

As men have often forsaken the plow and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.

Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as the means whereby the great human family can live in peace,

And each bearing after her own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

A few years later Howe campaigned for a "Mothers Peace Day" to happen each year on June 2.

She organized Unitarian and Universalist women ministers—there were a handful of us back in the 1870's—and she even preached sometimes.

By this time her husband's resistance to her leadership and intellect had softened, and he even admired her, and apologized. When he died in 1876 there was peace between them.

Mother's Peace Day, unfortunately, didn't stick on June 2nd. In fact it was soon replaced by a new iteration of Mother's Day, one that was less threatening than women organizing themselves to reclaim their power from "irrelevant agencies." One that did not involve women telling men how things are going to be from now on.

The new Mother's Day was a tradition not of women as leaders, but of women as caregivers. It was a woman named Anna Jarvis who started that one, in the early 1900's, inspired by her grief for her mother, who had died. ²

Although Anna's mother had been involved in the mothers' peacemaking movement, Anna had a different vision for the holiday. She envisioned Mother's Day as a personal and spiritual day, not one for political activism. She pictured families spending time together, mothers wearing white carnations, and special church services.

Jarvis sought financial support for her vision from a local department store. As she held a mothers day celebration at a local church, thousands of people showed up to the department store for special events there. She had no idea that was foreshadowing of the commercialization of Mother's Day.

It was Jarvis who got the holiday added to the national calendar. She noticed that national holidays were biased toward men and male achievement, and she went on a campaign to get people to sign petitions and write letters asking that Mother's Day be made a national holiday.

She prevailed. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson made it official, designating the second Sunday in May.

And then... it went off the rails. Jarvis had engaged the help of an increasing number of florists and other businesses to promote the Mother's Day vision, but once the day was made an US holiday, that early partnership quickly devolved into a bonanza of commercialization.

Jarvis was alarmed at the way card companies, florists, department stores, and other businesses capitalized on the holiday, making it more about shopping than about reverence and gratitude.

Six years after the measure was signed, Jarvis was disgusted, and began openly speaking out against the direction things had taken. She urged people not to buy cards, flowers, and gifts. It was a lost cause that she spent the rest of her life fighting. She threatened lawsuits, criticized Eleanor Roosevelt for using Mother's Day to raise money for charity, and—according to historian Katharine Antolini—Jarvis even “crashed” a candy convention in Philadelphia.

Jarvis eventually denounced the holiday altogether, and tried to get it removed from the national calendar.

When you give birth, whether it is to a person or an idea, you never really know what you're bringing into the world, do you?

² <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/05/140508-mothers-day-nation-gifts-facts-culture-moms/>

We nurture what is dear to us, but ultimately all that is born is born into its own path, and we have only so much influence.

And we make miscalculations. We don't know what we don't know, until we discover it with that 20-20 hindsight.

Mother's Day, the way it has played out now, is a mixed bag. On the one hand, it is good to give thanks for the sacrifices made for us by the people who have mothered us;

whether we had the blessing of a loving mother in our childhood home,

or whether we have received a patchwork of mothering from multiple people throughout our lives, as we tried to make up for what the mothers fate delivered us to were unable to give.

At the very least, each one of us arrived in this world through the process of pregnancy and birth—no small sacrifice, either of those, even in the best of circumstances, when they are a great joy.

On the other hand, the focus on sacrificial mothering casts a very narrow mold for what mothering is and what it should look like. What fits in that narrow mold? The housewife who pursues no calling or personal passion except for a life of service to her family.

The mother who keeps giving and sacrificing until everything looks as it "should"—clean house, perfectly behaved children, healthy meals prepared from scratch. If things don't turn out so tidily, the implication is that she must not be giving enough to the effort.

And by the way, her hair and make up should be neatly done—but not so nicely that it looks like she actually spent any significant time on herself. And she should be happy. All the time.

You know what I mean. It's the greeting card version of Mother's Day.

Now, hear me when I say that it is okay for mothers—and fathers too, for that matter— to choose to be stay at home parents.

I did it when my kids were very little, and I loved it.

But not everyone can choose it, and not everyone wants to.

And when you fall outside something that is lauded as "ideal", it can be very painful. Especially when it comes to something as precious as the task of mothering.

That commercialized, sacrificial version of Mother's Day casts a very narrow mold, and also, it is disempowering.

How can a woman stand in her power, when she is pouring out all that she is for someone else?

And it makes other kinds of mothers invisible. In the commercialized Mother's Day, you can find a card that says "Best Mom Ever," but not one for the mother living with mental illness, or who is incarcerated. 1.2 million women are under supervision of the criminal justice system. In state prisons, more than half have children under 18.

Mother's Day Cards typically give off an air of sweetness and flowery femininity—what about the mother who is a police officer? A pipe-fitter? Or a transgendered man?

What about single mothers? Teen mothers? And by the way have you ever tried to find a Mother's Day card with photos of people on it who are not white people?

Seriously. It's gotten to the point where I walk through the aisle at the store and go "here's another card for white people." I may be white, but my family is not all white, and I'd feel weird giving them a card that is.

Those images convey something besides Happy Mother's Day... and it's uncomfortable.

That's why the Mamas Day movement is so cool.

Mamas Day was launched in 2011 by a national coalition called Strong Families.

Strong Families is a big, multi-racial network of leaders and groups whose mission is to make public policy "catch up to the way we *actually* live." Meaning, we need affordable, good quality childcare, because mothers actually work. We need to dismantle institutionalized racism, because families are actually multiracial. We need access to the full range of reproductive healthcare, because mothers and non-mothers alike need to be able to plan their lives and take care of their health.

We need humane immigration policies, because family members are born in different countries. And marriage equality, because some families actually have *two* mothers. And transgender protections. You see.

It's a holistic kind of advocacy for what families need in order to be strong. Strong Families.

Our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, is part of the national Strong Families coalition.

Strong Families launched the Mamas Day movement as an antidote to the commercialized Mother's Day;

as an antidote to the old, too-narrow mold.

While Mother's Day all too often reinforces the notion that there is one right way to be a mother or a family, the Mamas Day website has eCards portraying lots of

diverse and beautiful families. And it has inspiration and tools to keep actively, intentionally shaping our society so that all families have the recognition, rights, and resources that they need to thrive.

In our reading this morning, Sobonfu Somé says it takes a whole village not only to raise a child but to look after the emotional health of the parents.

That's what Mamas Day is about. Seeing each other and supporting each other, so that mamas are empowered, encouraged, and equipped to love their families and themselves.

By being part of First Unitarian, you help support that.

Not only is our larger denomination involved, once a month I sit at a table with Strong Families' New Mexico Field Director, Adrienne Barboa, as well as leaders from the ACLU and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and we make plans to move reproductive justice forward in New Mexico.

This week the Santa Fe New Mexican published an op-ed I wrote that came out of these meetings, calling on state legislators to stop wasting time proposing anti-abortion bills that are doomed to fail, and instead focus on our budget crisis and other fixable problems that are hurting New Mexican families.

And in this congregation, we tackle lots of social justice issues, including racism.

In fact there are still some spots available for next Saturday's workshop by Tonya Covington. Tonya is the executive director of the non profit, Peacemakers, and she is going to lead a workshop that will equip you to interrupt prejudice and be the change you want to see in the world.

The Social Justice Council paid for the workshop using funds we all raised together in their auction last year, so the only cost next Saturday would be \$10 for lunch. That's pretty cool, right? \$10 to learn something important and new, and you can add it to your resume or college application after that.

You know what else? I know for a fact that when one person registered, she pre-paid lunches for two other people, so if you hustle over to the social hall after this service you might even get one of those free spots. Look for the table where you can register for the workshop.

Julia Ward Howe is long gone now. She was a woman of her time, privileged from birth by her economic status and race. Her words sound old fashioned, and she never could have imagined what motherhood in the US would look like today. But I can't help but think that Mamas Day is much more aligned with the spirit of her Mother's Day Proclamation than any greeting card even has been.

Mamas Day is about peacemaking in the deeply spiritual sense. We tend to think of peace as a passive situation. If nothing is happening, then things are peaceful. But

the biblical concept of peace is much bigger than that. The word shalom means to be complete or whole, and to live well. It refers to health, right relationship with others, fulfillment, and the absence of war.

That the kind of peace that Mamas Day is about.

If we were to write a Mamas Day Proclamation for today, what might it say?

Arise, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts, and all hearts who identify as women.

Say firmly, we will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies.

Our national budget shall not reek of carnage, while our children receive deficient educations,

We shall not be deported, or incarcerated, or disenfranchised, while our leaders feign dismay over the lack of concerned citizens in our country.

We shall not accept the falsehood that racism and misogyny are dead, while women and their loved ones continue to bear the brunt of institutionalized racism and sexism.

Arise!

Arise, and speak, and act,

for it is the soul's work to stand in our power,

to walk in the ways of love,

to insist on a society that does right by, and does not just thank, mothers.