

Mother's Day for Peace
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading – Mother's Day Proclamation, by Julia Ward Howe (1870)

Arise, then, women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be of water or of tears! Say firmly:

"We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies, our husbands will 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, the 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 plough 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 to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace.

Sermon

Some musings about mothers (of course, on Mother's Day) and peace.

We heard Julia Ward Howe's 1870 Mother's Day Proclamation earlier.

I guess she was ahead of her time. Though there *were* Mother's Day for Peace celebrations in Boston for ten years or so, they apparently ran out of steam when Howe stopped funding them herself. So *her* Mother's Day, focused on peace, never gained a foothold; whereas a few decades later the more easily sentimentalized and generalized Mother's Day became a national holiday – with all the attendant commercialization.

What happened? Maybe our culture couldn't handle the full force of the primal energy and passion of mother and of women. Maybe we were not ready for peace.

I'll leave such speculation to historians and sociologists. But you don't need to be a scholar to feel the power of the language of Julia Ward Howe's 1870 proclamation. And we can hope that though she may have been ahead of her time 137 years ago, maybe her time has come. In any case, listen again to a few of her words:

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.

There is power. Whatever you think of the way she put things, there is power. Can you imagine the Hallmark card based on Julia Ward Howe's words?

Anna Jarvis, by the way, who spearheaded the drive that led to the national holiday of Mother's Day finally being proclaimed by Woodrow Wilson several decades after Howe's proclamation, was adamantly opposed to its commercialization. She hated cut flowers and said that a card was a poor excuse for the letter we were too lazy to write!

And her mother (also named Anna Jarvis) in whose honor she wanted to create Mother's Day, was herself a social activist who had started what she called "Mothers Work Days" in the 1850s in West Virginia. So it is ironic in a variety of ways that Mother's Day so quickly became commercialized and narrowly sentimentalized. This was not Anna Jarvis' intention any more than it would have been Julia Ward Howe's intention.

Now it's not that I'm against sentiment – I'm as sentimental as the next person, particularly when it comes to mothers. And I have bought my share of cards and flowers. But when sentiment (which simply means "feeling" after all) degenerates into sentimentality, you can be pretty sure we have lost something – and maybe lost a lot.

And whatever else we've lost when it comes to Mother's Day, we've lost the richness of a day that could include all the wonderful, sweet, sloppy sentiment – I am firmly in favor of sweet, sloppy sentiment – but could *also* be much more, in the spirit of Mother's Day for Peace.

Yet... maybe we haven't lost it altogether. There are more than a few indications that we haven't lost it altogether. After all, preachers from many UU pulpits – and maybe other pulpits too – each year remind listeners of Julia Ward Howe's inspiring words. Women's peace groups issue their own proclamations on Mother's Day. There is even a new web site, Mothersdayforpeace.org, encouraging contributions to help victims of war. The site includes celebrities and other women reading Julia Ward Howe's proclamation (Vanessa Williams, Felicity Huffman, Christine Lahti, Alfre Woodward, Fatma Saleh, Ashraf Salimian, and Gloria Steinem).

So maybe Julia Ward Howe is making a comeback – and none too soon.

Though it's not as if mothers have been inactive between 1870 and 2007. Women, mothers among them, have been leaders in various peace movements throughout all these years and decades.

Another Mother for Peace was founded during the Vietnam War, with the slogan: "War is not healthy for children and other living things." Do you remember that? They were, as many of you will recall, among the groups which were instrumental in bringing the Vietnam War to an end. They printed Mother's Day cards with these words:

For my Mother's Day gift this year,
I don't want candy or flowers.
I want an end to killing.

We who have given life
must be dedicated to preserving it.

Please talk peace.

And though Another Mother for Peace became inactive for two decades, I've just learned that they are up and running again.

And just the other day there was an article in the "Boston Globe" about an organization called "Raging Grannies" – probably many of the same women who were Another Mother for Peace thirty years ago. I had never heard of the Raging Grannies, but it turns out there is a network of these local groups of singing activists who protest all manner of injustice, environmental crimes, and war. Granny power, which maybe is mother power squared!

And, speaking of “square,” take a look at the group which stands in Hingham Square each Tuesday at 11:30 holding signs and flags for peace – on most weeks, it looks to me that about half are grannies. I’m just glad it’s not a requirement, since I like to join them when I can.

And finally, one of the mothers (so to speak) of all vigils began in the late 1970s under the military dictatorship in Argentina. You may remember this. It began when the mothers and grandmothers of some of the tens of thousands of the “disappeared” – including many young children – began marching on the Plaza de Mayo, across from the Presidential Palace. They marched for years. When the exiled Argentine writer Julio Cortazar first heard of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo he said, “The mothers are out, the military have already lost.” (*as reported by “Los Angeles Times” Paris correspondent Sebastian Rotella*)

And mothers don’t only stand and march and speak *against* war. They work for peace and they work for the justice which brings peace.

You know the bumper sticker: if you want peace, work for justice. It’s a good bumper sticker. And it’s true.

After all, if everyone were treated fairly, if everyone had enough to eat and a roof over their heads, if nations received fair profits for the resources within their borders and workers received fair wages for their labor, if everyone were free to practice their religion without interference from governments or anyone else... then wouldn’t violence and war be far less likely...?

If you want peace, work for justice.

Of course. Any mother – any parent really – knows this within a family. How many arguments among siblings begin with one brother or sister feeling they have been treated unfairly as compared with another – might have to do with unequal portions of dessert, or might have to do with unequal portions of an inheritance; there is no age limit on sibling rivalry and argument.

And... any mother – or parent – also knows that it is no simple matter to ensure not only actual fairness, but to ensure that siblings *feel* they are being treated fairly.

Hard work. But every time a mother teaches fairness in her family, she is sowing seeds of justice and helping to create more peace. Any time she demonstrates kindness and compassion in her family, she is sowing seeds of justice and helping to create more peace.

Of course it is no easy task to keep and teach peace among brothers and sisters in a family. So... how are we to manage on a planet of six billion brothers and sisters?

Well, one modest thing we can do is to reclaim Mother’s Day... for Peace.

And not just *against* war, but *for* peace. (Shirley Brown is always careful to correct people on this point when they ask about the “anti-war” vigil in Hingham Square...) *For* peace and this means, as I’ve said, for the justice which makes peace, which means vote for justice, send emails for justice, make contributions to organizations working for justice. As recently as a little earlier this morning, we heard of a remarkable organization, Women to Women International, women partnering with women who have survived the plague of war, women helping to empower other women to be active citizens, to start businesses, to support their families, to lead whole societies to a better way.

Nabito, a Congolese mother raped by soldiers in the midst of war, now – thanks to Women to Women International – owns a small business selling rice with which she supports her family. Nabito, one woman representative of thousands of women from Rwanda to Afghanistan, from Bosnia to Iraq – women making new lives and leading in new ways from war to peace. All thanks to Women to Women International.

You know, our entire nation – mothers and fathers and all of us – could have seized such a direction on September 12, 2001. Even amid the despair and sadness, so many of us were so hopeful. Yet whereas we could have embarked upon a path (a motherly path you might say) of seeking peace by creating justice, we could have led the world on such a path – that’s the kind of

nation we could have been or become; instead we sought revenge and control. We sowed the wind, and we are reaping the whirlwind. We. Actually more than anyone it is the people of Iraq who have been victims of the whirlwind, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands killed, millions of refugees. In short, we so quickly squandered the good will felt by millions toward us in the aftermath of 9/11. There were candlelight vigils on the streets of Tehran for heaven's sake! And we so quickly squandered – or squashed, pushed down, put aside, forgot – our own good will and compassion as well.

We can only hope that we will have another chance to become the kind of nation and people that at heart we yearn to be, believe ourselves to be, the kind of nation that knows, with A.J. Muste – and maybe with most mothers and with the mothering energy somewhere within each of us – that “There is no way to peace; peace is the way.”

Now – before I close I will at least name a question I can't and won't even try to answer, a question which lurks within all of this: *are* mothers somehow uniquely suited to bring the message of peace to the world? As primal life givers, are they more suited than men to create peace? Because society has done less to suppress feeling and emotion in women and mothers than in men, are they more suited? Well... who knows?

In any case we honor today, on Mother's Day, these mothers who do stand for peace, who lead the way to peace.

And so, may all of us, mothers or fathers, women or men, whoever we are and whatever we do with our days, may all of us in ways small and large, tap the wellspring of mothering energy that *is* within every one of us, that mothering energy which of course wants simple fairness for every person, that wants happiness for every person, that wants peace for us all. As we heard last week from Buddhist scripture, may we each care for all beings with the same spirit of compassion and love with which a mother cares for her child.

Mothers are – I hesitate to say it today, but our mothers taught us to tell the truth – mothers are no more or less perfect than anyone else. But whatever else they have done mothers *have* given birth, given the gift of life. And so, inspired by this gift – our own lives after all! – we can all, whether we are mothers or not, strive to nourish and sustain life with *our* lives, *our* energy, *our* compassion – of course not just on Mother's Day, but every day. And not just in Hingham Square on Tuesday mornings, but also in our families, among friends, in the garden, in our place of work, in our lives, with our energy, with our checkbook, with our pen, with our email.

Yes, today we properly honor mothers. Yet may we make every day a Mother's Day for Peace, a Father's Day for Peace, a Children's Day for Peace. You know, Memorial Day should be a day for peace too; July 4 should be a day for peace.

Yes, inspired by our mothers and the lessons they strived to teach us, may we make every day a Day for Peace.

So may it be.