

JULIA WARD HOWE and MOTHER'S DAY

Partially in response to the rampant misogyny of the current Presidential campaign and partially to remind us that our Unitarian foremothers were often at the forefront of change in this country, I decided to recast a sermon originally written several years ago about our own Julia Ward Howe and Mothers Day!

Contrary to what has become common belief, Mother's Day didn't start out as a 'Hallmark Holiday,' Julia Ward Howe had a very different idea about what Mother's Day was about! Not that a day to appreciate the way that mothers affect our lives in mostly positive ways is a bad thing, not at all. And yet, Julia Ward Howe, one of our Unitarian foremothers, had a really important message in her vision of Mother's Day.

Remembered today primarily for her "Battle Hymn of the Republic," Howe was an essayist and poet, an abolitionist and an important leader of the women's suffrage movement.

According to an article by Joan Goodwin found on the UU Historical Society website:

Julia Ward was born in New York City, third of the six children of Julia Rush Cutler and Samuel Ward, a wealthy banker. Julia was tutored at home and at private schools in literature, languages, science and mathematics. She knew French from early childhood, began Italian at 14, later added German, and read Latin and Greek with ease. She had music lessons and voice training with the finest teachers available. The family home on Bond Street included an extensive library and art gallery. At 16 she left school and, in her words, "began thereafter to study in good earnest," continuing throughout her life to read literature, history and philosophy. By the time she was 20, she had written literary criticism published anonymously in the *Literary and Theological Review and the New York Review*.

Her mother died when Julia was five. Afterwards their father's influence dominated the children's lives. Samuel Ward, an Episcopalian and a strict Calvinist, was fiercely protective of them. Even so they enjoyed the fashionable social scene, especially after Samuel Ward Jr. married into the Astor family. High-spirited Julia, with her auburn hair, blue eyes and beautiful voice, was extremely popular.

Mourning the death of her father in 1839, and soon afterwards that of a brother and a sister-in-law, she turned to the religion of her upbringing, though her reading had exposed her to more liberal ideas. Later she wrote, "I studied my way out of all the mental agonies which Calvinism can engender and became a Unitarian." Mary Ward of Boston sent her a sermon by [William Ellery Channing](#), which she found helpful. While visiting Mary in 1841, Julia heard Channing preach and attended a [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) lecture and a [Margaret Fuller](#) conversation.

Also during that visit Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Charles Sumner took her to visit the New England Institute for the Blind (later the Perkins Institute) and meet Laura Bridgman, the phenomenal blind, deaf-mute student of Samuel Gridley Howe. While they were there Howe rode up on his black horse, "a noble rider on a noble steed," Julia remembered. Eighteen years her senior, this pioneer educator of children with multiple handicaps was indeed "noble"; a hero of the Greek war for independence, he bore the title "Chevalier of the Order of St. Savior."

A courtship began, and a wedding followed in April, 1843. Though strongly attracted to one another, both expressed misgivings before their marriage. Reformer Samuel Howe wanted a wife to support him in his work and doubted whether a talented socialite was equal to the task. Julia Ward admired Howe extravagantly but recognized their differences. He was serious and wholly focused on his work; she was brilliant and witty, loved literature, music, and the social scene.

Their location at the Institute in South Boston made it difficult for Julia to find the intellectual and emotional stimulation she craved, but she regularly attended Sunday services of Theodore Parker and later James Freeman Clark.

Over the years, Julia published books of poetry, essays, columns and reviews, even though her husband neither approved of nor supported her work. Their difficult marriage resulted in 6 children, the last of whom died in childhood. They thought of divorce, but Samuel insisted on keeping the younger children, a situation Julia found intolerable and unacceptable and resigned herself to remain with Samuel.

Goodwin's article goes on describing Julia's life and work:

During the 1850s Parker and Howe had drawn Julia into William Lloyd Garrison's anti-slavery group. When war broke out both Howes worked with the Sanitary Commission. On a trip to Washington in 1861, they went to watch a Union army review which was suddenly dispersed by a Confederate attack. On the way back to the city in their carriage surrounded by retreating troops, the Howe party began to sing patriotic songs, including the popular "John Brown's Body." James Freeman Clarke, one of the party, suggested to

Julia that she write new and better lyrics for the tune. At the hotel late that night, the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" began forming in her mind. In February, 1862, *The Atlantic* published "The Battle Hymn," paying its author \$5. Gradually the song caught on until it swept the North.

During and after the war, Howe appeared publicly many times. In 1864 she read a poem at a gala New York event honoring William Cullen Bryant's 70th birthday. She also read her essays and lectures to private gatherings.

In 1867 she was invited to join the Radical Club, which met monthly at the home of Cyrus Bartol or John T. Sargent. Other members were Ralph Waldo Emerson, [Frederic Henry Hedge](#), Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William Henry Channing and James Freeman Clarke.

In 1868 Julia Ward Howe joined [Caroline Severance](#) in founding the New England Woman's Club. She also signed the call to the meeting that formed the New England Woman Suffrage Association and served as its president, 1868-77 and 1893-1910. In 1869 she and Lucy Stone led the formation of the American Woman Suffrage Association when its members separated from the National Association of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Howe presided over the Massachusetts Suffrage Association, 1870-78 and 1891-93. From its first issue in 1870 she edited and contributed to the *Woman's Journal* founded by Lucy Stone.

In the 1870s, during the Franco-Prussian war, Julia felt "the cruel and unnecessary character of the contest. . . . a return to barbarism, the issue having been one which might easily have been settled without bloodshed." She began a one-woman peace crusade that began with an impassioned "appeal to womanhood" to rise against war. She translated her proclamation into several languages and distributed it widely. In 1872 she went to London to promote an international Woman's Peace Congress but was not able to bring it off. Back in Boston, she initiated a Mothers' Peace Day observance on the second Sunday in June and held the meeting for a number of years. Her idea spread but was later replaced by the Mothers' Day holiday now celebrated in May.

During denominational meetings in May, 1875, Julia Ward Howe called together the first convention of women ministers. Among those attending the meeting at Church of the Disciples were Universalist Lorenza Haynes and Unitarians Mary Graves and [Eliza Tupper Wilkes](#). Howe hosted such meetings in coming years, and other conveners succeeded her.

After (Samuel's) death Julia went on an extensive lecture tour through the West to raise money for a two-year trip to Europe and the Middle East with her youngest daughter Maud. When they visited relatives in Italy, a niece described her Aunt Julia at 60 as "a small woman of no particular shape or carriage, clothes never quite taken care of, her bonnets never quite straight on her head; and yet there was about her presence an

unforgettable distinction and importance. Her speaking voice was very beautiful, and her face had a sensitive gravity, a look of compassionate wisdom, until a twinkle of fun rippled over it and a naughty imp laughed in her eyes."

In Boston her busy social and organizational life centered in a house at 241 Beacon St. She continued writing and lecturing, organizing women's clubs wherever she went. She preached frequently at her own Church of the Disciples and other Unitarian churches and, in 1893, gave an address at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, titled "What Is Religion?"

In 1908 Julia Ward Howe was the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Not long before her death Smith College accorded her an honorary degree. The ceremony included "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," often performed to celebrate her appearances.

Julia Ward Howe died (at age 91) on October 17, 1910. Services were held at Church of the Disciples and at Symphony Hall with crowds overflowing both buildings. Maud Howe Elliott wrote, "A long succession of meetings of commemoration were held by her church, her clubs, the many associations she had founded and worked for. So great was the outpouring of love and reverence that it seemed as if her beloved name were writ in fire across the firmament."

Mother's Day would be quite different today if it continued the vision of Julia Ward Howe. It would be a day of peacemaking and perhaps recognizing and honoring the wisdom, creativity, and accomplishments of women rather than merely a day of giving mothers roses or carnations, cards, and chocolates. Men have too often felt threatened by the power and abilities of women. Keep the women 'barefoot and pregnant,' but don't listen to their ideas or hear their concerns. So much easier to keep women down if you can ignore what they have to say or pretend that they are not every bit as smart and wise and creative as men, if not more so. Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day Proclamation could actually have reshaped history (yeah, not herstory, history) if enough women had joined together to say enough of these wars begun by men who wouldn't ask for directions, I mean who wouldn't negotiate for a mutual good, but would rather lock themselves into some untenable position rather than risk be accused of flip-flopping.

A lot of women enjoy receiving flowers, cards, and candy and being taken out to eat, but I expect most would appreciate even more being taken seriously,

being honored for what they think and believe and accomplish, rather than just for their beauty and kindness and childbearing and childrearing.

Yes, Mother's Day could have been a very different holiday, a very different kind of celebration, a very different spirit! But there is nothing bad about Mother's Day, really, it just could have been so much more!

My mother, Alice Mary Jarvis Klein, was a Master's level Professional Engineer, having graduated with a BS and an MS in Civil Engineering from the University of Minnesota in the 1940s, one of the first women to enter the field of Engineering. She was smart, tough, and articulate and she expected my brother and me to do well in school and life. She didn't let us get away with much! My schoolmates remember her for assigning words like **sphygmomanometer** when she was substitute teaching during the 17 year interlude while raising my brother and me. Even when she returned to Engineering, it was still a field where men dominated and women had to be pretty thick-skinned. Widowed in 1991 when my dad died, she never fully recovered from her first hip replacement and went downhill in her latter years, dying at 82 back in 2008. My mom was unforgettable, and I still miss her!

What would you each like to say about your mother? What lasting memories or words of appreciation do you have for your mother that you would like to share? Let's take a few moments for sharing.

Thank you for sharing your memories and appreciations!

Amen!