

Ain't Gonna Study War No More

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We could argue about who the true mother of Mother's Day is. Like many things in history, there are competing claims coming from various places. But the one thing common to all histories of this day is that greeting cards and flowers have little to do with it until the early 20th century, when it became a Federally-recognized holiday.

Two nineteenth-century women are often cited as the mothers of Mother's Day; each has a good claim. I'm willing to give them both some credit.

Both of these women conceived of days in which mothers would be organized—not celebrated. Both cared deeply about the society in which they lived, and thought that women needed to come together and demand changes to the way things worked. Both challenged our society's divisions, and both worked for peace, each in her own way.

The first of these women was Anna Reeves Jarvis, who lived in what is now West Virginia. According to Ruth Rosen, writing in Slate magazine, "In 1858, Anna Reeves Jarvis organized Mother's Work Days in West Appalachian communities to protest the lack of sanitation that caused disease-bearing insects and polluted water to sicken or even kill poor workers."

After the initial gatherings were held, Jarvis organized Mother's Work Day clubs in towns across West Virginia. These clubs raised money for healthcare in their communities.

The Mother's Day Work clubs later centered their work on creating hospitals and centers to treat, feed and house soldiers wounded in the American Civil War. Jarvis insisted that the clubs openly declare their neutrality in the war, and they treated both Union and Confederate wounded alike.

After the war, Jarvis turned her attention to healing the deep divisions in the society around her—divisions that were stark in postbellum Appalachia, where families often had soldiers who fought on both sides of the Civil War. Her Mother's Work Days became Mother's Friendship Days in the late 1860s, dedicated to inspiring women to bring together families torn apart by the Civil War.

It was Anna Reeves Jarvis' daughter, confusingly also named Anna Jarvis, who lobbied Congress for the national holiday in her mother's honor, a campaign she won in 1914, partially because of the backing of the greeting card and flower industries. The younger Anna Jarvis then spent the rest of her life fighting the commercialization of the holiday. As any card store or florist can tell you, she lost that battle.

The second important figure in the history of Mother's Day is someone of special interest to Unitarian Universalists. Her campaign to establish a Mother's Day of Peace each year swept across our nation in the late nineteenth century, and her day was celebrated for more than 30 years.

This second mother of Mother's Day is Julia Ward Howe.

Howe grew up in New York City, the daughter of a wealthy couple who were theologically quite conservative. Her mother died when she was five years old, and her strict and protective father dominated her life. He encouraged her to become educated, and she took to the study of languages and literature. In her late teens, she had several essays of literary criticism published anonymously in well-established literary magazines in New York (anonymously because women couldn't get such things published under their own names in prestigious publications in those days).

After her father's death when she was 20, young Julia found herself uncomfortable with the religion of her upbringing. It was at that time that she was introduced to the writings of William Ellery Channing, an early American Unitarian minister, and to the radical liberal transcendentalist theology of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller. She soon thereafter became a Unitarian.

On a trip to Boston, she met and fell in love with Samuel Gridley Howe, a pioneering educator of children with multiple physical handicaps. Howe was also widely known as a social reformer—his work in education, organizing for social safety nets, and against slavery were at least as important to him as was his marriage.

The Howes were part of elite social circles in mid-nineteenth century Boston. Their friends, co-workers and acquaintances read like a "Who's Who" of Unitarian history. Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Caroline Severance, and Horace and Mary Mann were among the famous Unitarians they were close to in Boston.

They were also good friends with Theodore Parker, Unitarian minister, transcendentalist and ardent abolitionist, who famously kept a loaded gun on his desk as he wrote his sermons, so numerous were the threats on his life; the gun sat beside him on his pulpit as he preached, lest slave-catchers enter his church, where escaped slaves worshipped openly.

The Howes became ardent supporters of the abolition of slavery. Their support for this cause, however, was shown in very different ways—Samuel through actions, and Julia through words, as she began a career as a published poet and playwright. These (and other) differences made their marriage a troubled one, but they stuck it out. The outbreak of the civil war brought them back together—as a team working together with the Sanitary Commission, the forerunner of the American Red Cross, organized to help the Union cause by improving conditions in army camps and running hospitals for the wounded of war. As a biography of her explains:

“Her emergence as a [recognized and] published writer corresponds... with Samuel's increasing involvement in the abolitionist cause. In 1856, as Samuel led anti-slavery settlers to Kansas... Julia published poems and plays.

As a result of their voluntary work with the Sanitary Commission, in 1862 Samuel and Julia Howe were invited to Washington by President Lincoln. The Howes visited a Union Army camp in Virginia across the Potomac. There, they heard the men singing the song which had been sung by both North and South, one in admiration of John Brown, one in celebration of his death: ‘John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in his grave.’

A clergyman in the party, James Freeman Clarke, who knew of Julia's published poems, urged her to write a new song for the war effort to replace ‘John Brown's Body.’

The result was a poem, published first in February 1862 in the Atlantic Monthly, and called ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic.’” (Julia’s Voice website)

Battle Hymn of the Republic, of course, became well-known throughout the country, making Julia Ward Howe quite famous.

After the Civil War, Julia Ward Howe became active in the movement for women’s suffrage and women’s equality, but the things she saw in her service with the Sanitary Commission stayed with her.

When, in the late 1860s, the Franco-Prussian conflict began to escalate, Howe decided that she must do something.

As a well-known celebrity, she had a wide public audience, which she used to organize women for peace. Her Mother’s Day Proclamation was issued in 1870, and it asked women to come together on June 2 to put an end to war.

In that proclamation, she combined her two passions: the equality of women in the political arena and peace. She asked women to reject their second-class status as citizens and to rally together and demand that no more of their sons and husbands be sent to war to die.

She wrote:

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 questions answered 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.

Like Anna Jarvis, Howe envisioned a holiday in which mothers would come together to demand that our society change its ways. She, like Jarvis, believed that the empowerment of women in our society would help us create a better world. Both of these women believed that the compassion born of motherhood was sorely needed in a world torn apart by violence and injustice.

Julia Ward Howe and Anna Reeves Jarvis each invented a Mother's Day. Neither was a holiday for buying sentimental cards and big bouquets of flowers. Neither was a holiday for special brunches and misty-eyed memories.

And yet, that's what we have today.

I'll admit it: I sent my mother a card for Mother's Day. I'll probably be taking her out to lunch when she comes and visits tomorrow, too. I sent my grandmother a card as well—and will most likely call her the minute I get home from the Fellowship this afternoon. I even bought a card for Eric to send to his mom (and I hope he's already called). Celebrating our mothers is a good thing.

I, like most Americans, have bought into the dominant culture, a culture that tells us that this day is meant to celebrate our mothers. As if we shouldn't be celebrating them the other days of the year!

This year, just for a few minutes, I wonder what it would be like if Mother's Day were instead a day to imagine a world run by mothers. Or maybe, since we know that mothers span a wide range of competencies, strengths and qualifications (along with a wide range of very human foibles, weaknesses and misjudgments), we can imagine a world run with the very best instincts of the very best mothers out there.

To imagine a world in which decisions were made with compassion, empathy and love. In which our leaders thought of each and every one of their citizens as children who had gestated in their womb for forty weeks, and not as disposable toys or collateral for bargaining.

Maybe, just for a little while today, before we get back to our brunches and flowers and long-distance phone calls (and we will, and this is good), we can imagine a world in which other people's children were seen as our own—so that the children of the homeless woman forced to pay rent for her cot in the New York City shelter were *our* children; so that the children of New Orleans were *our* children; so that the children of Darfur were *our* children.

What might that world look like?

Could we let our own children suffer? Could we let them die to settle scores between tribes or nations?

Not if we were acting with the very best instincts of the very best mothers. Certainly not.

Maybe we can put down the flowers and the cards, just for a little while today, and imagine the world that Julia Ward Howe saw in 1870.

A world where we study language instead of war. A world where every person's voice and contribution was valued equally. A world of peace, for all people—every son and every daughter, every mother and every father.

Let us imagine it, and let us make it so.

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