

RETHINKING OUR HOLIDAYS
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July 5, 2009

Reflection

Most Americans know Unitarian Julia Ward Howe as the author of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. But, her signature song is only one landmark in a long and active life. Howe was involved in many social reform movements. She opposed slavery and later worked with Lucy Stone and others on women's rights issues. But, her early career in the 1840's began as a writer. She published a number of scholarly articles in the *New York Review* and the *Theological Review*. Ten years later, after publishing collections of poetry, she wrote her first play, *Leonora*, that was "condemned as immoral" and closed after one week in New York City. She certainly was a woman possessed of many talents.

But, back to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. A year or two before *Leonora* was shut down, a man named William Steffe wrote a stirring campfire spiritual song. In no time, the song spread across the country. Two years later, on the eve of the American Civil War, John Brown died leading a raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. Out of his death came the infamous John Brown's Body version of the song, which inspired the anti-slavery forces. Shortly after that, the Civil War began, pitting the Confederate states of the American South against the Union forces of the Northern states.

Two years later, Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke heard Union soldiers singing the song and asked Howe to write more uplifting lyrics. That night by candlelight, Julia wrote the now famous lyrics. That is the story of how a Southerner, with the help of two Unitarians, is responsible for the most patriotic song of the Union forces in the Civil War. By the way, for those of you who love irony, the music for the song Dixie was written by a Northerner.

The Battle Hymn of the Republic was all but forgotten until the 1940's, when choral conductor Fred Waring re-introduced the song on his network radio show during World War II. The tune was such a hit for the Pennsylvanians, that Waring featured it as the closing number in his live concerts for the next 32 years. During the Civil Rights era, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. referenced lyrics from the song in sermons and speeches, including his last public words. *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* lives on as a cultural icon in film, music, books, and even video games.

Reflection

On March 25, 1965, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke from the steps of the Courthouse in Montgomery, Alabama. In this speech, he quoted the first and fourth verses of Julia Ward Howe's *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. The following is a short excerpt from that speech.

"The battle is in our hands. And we can answer with creative nonviolence the call to higher ground to which the new directions of our struggle summons us. The road ahead is not altogether a smooth one. There are no broad highways that lead us easily and inevitably to quick solutions. But we must keep going.

My people, my people, listen. The battle is in our hands. The battle is in our hands in Mississippi and Alabama and all over the United

States. I know there is a cry today in Alabama, we see it in numerous editorials: "When will Martin Luther King...and all of these civil rights agitators and all of the white clergymen and labor leaders and students and others get out of our community and let Alabama return to normalcy?"

But I have a message that I would like to leave with Alabama this evening. That is exactly what we don't want, and we will not allow it to happen, for we know that it was normalcy in Marion that led to the brutal murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson. It was normalcy in Birmingham that led to the murder on Sunday morning of four beautiful, unoffending, innocent girls. It was normalcy on Highway 80 that led state troopers to use tear gas and horses and billy clubs against unarmed human beings who were simply marching for justice. It was normalcy by a cafe in Selma, Alabama, that led to the brutal beating of Reverend James Reeb...

The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy that recognizes the dignity and worth of all of God's children. The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy that allows judgment to run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy of brotherhood, the normalcy of true peace, the normalcy of justice."

Sermon – Rethinking Our Holidays

After Julia Ward Howe wrote *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, the American Civil War raged on for four more bloody years of death and destruction. Five years after that, the Franco-Prussian War broke out in Europe and Howe acted. She began a one-woman global peace crusade, starting with an appeal to womanhood to rise against war. She went to London to promote an international Woman's Peace Congress. That effort failed, so she returned to Boston and initiated a Mothers' Peace Day observance on the second Sunday in June. That meeting was observed for a number of years.

Now, there were other movements afoot to create a day honoring mothers. Ann Jarvis was a young Appalachian homemaker who tried to improve sanitation through what she called Mothers' Work Days before the Civil War. When Jarvis died in 1907, her daughter Anna worked to found a memorial day for women. The first such Mother's Day was celebrated in Grafton, West Virginia on May 10, 1908, at St. Andrew's Methodist Episcopal Church, where Anna's mother had taught Sunday School. From there, the custom caught on and eventually spread to 45 states.

In 1913, Congress declared the second Sunday in May to be Mother's Day. The next year, Woodrow Wilson made Mother's Day a national holiday. This is long before radio and television, and advertising was still a new industry. But, the growing American consumer culture had successfully redefined women as buyers for their families. Politicians and businesses eagerly embraced the idea of celebrating the private sacrifices made by individual mothers. As the *Florists' Review*, the industry's trade journal, bluntly put it, "This was a holiday that could be exploited." The new advertising industry quickly taught Americans the best way to honor their mothers – by buying flowers.

Since then, Mother's Day has ballooned into a billion-dollar event. Again, for those of you who appreciate irony, Anna Jarvis became increasingly concerned over the commercialization of Mother's Day, saying, "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit." She opposed the use of greeting cards, calling them "a poor excuse for the letter

you are too lazy to write." In 1923, Jarvis filed suit against New York Governor Al Smith, over a Mother's Day celebration. When the suit was dismissed, she began a public protest and was arrested for... disturbing...the peace.

Most Unitarian Universalist congregations routinely observe Easter, Christmas, Passover, Hanukkah, Palm Sunday, and Yom Kippur, in addition to other holidays derived from Christian and Jewish traditions. We can understand the rationale for these celebrations and even concur with our commitment to them. But, harder to understand is our lack of uniquely Unitarian Universalist religious holidays. We engage in a Flower Communion in June – a deeply moving and meaningful practice honoring our service and dedication to justice across the globe. Many of our churches embrace a Water Communion ritual at the end of summer that embodies a spiritual depth and that unifies us in our common human experience. But, we do not set aside whole days to perform these worthy worship elements, nor do we plan our life activities around them for preceding days or weeks.

We can acknowledge the importance of Christmas and Easter to our Christian colleagues, both within this congregation and without. We can respect the place of Yom Kippur and Passover to all of our Jewish comrades. Thankfully, some of our churches offer solstice celebrations for our Wiccan and neo-pagan members and friends. But, where are the religious holidays that every Unitarian Universalist can embrace as his or her own, not just out of a sense of shared joy and reverence, not just out of tradition or habit, but out of true ownership?

The battle is in our hands. And we can answer with creative nonviolence the call to higher ground to which the new directions of our struggle summons us. In doing so, we too can disturb the peace. We can disturb the peace of normalcy that for too long has suffered the manipulations of the self-righteous and the war profiteers. We can disturb the peace of normalcy that turns every decent expression of sentiment and honor into an opportunity for retail sales and advertising bonanzas. For we can and should reclaim Mother's Day for the purpose Julia Ward Howe intended. The Mother's Day for Peace should rise up again to help us create a normal world where every person is regarded with inherent worth and dignity; a normal world with justice, equity, and compassion; a normal world with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Two years ago, Unitarian Universalist women in Kansas City began planning an event for the upcoming Mother's Day. "Julia's Voice" is a group of mothers and others joined together to return Mother's Day to its original intent. They peacefully assembled along a public sidewalk and, standing shoulder to shoulder, were joined by Julia Ward Howe re-enactors, musicians, and other special guests. That is one way to reclaim our holiday. There are many others.

We can take the money we spend on greeting cards and use it to send letters to politicians and businesses and tell them what we think about war. We can take the money we spend on flowers and use it to provide microloans, or to buy alternative gifts for women across the world in need of our assistance. We can use the day to write, to study, to talk with each other and plan for our future. And, we don't have to wait for Mother's Day to honor the mothers in our lives.

The original Mother's Day for Peace envisioned by Julia Ward Howe possessed deep meaning. The origins of Father's Day lack even this hint of significance beyond a maudlin celebration as manipulated by commercial interests. The beginnings of the first Father's Day celebrations derived from people listening to Mother's Day sermons in the early 1900's. It was not until the 1930's, however, when the Associated Men's Wear

Retailers formed the National Council for the Promotion of Father's Day, that a concerted effort to legitimize the holiday arose.

People were slow to accept Father's Day because they saw the holiday for the marketing device that it was. And yet, people increasingly felt compelled to buy gifts in spite of the facade, and the custom of giving gifts on that day became progressively more accepted. By 1937, the Council calculated that only one father in six had received a present on that day. By the 1980's, the Council proclaimed that they had achieved their goal: that one day holiday had become a three-week commercial event, a "second Christmas."

Well, if Madison Avenue can create a holiday celebrated across the country by millions of people, why can't we reshape that holiday into one with deeper meaning and perhaps with broader purpose? Why can't we, as we reclaim the Unitarian Universalist heritage of Mother's Day as a day promoting world peace, recast Father's Day with a new intent and with a new range of activities and ways to involve everyone in our religious communities?

Especially to all of the young people here today, this point is important. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. What exactly does that mean to you? When you come here for Sunday School classes, how do you see yourself freely and responsibly searching for truth and meaning?

For me, it means that I will think for myself and not let other people do my thinking for me. It means that when I decide to do something, I will do it because I want to, not because other people want me to. And, it means that whatever I think or do in my life, I want those thoughts and actions to mean something – to be important.

Now, I hope that everyone here has had a father, or one or more people in your lives who served the role of fathers. And I hope that the relationship that you have with that person is a loving one. You should feel free to take the time to honor and to share your thoughts with that person anytime, and not wait for the calendar to limit you. There is no rule that says that you must wait until Father's Day to reach out to the fathers in your life.

So, what then do we do with the Father's Day holiday? As we reclaim Mother's Day for world peace, let us rededicate Father's Day as a celebration of domestic peace – peace in our homes and peace in our hearts.

Responsive reading #602 in the back of our hymnal quotes Lao-Tse, the central founding figure of Taoism 2,500 years ago.

- If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations.
- If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities.
- If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors.
- If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home.
- If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.

The essence of this wisdom is this. We must have peace within ourselves and our families before we can become peacemakers in our communities and in our world. Father's Day can become a time for reflection and study about our own lives; a time for families to bond and resolve differences; a time to strengthen the foundation of peace that can lead to a world without war. For the more practically-minded, Father's Day can become a day to support agencies that combat domestic violence and that support healthy lives for children.

Mother's Day and Father's Day as we currently celebrate them can represent a noble exercise. Those who fulfill the roles of mothers and fathers in our society deserve our respect and our recognition. The question we must ask ourselves, however, is this. How do we best honor our mothers and fathers? How do we best honor the parents of all the other children of the world? How do we best honor those who assume this responsibility for tomorrow's children?

Considered together, a Unitarian Universalist revisioning of Mother's Day and Father's Day can celebrate men and women as role models for children and as partners for each other. As religious celebrations, these holidays can represent our commitment to the principles of our covenant, from the inherent worth and dignity of every person to the goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

An essential broader message overlays this idea to remember when you leave here today, when you sit at your desk this week, or when you return to school in a couple of months. Ask questions when you do not understand why things are the way they are. Challenge rules and beliefs that you see as unfair or oppressive. Use what you acquire here on Sunday morning to shine a religious light on all aspects of your life. Use that religious lens to rethink every aspect of your life, of our society, and of our world.

Benediction

These modern words are modeled after Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day Proclamation of 1870.

Arise, then, men of this day! Arise all men who have hearts,
whether forged from fire or from fears!

Say firmly: We will not have our families damaged by outmoded stereotypes. Our partners shall not come to us, cowering and frightened. Our sons and daughters shall not go into the world equating manliness with malevolence, but with mercy. Our children will know men capable of compassion with strength; patience with wisdom; and forgiveness with justice.

We men of one community must be too tender of those of another community to allow our sons to accept violence as a tool of communication. From the bosom of our devastated homes a voice goes up with our own. It says "Men of the world! The fist of anger cannot wield the touch of parental caring and of spousal love."