

Julia Ward Howe, Mother

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By the Rev. CJ McGregor

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Mother's Day owes its credit to 19th-century abolitionist, social activist, poet, and Unitarian Julia Ward Howe. Howe, the author of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, became sickened by the bloodshed in the Civil War, and in 1870 she wrote a Mother's Day Proclamation, which Doug shared with us in our reading, calling women around the world to speak out for peace. She wrote, "Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience" and "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."

The Rev. Stefan Jonassen, a Canadian Unitarian historian tells us, "The following year, eighteen cities held such a gathering [a commemoration of the proclamation]. Bostonians continued to observe the day for more than a decade, while some cities continued the observance until the turn of the century, when the annual "Mother's Day for Peace" appears to have died out. In 1907, Anna Jarvis, a Methodist, began a campaign to establish a permanent Mother's Day. By the following year, the YMCA had taken up the cause and, in 1914, Woodrow Wilson signed a congressional resolution establishing Mother's Day in the United States. In time, the day came to be marked in many other countries. Jarvis was troubled by the commercialization of the day, saying, "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit." Inalterably opposed to the sale of flowers (but not the giving of homegrown blossoms), she also lamented the advent of the Mother's Day card, describing it as "a poor excuse for the letter you are too lazy to write." We've all heard that before! Mother's Day is one the most heavily attended Sunday in North American churches, outside of the Christmas and Easter seasons. In Unitarian Universalist congregations, the day has increasingly taken on a sense of being a day to mark the contributions of all women."

Julia Ward Howe was born in New York in 1819, to a wealthy banker. She had family in Boston, and through them encountered Unitarianism, reading and hearing and meeting William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller. She married Samuel Howe, who worked as an educator of children with disabilities. She switched from the Episcopal religion of her youth to Unitarianism, attending Theodore Parker's church, which was the nexus of the radical anti-slavery movement. This morning we sang *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, written by Julia Ward Howe. This hymn was included in the 1930's era Unitarian hymnal "Hymns of the Spirit." This hymn was published in the Atlantic Magazine in 1862, and increased Julia Ward Howe's prominence as a writer and speaker, so it's important to this story. She tells about writing this hymn in her autobiography. She writes, "We were invited, one day, to attend a review of troops at some distance from the town. My dear minister was in the carriage with me, as were several other friends. To beguile the rather tedious drive, we sang from time to time snatches of the army songs so popular at that time, concluding, I think, with "John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the ground; His soul is marching on." The soldiers seemed to like this, and answered back, "Good for you!" Mr. Clarke said, "Mrs. Howe, why do you not write some good words for that stirring tune ?" ...and the rest is history.

The history of Mother's Day reminds us that it is more than a day for flowers and brunches. It's a time to highlight the aspects of motherhood that are not usually visible in the greeting card aisles. It's a call to honor the resiliency of all those who mother, especially those who bear the brunt of hurtful policies or who are weighed down by stigma in our culture. It's an opportunity to take action to create the conditions so that all families can thrive. Which brings us to present day and a terrible crisis. There is glaring opportunity to take action to create conditions where all can thrive where we can have the peace called for on the original Mother's Day. I'm not only using this morning not as a time to honor Julia Ward Howe, a mother, but to offer how we can celebrate her legacy of activism and justice in our lives today.

I am a supporter of the organization Mothers Against Murder in West Palm Beach. MAMA was founded by Angela Williams, in memory of her nephew, Torrey Donnell Manuel, who lost his life due to a senseless act of violence. His death is indeed an unspeakable tragedy. In addition

to that, she also lost thirteen additional family members to gun violence in Palm Beach County. The organization provides support to families who lose their loved ones to community violence and they provide education and activism to reduce community violence specifically gun violence. According to MAMAS 289 people are shot every day in our country and every day 86 of them die. Eighty-six people die every day.

Allow me to offer two stories from 2015. First, It was the smack heard around the world. A Baltimore mother was being called “mom of the year” for giving her son a violent slapping after she caught him taking part in the riots that swept the city following the funeral of Freddie Gray. Caught on tape, the video shows a mother cursing and slapping her son, who is decked out in a black hoodie and ski mask in order to avoid being identified by police. She can be heard screaming, “I know that’s you!” while she chases after him. There are no soft words spoken between mother and son. But when she was asked why she did it, she said it was to save his life. “That’s my only son, at the end of the day I don’t want him to be a Freddie Gray,” she told reporters.

The second story begins on April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man who was a resident of Baltimore, Maryland, sustained injuries following his arrest by policemen. On April 18, 2015, after Gray's subsequent coma, the residents of Baltimore protested in front of the Western district police station. Gray died the following day, April 19, 2015, a week after being arrested. Apparently in good health at the time of his arrest, Gray fell into a coma while in transport as the result of injuries to his neck and spine sustained while being transported in a police vehicle. On May 1, 2015, Gray's death was ruled to be a homicide and legal charges were issued against the six officers involved in the incident, including that of second-degree murder.

Peaceful protests were organized after Gray's death became public knowledge, and apparently spontaneous protests started after the funeral service, although several eventually included violent elements. Civil unrest continued and as of April 28, at least twenty police officers had been injured, at least 250 people had been arrested, thousands of police and Maryland Army

National Guard troops had been deployed, and a state of emergency was declared in the city limits of Baltimore.

We've seen this before. If we haven't seen it in real life, we've all seen it on television or in the newspapers. Blacks rioting, looting, and burning down their own neighborhoods after some racial injustice. On the surface, it looks like the most illogical of behavior, you are tearing yourself and your livelihood down, and all because you're mad at someone else. However, according to one professional who has studied this phenomenon, the roots of this anger runs much deeper. It's an anger that's based in reason. Christina Greer is a professor of political science at Fordham University in New York who has studied American politics, black ethnic politics, and urban politics. She says, "the phenomenon of blacks destroying their own neighborhoods, is more an act of rebellion than rioting." Dr. Greer explains the difference as a riot being an instantaneous, non-intellectual act whereas a rebellion has a historic genesis to it. That history begins with years of frustration.

She says, "The reason why I call them rebellions is because it's actually a form of resistance to an established order of dominance. So, if we look at cities and what happens to people of color in these cities, as well as their reaction to what's happened, it's usually because of a long term oppression that has essentially reached a boiling point." The incident, the beating and ultimate death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore or some other injustice, merely served as a catalyst for this frustration. It's bred out of a larger sense of hopelessness, despair, and isolation from mainstream education and economic opportunities. Add to that an overall lack of respectful treatment in the criminal justice system, and not being offered the same economic, housing, and employment opportunities, and the ingredients are all there for a rebellion whenever an incident takes place. And when you're angry, you're going to take it out on the closest thing to you, in this case your neighborhood, probably most which you don't own anyway.

I used Freddie Gray's story this morning, but we have Freddie Gray's all around us. Take for instance Jordan Edwards, a black fifteen-year-old was shot and killed as a police officer shot into a car filled with teenagers leaving a party this month. Edwards was a straight-A student who excelled in sports. He was kind, had great manners and was known as someone who easily

united and motivated his peers. He had an indescribably strong bond with his family, especially his siblings. He won't graduate high school. He won't make his next football game. He won't celebrate his sixteenth birthday. His father won't be able to teach him to drive and his mother won't be able to kiss him on the cheek when he leaves for the school dance next week.

Mother's, just like in the times of Julia Ward Howe, are desperate to save the lives of their children. I remind you, again, of some of the words of the 19th century Mother's Day Proclamation. "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." As Unitarian Universalists we need to once and for all take a bite out of long term oppression and the effects of such oppression. Our work is passive. We are called to become more strategic as a congregation and a movement. Mother's Day is the perfect day to make our own proclamation learning from the women in our lives who are concerned about those they mother to and the violence that is taking their lives. This is how we will honor women past and present: to become allies in peace making, justice making, and grow in love.

In the words of the Rev Leah Hart-Landsberg, "On Mother's Day, let us mark how beautiful and complex it can be to mother and be mothered: To those who have mothered, we thank you. To those who rejoice in the work, the role, the presence of mothering and mothers, we celebrate with you. To those who are in the thick of parenting children of any age, we appreciate you. To those who experience loss through infertility, abortion, miscarriage, adoption or running away, we mourn with you. To those who have lost their mothers, we grieve with you. To those who have endured abuse at the hands of your mother, we acknowledge you. To those who experience pain at the marking of this day, we witness you. To those who are single moms, grandmoms, stepmoms, foster moms, adoptive moms, mentor moms and spiritual moms, we need you. And to those who are pregnant with new life, both expected and surprising, we anticipate with you." May we reflect with gratitude on the wide spectrum of mothering that happens in our lives and in our communities.

May it be so.

