

Mother's Day for All

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[Julia Ward Howe is most famous for writing the Battle Hymn of the Republic in 1862. She was also a Unitarian, and the author in 1870 a proclamation calling for the first Mothers' Day, which she envisioned as an International Day of Peace. As you listen to Howe's words from the late-19th century, you are invited to reflect on the ways her words remain relevant on the Mother's Day in 2013. Almost 150 years ago, Howe proclaims:]

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

Say firmly: "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. 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 taught them of charity, mercy and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another 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 not wipe out dishonor; nor violence indicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plow 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 & commemorate the dead. Let them 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 Caesars but of God.

In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at some place 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.

— Julia Ward Howe

This Tuesday will be the final session in our six-week study of “Reproductive Justice,” which is the new four-year Congregational Study Action Initiative for all Unitarian Universalist congregations. As some of you will recall from my sermon a few weeks ago, the term Reproductive Justice refers to the intersection between Reproductive Health and Social Justice.¹

¹ *Reproductive Justice* — see Carl Gregg, “Did You Just Send That Woman To a Church To Get Help with an Abortion?” (April 8, 2013), available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2013/04/did-you-just-send-that-woman-to-a-church-to-get-help-with-an-abortion/>.

On this Mother's Day Sunday, I'm reminded of one of the curriculum's suggested activities called, "Telling Your Story: Questions for Reflection."²

We took turns reading one question each from a list. Each individual was invited to pay attention to the question that resonated most with his or her own life story. Then, we took time to listen to one another's stories. As I share some of those questions with you, I invite you to **notice which of these questions resonates most with you.** There is a set of questions for parents and then for non-parents. For parents, some of the prompts were:

- Did you intend to have children when you did?
- What factors influenced your decision to have a baby or keep the pregnancy?
- Did you have role models or other resources to help you raise your children?
- What major life events have impacted/are impacting your parenting and children?
- What are/were the major challenges of parenting (physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, sexual, social)?

For Non-Parents, the prompts were similar:

- Do you want to have children? Why or why not?
- If you have actively decided not to have children, what factors will influence or have influenced that decision?
- Do you have role models or resources to support your reproductive choices?
- How is your life impacted by not having children (physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, sexual, social)?

If one of those questions particularly resonated with you, I invite you to share your story with me or with one another at a future time. For now, I will share with you that for both me and my wife Magin, the most resonate of those questions is "Do you want to have children?" Said differently, the question is: **Do you want to become a father? Do you want to become a mother?**

I'm 35, and Magin is 32. We've moved through the season of weddings when we seemed to be constantly attending marriage ceremonies for our friends, and we're well into the season of

² "Telling Your Story: Questions for Reflection" — Handout 3:2 from *Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling*, available at <http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/reproductivejustice/curriculum/3-2.pdf>.

babies in which we are regularly attending baby showers and birthday parties for the children of friends and family. But we do not feel that the time is right to starting trying to have a baby ourselves. We both feel like we already have too much responsibility with our careers (which arguably is its own form of giving birth), but that balance may shift in the next few years. We'll see.

In the meantime, Magin is asked at least weekly by friends, colleagues, or strangers if she has any kids — not a “baby,” but kids...*plural*. She's seen a marked increase in this question since she turned 30. In contrast, a stranger has never come up to Magin to ask, “How many master's degrees do you have?” or “How much of your writing have you published?” You can perhaps also guess that I'm asked the question “Do you have kids?” far less often. At the same time, I can't count the number of times that someone has warned me or Magin of the dangers of having kids after age 35 at which point I'm told the dreaded words “Advanced maternal age” are printed boldface on the medical chart of pregnant women. There is also, I'm told, potential consequences to “Advanced Paternal Age.”³

However, waiting to have children — waiting to become a mother or a father — is part of how I was raised. I'm an only child. My mother was 37 when I was born, and my father was 46. They had been married for eight years at the time. Although people would sometime assume that my father was my grandfather, I heard from my parents what I hear from many older parents: that they were likely more tired than they would have been if they'd had me ten or twenty years earlier, but that they also thought they were likely more patient as parents than they would've been years earlier as well more financially stable. At the same time, my mother endured many years of being asked why she hadn't gotten married yet and then why she hadn't had kids yet. (One of the responses she started using over the years was, “I haven't found a man that can treat me better than I can treat myself.”)

What I'm building to is that — as many of you have experienced personally in perhaps different ways from the ways I've named — **parenthood in general and Mother's Day in particular can be a painful, neutral, or celebratory subject depending on one's history and**

³ “Older dads may increase child's health risks more than older moms,” *CBS This Morning* (April 11, 2013), available at http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505263_162-57579042/older-dads-may-increase-childs-health-risks-more-than-older-moms/.

circumstance. To again use Magin as an example, which I have her permission to do, Mother's Day is a complicated holiday for her not only because we do not have children, but also because her mother died when she was 21 after a long struggle with complications related to juvenile diabetes.

I'm also reminded of my friends Adam and Sarah Walker-Cleveland. They are a few years younger than I am. Adam is the Associate Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church of Ashland, Oregon and Sarah is a Ph.D. candidate in Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Writing about his story, Adam says,

I am the father of 3, 1 living. My wife and I were expecting twin boys until her water broke on October 24, 2010. We were 19 weeks into our pregnancy. We had no choice other than to deliver our boys, and so Micah and Judah were born at 6:49am and 6:54am on Monday, October 25th. They were both alive when born and we held them for a few hours before they passed away. On December 30, 2011 we gave birth to our third son, Caleb Elijah, 8 lbs., 4 oz. We are deeply in love with him and are experiencing all the things you'd expect from new parents of a newborn baby.

As a way of processing the loss of their twins, Adam started a blog called "Dazed Dad: Reflections on Family, Fatherhood, Loss & Grief" (<http://www.dazeddad.com/>).⁴ One of the most important results of being so public about his grief process is that Adam has found many people have shared their story of reproductive loss with him — in many cases, stories that likely would not have been shared otherwise and, in some cases, stories that had never been told to anyone before. Adam writes that, "**realizing what parenthood looks and feels like when you have lost children . . . gave me a deeper appreciation for the fact that Mother's Day and**

⁴ "Dazed Dad: Reflections on Family, Fatherhood, Loss & Grief" — see "October 25: The Day I Will Never Forget," available at <http://www.dazeddad.com/2010/10/27/october-25/>. And "Four Weeks Ago Today I Became a Dad," available at <http://www.dazeddad.com/2010/11/22/i-became-a-dad/>.

Father's day have the possibility of being horrible days for many people.”⁵ (They can also, of course, be joyous days.)

Two Sundays afternoon after leaving UUCF, I drove to Lewes, Delaware for the spring CUUMA retreat, which stands for Chesapeake Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association. The focus of our retreat was better negotiating intercultural conflict — such as the different expectations that different cultural backgrounds have about whether communication should be direct or indirect, expressive or non-expressive. And one of the lessons that I took away from that retreat is the aphorism that **“Intent does not always equal impact.”**

To give one of many examples we explored, someone could come to you with a problem and be full of expressive emotion. And perhaps if your family background has trained you to be indirect and non-expressive in all situations, then that emotion-filled person may not feel heard, appreciated, and understood by you even if he or she has your full attention. You may need to match that person's type and level of expression to better communicate.

Now, we spent a little more than two full days exploring intercultural conflict in much more nuanced detail, but the important point for this morning is increasing our awareness that “Intent does not always equal impact.” Despite our best intentions, another person's experience of our words and actions may be radically different from our intent.

And Mother's Day can be a classic example of intent not always equalling impact, despite our best intentions to honor the mother's in our lives. However, before continuing, I should qualify that if Mother's Day is one of your favorite times of the year, then please continuing celebrating in a way that is meaningful to you and your family. **My intent is to expand the possibilities of how we can make meaning out of Mother's Day.**

It is also fascinating to note that far beyond the contemporary complaints about the commercialization of Mother's Day, historically speaking **there has been a gulf between the intent and impact of Mother's Day from the beginning.** Some of the earliest roots of Mother's Day are from the late 19th-century, as you heard earlier in the Spoken Meditation.

My colleague Rev. Stefan Jonassen writes that,

⁵ *“possibility of being horrible days for many people.”* — Adam Walker-Cleveland, “Mother's Day and the Church: What is Our Responsibility?” available at <http://pomomusings.com/2013/05/09/mothers-day-and-the-church/>.

In 1872, Unitarian Julia Ward Howe began advocating the creation of a “Mother’s Day for Peace” to be held on June 2 each year. The following year, eighteen cities held such a gathering. 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.

So not only did the original intent not come to pass of Mother’s Day as a lasting annual International Day for Peace, but the world was wracked in the next century by two World Wars, along with many other battles and conflicts. (Keep in mind also that, writing in 1872, Howe’s plea for peace came in the wake of the brutal U.S. Civil War.)

An even more striking disjunction between intent and impact happened with the next attempt to found Mother’s Day:

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.”⁶

Anna Jarvis, the “Mother of Mother’s Day,” so to speak, was distraught at what florists and Hallmark made of her holiday.⁷ So **for all of you who have ever feel disillusioned with Mother’s Day, consider yourself in distinguished company.**

⁶ Rev. Stefan Jonassen, “A Canadian Unitarian Almanac And Liturgical Calendar,” available at <http://www.uua.org/worship/holidays/174642.shtml>.

⁷ *Anna Jarvis* — “Why Mother's Day Horrified, Ruined Its Own Mother Born of war, Mother's Day went big-time—and broke its mother's heart,” *National Geographic* (May 8, 2011), available at <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2011/05/110508-mothers-day-google-doodle-history-jarvis-nation-gifts-facts/>.

But to turn our attention back to the present, I want to share with you a related sentiment by a blogger named Shanelle Matthews from her essay “Mothers's Day for the rest of us.” She writes:

I dread it. That uncomfortable, anticlimactic moment I enter the drug store and begin to comb through their dismal shelves for a Mother’s Day card.... I listlessly pace the aisles looking for a sentiment that speaks to me — one that fits the unique experiences I share with my mom. Like the year before, I am underwhelmed with the choices. No brown faces; no candid, raw emotions that illustrate the complexity of our relationship; no culturally relevant jokes to make us laugh.... I rummage through the picked over, paisley prints desperate for something — not just for my mom but for the millions of moms who...don’t fit....

If Mother's Day is about celebrating motherhood, don’t queer moms, immigrant moms, moms of children with disabilities, and moms with disabilities deserve to be celebrated? If Mother’s Day emphasizes the importance of the maternal bond, don’t genderqueer moms, adoptive moms, foster moms, trans moms, grandmas parenting grandkids, and single moms also experience that same bond? If the purpose of Mother’s Day is to highlight the influence of mothers, aren’t stepmoms, incarcerated moms, young moms, refugee moms, low-income moms, and moms living on sovereign land also influential?

It’s not new news that greeting card companies aren’t in the business of celebrating the marginalized—after all, **who wants to read a greeting card that says, “Happy Mother's Day, Mom. I’m sorry you got deported.” But whether they highlight our stories or not, we exist....**

The mother’s whose lives are not being reflected on greeting cards are in need of something that can’t be delivered, worn, or eaten. They need policies that accurately reflect the reality of their daily lives. They need affordable health care, citizenship, access to healthy foods, transportation, birth control, self-care time, and support. They need second parent adoptions minus the red tape. They need safe spaces from domestic abusers, visitation rights, affordable and safe housing,

and culturally relevant education in languages their families understand. They need less shaming and more policies in places that make it safe and secure to be the kind of moms they want to be.

I've taken the time to share that excerpt because Matthews captures some of the same spirit that our Unitarian foremother Julia Ward Howe did more than a century ago in her call for an International Mothers' Day for Peace. **My hope this morning has been to open up the possibilities for what Mother's Day can and should mean today and in years to come.**

And this focus on the diversity of what Mother's Day at its best must entail is also why I scheduled Flower Communion on Mother's Day this year. I'm open to suggestions about when to schedule Flower Communion in the future, although my current inclination is to schedule it around the same weekend as the Cherry Blossom Festival in D.C. I figure, let the National Park Service figure out when flowers will be in bloom.



But for this morning, the intent is for the diversity of the flowers before us to, in part, symbolize the diversity of what motherhood and mothering means. But beyond that symbolism for Mother's Day, **the diversity of the flowers more broadly symbolizes the unique gifts that each of us freely choose to bring to this congregation.**

In a few moments, we will sing together hymn #305. “*De Colores.*” As we sing, I invite you to remain seated. But as we sing together as a congregation, I also invite you, as you feel led, to come forward and:

select a flower — different from the one you brought — that particularly appeals to you. **As you take your chosen flower — noting its particular shape and beauty — please remember to handle it carefully. It is a gift that someone else has brought to you. It represents that person's unique humanity, and therefore deserves your kindest touch.**⁸

Let us join in this Flower Communion with gratitude for the bountiful diversity in this sanctuary and on this earth.

⁸ “*select a flower — different from the one you brought*” — Reginald Zottoli, “The Flower Communion A Service of Celebration for Religious Liberals,” available at <http://www.uua.org/documents/zottolireginald/flowercommunion.pdf>.