

Mothers' Day 2017  
In Honor of Julia Ward Howe  
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This wonderful book, "The Civil Wars of Julia Ward Howe," by Elaine Showalter, published in 2016, I enthusiastically recommend, especially if you're interested in American feminist or Unitarian history. Reading it made me feel very proud indeed of our Unitarian contributions to American cultural development and history.

My intentions for this sermon are to reflect on how far we've come, or not come, since Howe proclaimed Mothers' Day in 1870, nearly 150 years ago, in terms of feminism, and general progress. I'm not talking about mothering much today, for as it ironically turns out, the inventor of Mothers' Day wasn't that enthusiastic a mother. Julia was a good mom, a mother of five, but she constantly yearned to create in the ways of the mind, not just of the body.

I read this book in the past ten days, during my keynote contributions to the UU Women's Retreat at Camp DeBenneville last weekend, our UU district camp in the San Bernadino mountains. There I focused on self-care for women, in the areas of coming home to our soul-life, creativity, and belonging. So, I have that weekend as a bit of a yardstick when comparing the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup>.

Off the bat I will say that when you realize just how restricted women's lives were 150 years ago, you might be tempted to say that the women at the retreat could sound like a bunch of whiners, which is a facetious way of saying, indeed, we have come a long way.

If some of our most troubling challenges as modern women boil down to there not being enough hours in the day, or enough energy to care for ourselves as whole women, which was a recurring theme last weekend, then it's an indicator of progress compared to the utter repression of women's freedom as a rigid social construct until about the time women got the vote in the mid-1920s.

Women haven't had the vote in this country for a full 100 years yet, and before that, they didn't have much claim even to their own children, property and assets. For example, in Julia's case, she, who grew up wealthy and prominently in Manhattan society, inherited valuable properties and cash reserves that, unfortunately, her husband Dr. Samuel Howe, squandered almost all of by the time he died. This man speculated that big swaths of property in Kansas would be a great investment, and he was quite mistaken. Two minds working toward fruitful speculation may have resulted in better investments, or at least more cautious ones.

So yes, we women are enfranchised in our role as citizens of our imperfect democracy, and while we have yet to elect our first woman president, I take great

comfort in knowing I will see the first one elected in my lifetime, of this I am confident.

Women, especially in urban areas, where most of our population now resides, appear to have more opportunity in general. Being a working mom is now an accepted option. Even as not long ago as the early 1980s, it was a bit unusual for women to work, as I recall it was for my mom when she launched her career in business consulting.

Women are even finding that there are more jobs available for them in the service and caring fields, compared to the crisis of many men's manufacturing and construction jobs getting automated out of existence, or shipped overseas. In a lot of ways, women have been having a renaissance in the past decade or so. Unfortunately, and I'm sure Julia would agree, we are also in the midst of an incredible reactionary backlash against women's agency and freedom. A backlash that apparently a significant number of women are in support of themselves. There's an even more recent book that documents the backlash to the 1970s wave of feminism, and that the ascendancy of the religious right actually was born out of that *women-led* backlash.

It reminds me of Betsy DeVoss, our new Education Secretary, one of the only women appointed to serve on the President's cabinet. Her reactionary fervor helped her seize power that may, not only privatize public education, but also supplant Christian instruction as the public school norm. For example, posting the Ten Commandments in public schools. I know I shouldn't get too political up here, but as religious liberals, we should be aware of the specter of the separation of church and state getting gutted.

Julia Ward Howe was a politically-minded Unitarian back in her day, and her intent for Mothers' Day was political. She asked, why should mothers put up with this? With war, with husbands and sons and children getting mutilated and killed? It was an overall critique of men's failure to lead with wisdom, temperance, and diplomatic skill. Perhaps it was easy to make this assertion when there was nary a female in sight in a position of power, save the Queen of England. Now, those waters are muddied with more and more women in politics, and the occasional critique we hear of a woman being "hawkish."

So, one way we have moved forward, is in realizing that, like so many matters that have been over-genderized, war and violence is a *human* problem, it's not just boys playing with toys, though that phenom appears to be alive and well in recent months. How ironic is it to call that bomb we dropped on Afghanistan a month ago, "The Mother of All Bombs"? Hmmm.

Regardless, it's true we have come a long way as women and mothers with agency and power. I think of myself in particular as someone who has enjoyed increased

opportunity in my field, as well as having a marriage with a truly equal division of labor.

Perhaps there will always be the niggling things that mostly only women seem to think of or do, such as: why is it that men by and large don't write thank you notes? Has anyone here recently received a hand-written thank you note written by a man? Received on occasions other than Mothers' Day?

Why is it that women still often do most of the cooking or laundry, or all the stuff related to the kids' schools, the bake-sales and what-not. At my kids' school, there are no men on the PTA, and there is a dads' group though I'm not sure what they do other than be encouraged to support their women. Perhaps I digress, but I bet if I took suggestions from the pews, we could on a while like this.

My analysis here of then and now is rather cursory, I want to admit, but it's meant to get you all thinking of it in your own lives. Take some time for reverie, and consider our lives now compared to what they were like for both men and women when our parents were our ages. What has changed dramatically and what patterns still persist? What progress can we claim for ourselves, and what changes might you diplomatically suggest still need to be made?

Here's something I hope resonates for men: women's progress does not equate a diminishment of men's power. Think of all the ways women have been encouraged to empower themselves spiritually, emotionally, and so forth in the past 25 years. Think: the book, "Women Who Run With the Wolves," published exactly 25 years ago; think feminist and womanist theology; women's sacred circles; and all the wonderful work around shame that Brene Brown has done, to which mostly women have flocked.

Where is the equivalent for men? Where's the best-selling Men Who Run with the Bears book or what have you? There was some "Iron John" book or something years ago, and there is SOME men's group work happening, such as The Good Men Project, but not enough. The point here is that all the work women try to do to become whole people is JUST AS IMPORTANT for men to do!

I am not trying to sound mean or judgmental here, but the truth is, a lot of men are unmoored and unsatisfied in certain ways. We know patriarchy hurts women, but it would appear we still don't acknowledge the extent to which patriarchy also hurts men. We have to stop reducing or oversimplifying this matter to "a battle of the sexes," and Venus and Mars, and stupid crap like that. These things are part of the ages-old tradition of resisting change, change that we may fail to acknowledge is in men's best interest as well as women's.

This latest wave of feminism, that I say commenced in the 1990's, is much more concerned about human beings having everything they need to be whole people, be they men, women, or transgender. It's about shattering the stereotypes that have

hurt all the sexes. We see each human being more on a continuum of traits rather than as some static set of gendered traits.

So many men miss out on depth and belonging and connection in their lives because of the ways they have been socialized. Men are not encouraged to show their emotions or vulnerability as a source of strength; they have difficulty understanding when they need help and hence can be isolated, though they may not even be aware of their self-imposed exile. This lack of awareness comes from the strength of our cultural mores where gender is concerned, still very much alive in certain subtle and insidious ways.

So I've reflected enough, I think, and I'd like to finish by honoring the woman of the hour, Julia Ward Howe, and the fascinating history that surrounds her. This woman was quite ahead of her time. There's a wonderful section of the book where Julia is compared to Walt Whitman. Julia and Walt grew up with all the same advantages, but whereas Walt could go be the poetic bard he was called to be, Julia could not. This is why everyone knows who Walt Whitman is, but not Julia.

So it is a testament to her resiliency and determination that she still made a name for herself as poet, abolitionist, suffragist, luminary. She began life as a staunchly sanctioned Calvinist (the same religion as Betsy DeVoss, I must note), and she very much saw the light in Unitarianism, which then as now emphasized free moral agency, personal responsibility, and education. Her minister was Theodore Parker, who first uttered the phrase that "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

She was a model Unitarian in her public activities and enthusiasm to organize and lead many social progress endeavors. She could especially do so after her husband who was over 20 years older than her died. She and her husband competed in matters of public achievement, and he discouraged her pretty much every step of the way, belittling her affection for and acumen in literature and art. He also kept her pregnant as a way to stop her progress in the world.

In the end, her fame outshined his, though Dr. Howe was known for his pioneering treatments of the blind and deaf, this work that directly preceded the work with Helen Keller. In fact, it was the Howes' son-in-law who was the doctor that worked with Helen Keller and her teacher.

As you have heard, Julia Ward Howe is best known for her lyrics for The Battle Hymn of the Republic, which we are going to sing shortly. The song itself is super interesting. The tune was originally a marching song for the Union soldiers in the Civil War, a tune that came out of the Camp Revivals of the Evangelical Awakening that occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The original words to the tune were the "coarse" ones that soldiers made up themselves about the famous abolitionist John Brown. It was called the John

Brown's Body marching song at first, and it basically talked about him a-moldering in his grave. John Brown was an impactful martyr abolitionist patriot that inspired the anti-slavery movement. Imagine this. Imagine feeling so strongly that slavery should end, that you organize a huge attack of rogue soldiers on a big armory of the Confederacy. That's what he did. He killed soldiers, was convicted of treason, and hanged.

So at that point, people liked the tune, but felt the words were too base, and it was suggested to Julia that she replace them with her own, which she did to great acclaim. The words came to her in the middle of a sleepless night, and as is the case with so much barely-captured genius, the hymn only exists because she actually got out of bed and wrote it all down.

Of course the words have evolved over the years, making it more palatable in terms of religious language when it's sung in a public setting, BUT, since we're in a church, and we proudly claim Julia as one of her own, and we wish to honor her, I've kept the words as close to her original as we could. It gives us a sense of where Unitarianism has come from, and recalls our Christian beginnings.

So as you sing, be aware that the line "his truth is marching on," while it appears to refer to God, is actually referring to John Brown, that though he died for his cause, it was not in vain, and it sparked a movement that was equated at the time with the righteousness of God. I don't think enough of us are aware that this catchy patriotic song is a product of the Civil War, and more importantly, THE anthem of the wrongness of slavery.

It always stirs me, and I think it's because our work as a country is not done on the matter. We still have severe racial oppression, immigrant slavery, and sexual slavery, right here in our country.

And so, this Mothers' Day, let us lift up in our hearts and our souls the true origin of this holiday, when one brave, highly literate mother of five stood up and said, "ENOUGH!" We echo Julia today. Enough violence, enough war, enough murderous debauchery. Enough racism and sexism and boys playing with toys. Enough mass incarceration, enough mothers being separated from their children. Enough!

Without further ado, let's sing. Please rise in body or in spirit for our last hymn, Julia Ward Howe's Battle Hymn of the Republic.