

## PEACEFUL VILLAGE

First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis

Mother's Day, 5/13/2012, ©2012 Rev. Thomas Perchlik

Today I will hold up the life of Julia Ward Howe as my exemplar of the ideals and religious purposes of Mother's Day, to fill the world with peaceful villages. The fact is that everyone is connected. We speak of being one family, as in the words of Rev. Argow which we used as our opening words: "An eternal verity abides beneath diversities; we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family." It is a beautiful and very true sentiment, but it has its limits. Once, a colleague of mine noted that Churches are often described in terms of home and family. Then she asked, "What do you mean by family? Like Cain and Abel were family or Arjuna and his cousins were a family turning a whole country to civil war in the Mahabharata? My colleague noted how often religious leaders speak the church protecting Biblical family values. But what are those values when Abraham passes his wife off in marriage to the Pharaoh as if she were his sister and was blessed as a result?

A while back I was listening to a member of our congregation reflecting on a visit to our Partner Church in the village of Chokfalva, in Romania. He spoke of a powerful sense that the children of the village were truly "of that village", their lives tied to every other person in that community. Everyone shared some pride, some desire to protect and play some role for good in the life of every child in that village. Now, metro-Saint Louis is a vast place compared to Chokfalva, so we can romanticize village life. I know how oppressive and inward some villages can be. Anyone who grew up different from the norm in a small mid-western town knows this deeply; that villages can become oppressive. But my sense is that, above all, human beings long for meaningful connection. Each of us is born with a capability to see our place in society and a longing for our connections to be strong and whole. For most of us this capability develops fully when we are teenagers, later for some, earlier for others, but we all have an innate desire to belong. We hunger for community, to be connected and have someone else, when they see us on the street or in the market, at a concert or on the news, to say with pride "That is one of my people" likewise, when we suffer some tragedy for someone to say, "That is one of my people." This is why we form this church. Not to create a church family, but to develop a sort of village. It takes a village to raise a child, then this is that village, this building-the one holy center of a small town or village, connected to other nearby towns like Eliot Chapel and Emerson Chapel and First Unitarian Alton, all part of a larger nation, but this is our village.

We bring our children because all are valuable, the bearers of our values into the next generation. Each child a message that the universe, or the God of the universe, is not yet discouraged with us, not finished with us quite yet. Whenever a child comes into the world there is an impulse to do something, paint a room, make a rocking chair, work for peace, anything that matches the new promise of life and hope and love renewed that comes with each new person.

One Unitarian who understood this truth was the mother of six children and a passionate writer, speaker and activist. I speak of Julia Ward Howe. The first of her five children was christened by the Rev. Theodore Parker, one of my favorite Unitarian historical figures in part because he called to God as Mother *and* Father back in the 1840s. But Julia was an inspiration in and of herself. Julia Ward was born May 27, 1819 in New York City, the daughter of a strict Episcopalian Calvinist. As a young woman, directly inspired by preachers like William Channing or Ralph Emerson, and conversations with thinkers like Margaret Fuller, she underwent a conversion and spiritual liberation. Later she wrote, "I studied my way out of all the mental agonies which Calvinism can engender and became a Unitarian."

She married Samuel Gridley Howe of Boston, a physician educator and social reformer. He was a bit older than her, and clearly of a culture that expected a husband to take care of and manage the finances and life of his wife. For years she chafed against the expectations that her husband control her and her finances. Julia was a talented writer, of poetry and of prose. She knew personally authors like Hawthorn and Wordsworth. She published several books of poetry and essays, though always against her husband's wishes. Partially because of her devotion to her children, her understanding of motherhood, they never divorced. By the time of his death in 1876, they had come to admire one another, even respect one another in an amiable friendship.

The one thing in which they were always fully joined was active and ardent opposition to slavery. In 1861 she went with friends to see a review of Northern troops. She saw them scattered by a Confederate attack and as they rode home to safety she heard them singing John Brown's Body. A friend commented that she, as a poet, could surely write better lyrics to that fine tune. That night the words of the Battle Hymn just came to her, which she wrote in the darkness so as to not wake her children. It was published in the Atlantic in 1862. As the work of the war wore down and people began to reflect theologically on the meaning of that event this song eventually swept the northern states as the anthem of the war, a justification of its horrors.

Julia was a frequent speaker and writer, debating with men on the leading thinkers of their time. "During the first two thirds of my life," Howe recalled,

"I looked to the masculine idea of character as the only true one. I sought its inspiration, and referred my merits and demerits to its judicial verdict. . . . The new domain now made clear to me was that of true womanhood—woman no longer in her ancillary relation to her opposite, . . . but in her direct relation to the divine plan and purpose, as a free agent, fully sharing with man every human right and every human responsibility. This discovery was like the addition of a new continent to the map of the world, or of a new testament to the old ordinances."

I like this image of each person in direct relation to the divine plan as a free agent, fully sharing in every human right and in every human responsibility. Reflecting on this time in her life Julia's friend, Thomas Higginson, noted the change in Julia as she discovered a fuller domain: "It

gave a new brightness to her face, a new cordiality in her manner, made her calmer, firmer; she found herself among new friends and could disregard old critics."

In the 1870s, during the Franco-Prussian war, Julia read of the death of young men. As a mother and as a human being she deeply felt "the cruel and unnecessary character of the contest". She described it as "a return to barbarism, the issue having been one which might easily have been settled without bloodshed." At this point she was somewhat tired of the Battle Hymn and its association with unquestioned, almost jingoistic, support of bloodshed. She saw how the arrogance and certainty of some in the Northern states caused suffering and unneeded grief in the South. She began a one-woman peace crusade that began with an impassioned "appeal to womanhood" to rise against war. She translated her proclamation into several languages and distributed it widely. I want you to hear the words of her Mother's Day Proclamation 1870:

"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 [toward] 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 does not wipe out dishonor, nor does 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."

She wanted peace between nations, so that all would be filled with peaceful villages. In 1872 she went to London to promote an international Woman's Peace Congress but she failed. Back in Boston, she initiated a Mothers' Peace Day observance on the second Sunday in June and held a meeting on that day for a number of years. Her idea spread to other places, mostly on her fame. Then, in 1907 a woman named Anna Jarvis, in West Virginia decided to create a ceremony in her church to honor the memory of her mother and others, and worked with President Wilson to set it to the second Sunday in May. Later in her life she was deeply dismayed by the

commercialization of the day and fought to oppose its shallow observance. According to a story in the National Geographic [<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2011/05/110508-mothers-day-google-doodle-history-jarvis-nation-gifts-facts/>], Jarvis held Mother's Day work clubs to improve sanitary conditions and try to lower infant mortality by fighting disease and curbing contaminated milk, and organized Mother's Friendship Day picnics and other events as pacifist events uniting former foes. But eventually the Mothers' Day holiday now celebrated in May replaced both her vision and that of Julia Ward Howe.

So I want you to remember. According to Joan Goodwin, (in the Dictionary of UUBiography) Julia Ward Howe worked to end slavery, helped to initiate the women's movement in many states, and organized for international peace—all at a time, she noted, "when to do so was a thankless office, involving public ridicule and private avoidance."

Almost 30 years before in 1893 she attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. As a lifelong Christian and someone who saw Jesus' teachings as universal truths, she was impressed by the diversity of views there. In her talk to the Parliament she responded to the question "What is Religion?" After noting that it was not, as so many seemed to think, a sort of magic for getting the luck we want she then proclaimed religion,

"...is aspiration, the pursuit of the divine in the human; the sacrifice of everything to duty for the sake of God and of humanity and of our own individual dignity. I think nothing is religion which puts one individual absolutely above others, and surely nothing is religion which puts one sex above another. ... And any religion which will sacrifice a certain set of human beings for the enjoyment or aggrandizement or advantage of another is no religion. It is a thing which may be allowed, but it is against true religion. Any religion which sacrifices women to the brutality of men is no religion. From this Parliament let some valorous, new, strong, and courageous influence go forth ... [truly] for the glory of God, [truly] for the sake of humanity from all that is low and animal and unworthy and undivine."

Over a hundred years later her vision still echoes. Just last week, a Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) passed the Senate, HR 4271, with strong bipartisan support. This Act was reauthorized and amended to include many new and improved provisions for the protection and care of all women, especially immigrants, LGBT people, and Native American women. These improvements, reaffirming the many successful programs of the original VAWA, are vital to the equality of access to services for these marginalized groups.

Julia Ward Howe died in 1910, but her spirit lives on: the spirit of all true motherhood can live on in each of us male or female. Let us honor our mothers today by doing some of their work or increasing, expanding upon the work they have done: to make peace, to seek justice, to temper the barbarians, to help people bloom, to form across the globe a network of peaceful villages.