

MOTHER'S DAY, IT'S COMPLICATED!

Susan Freudenthal

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On June 2, 1872 Unitarian activist and writer, Julia Ward Howe, called for the women of the world to rally together for a festival she called "Mother's Day." As a Boston Unitarian, Julia counted among her friends, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Mann and the Alcott family. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow introduced to her husband and Theodore Parker christened her children. Julia published poems and essays despite her husband's disapproval and she is most remembered for writing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic". When Julia Ward Howe called for a "Mother's Day" rally, it came after years of a commitment to social justice. Julia believed that slaves, women and children deserved equal rights and protection under the law.

Julia Ward Howe began her Mother's Day proclamation as a call to action. "Arise, then, women of this day, she wrote, "Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of fears!"

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 been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience."

For the next thirty years, Americans celebrated Mother's Day for Peace on June 2nd. In 1913, Anna Jarvis' proposed Mother's Day replaced Julia's. Anna Jarvis was also a peace activist but her proposal for Mother's Day reflected a less strident position. Mothers, in Anna's proposal, deserved to be honored for the personal sacrifices they incurred as mothers. The United States Congress agreed. Anna Jarvis herself began the flower giving tradition when she gave white carnations to all the women in her home church. Anna's sent white carnations for several reasons. White was the color of the women's suffrage movement, carnations were cheap and happened to be her favorite flower.

Not everyone agrees on why Anna sent white flowers. For example the florists association claims that the white carnation represents purity, faithfulness and love. As one Florida congressman put it in 1913, "Mother's Day as a time to personally honor woman is meant to be exploited." And so it began.

I personally don't really like Mother's Day for the most part, for too many of us, it is accompanied by loss, pain and unfulfilled expectations. My own mother isn't a huge fan of Mother's Day as it is, she'd rather her five children and five grandchildren call or visit when we want to not when we feel compelled to. I understand that, the years I sort of enjoyed Mother's Day were when my own children were small and living with me.

I sort of miss the handmade cards and bead encrusted picture frames. I have not saved everything but I do have one thing that each of sons made me for Mother's Day. I am fortunate, I know that. I have two relatively healthy grown sons this Mother's Day and of course I take some credit for that.

But mothering did not come naturally to me. I remember when my oldest son was born a little voice in my head kept on asking, "Where are his real parents?" It took me awhile to experience that

parent-child bonding thing. There are days now when I think, had I dog before children, I may never have had them at all. That said, I have been completely gob-smacked by the intensity of my love for my children in a way that defies reason. Seriously, how many people do you know who survived the teen years? In my opinion, parenting teenagers is the most hopeful act of love that exists in the best of cases.

Mother's Day, for me, cannot be celebrated without acknowledging some of the other people who actively parented my sons with me.

When my boys were little, my sister and mother would take days off from work during school vacations so that I might continue to work. My sister has attended every school performance, graduation and birthday party for each of her nieces and nephews. She planned and took vacations with my children and paid for extras when their father did not. Her parenting of my sons continues today, my oldest son lives with her in New York in a mutually beneficial arrangement. May all parents be so blessed.

As a step-parent, my husband Eric's experience was pretty tough. His expectations and mine were sorely out of sync. Eric taught me that having high expectations for my children was being a responsible parent, that clear boundaries and consistency are critical and to be engaged with each other as truthfully and lovingly as possible is what really matters.

Boy, oh, boy, did we struggle to find peace together as a family. I remember once, when my youngest son was seven or so, he overheard Eric and me trying to work out a parenting strategy. I spoke about how my son's anger was clearly the result of my divorce, of my inability to be the parent he needed. From the other room a little voice said, "You know Mom, it's not always just about you."

There are others who helped; my sons' father played a huge role in our lives, both for good and bad. Uncle Jimmy, one of my brothers, is still the preferred guy to hang out with. The family therapists contributed as well. The list is not small and I thank all of them for parenting with me this Mother's Day as being a parent is the hardest thing I've ever done.

And I did choose to be a parent, to be a mother. I appreciate that I had the choice for in Julia Ward Howe's day this was not the reality. Today, we have many choices and options into motherhood and parenting. Birth mother, adopted mother, surrogate mother, fosters mother, tiger mother, step-mother, egg donor and gestational carrier, and women who choose to not to be mothers at all are no longer consider failures.

Some might argue that all these choices are not necessarily good things but I believe they help us expand our notions of what motherhood and parenting is. It offers the chance for many people to experience mothering and parenting -- to bring a family to life through love regardless of orientation and marital status.

It reminds me of the children's book, "Are You My Mother?" by PD Eastman. It's the story of a little bird that upon hatching from his shell finds his bird mother gone and goes to look for her. He asks every creature he meets, "Are you my mother?" with increasing anxiety until of course they find each other. I've always thought this story was about the little bird finding his real family, you know, the family that loves him best, the family that undertakes parenting to the best of their bird ability.

Would Julia Ward Howe embrace a Mother's Day that celebrates this kind of family? Well, I believe she would. After all, Julia wanted a day of social activism, a day that would recognize the inherent right of all people to live in peace, a day to honor all those who mother children with love.

I would like that. A day set aside to honor family and the contributions we make to the health and well being of family, a time for celebrating chosen families. Because as my son said, "Mom, it's not always just about me." Happy Mother's Day.

Today, if you ask my sons, they will tell you that having been parented by Eric has made a huge difference in their lives. They both have a relationship with their father but Eric is the one who showed them how to be successful, how a person with a good smile and personality is the best look there is, how to appear different to the world and not care much what others think, how to handle a mother who loves you but may not always like you.

So, Parenting Day instead of Mother's Day, how would it be different? How would it be the same? Flowers can still be sent, silly cards and homemade presents given, phone calls and chocolates still offered. What would be different?

Happy Mother's Day, Happy Parenting, call soon and be careful.