

Draft

REFLECTIONS ON MOTHERS DAY AND JUSTICE
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
May 8, 2011

Good morning again, everyone, happy Mothers Day to you all and special thanks to our music folk.

We say 'happy Mothers Day' but from what I have experienced and seen over the years, it's a conflicted holiday. For many people the memory of our mother can be a mixed one. I am one such example. My biological mother was not an especially stable person and I was removed from her care at six months of age. I then had a wonderful two year living experience with an Italian-American family in Keene, New Hampshire. Then our family psychologist for whom I am named recommended I go to a farm in Maine that doubled as a summer camp for children.

My foster mother was a formidable woman. Selma was about 4'10" and of Maine and Scots heritage. She could detect a lie a mile away and was skilled at debating. As far as I know, she never lost a political argument because no one could change her mind.

She was a life long Republican and proud of it. She'd been National Republican Committeewoman from Maine in the 50's and 60's and worked as campaign manager for the first elected woman Senator Margaret Chase Smith. Democratic Senator Edmund Muskie came to our home several times. While Selma didn't agree with his politics, they worked on many issues together.

I went to see Selma in Maine sometime in the late '90's as usual. She was in fragile health, hard of hearing but her mind was sharp. I'd told her I was doing a Sunday service at the UU church in Brunswick just a few miles away. Much to my surprise, she asked if she could attend. This astonished me as she equated Unitarian Universalists with liberalism and had never gone to a UU church as far as I know.

Of course I invited her to come along and mentally went through my sermon wondering what parts would create a one sided dialogue. We got to the church and the regular minister welcomed her. She sat herself down in the very back row and held her cane firmly. I joked with her later that she sat there to escape quickly if needed.

I did the service and I think the sermon was had a title like "Just How Tolerant Are We?" Selma refused to wear any hearing aids and constantly was trying to catch my words. She could only hear perhaps one word out of

ten. Somewhere in the sermon, I used the term “we are as much conservative as we are liberal and should not label ourselves or others in absolutes.”

After the service was over, we left the church and she was quiet...always a dangerous sign. She asked, “I heard you use the word ‘liberal’...what were you saying?” I told her the sentence and she was quiet for awhile longer. Her only response was “Oh,” and then we went out for lobster.

That was only one of two times that I left her with a loss for words.

My relationship with my two mothers was conflicted. I suspect many of us have had similar feelings over our lifetimes.

Mothers Day is also born of conflict. I mentioned earlier the life and work of Julia Ward Howe. She’d written a patriotic song in the Civil War but then wrote and supported the Mothers Day Proclamation. Her life was a hard one and she died in October of 1910. My foster mother would have been about 10 months old when Julia Ward Howe died.

Many people don’t know that there was a second effort in the 19th century to create an official Mothers Day. Anna Jarvis from West Virginia had helped to found Mothers Day Work Clubs during the Civil War to treat and support soldiers from both sides of the conflict. She later began a “Mothers Friendship Day’ to bring mothers from both sides of the Civil War together. Later in her life after her own mother died, Anna Jarvis started a campaign to make Mothers Day an official American holiday. She succeeded in 1914 and Mothers Day became official.

Later on she became horrified with the commercialization of Mothers Day. Jarvis became embittered because too many people sent their mothers a printed greeting card. She said, **“A printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world. And candy! You take a box to Mother—and then eat most of it yourself. A pretty sentiment.”**

So here we are on Mothers Day. We have two versions of this holiday from which to choose. We could grumble like Jarvis about the commercialization of the day with some justification. Or we could take the high road and consider the efforts of our Unitarian ancestor Julia Ward Howe as she attempted to create a women’s peace movement.

However, why should we choose between one Mothers Day and other one?

I mentioned earlier that my foster mother was born ten months before Julia Ward Howe died in 1910. That’s nearly two centuries but really two very long lifetimes separate Julia Ward Howe’s birth in 1819 and Selma’s death in February 2002.

Think of the changes in those two lifetimes.

Yes, we still have brutality, warfare, injustice, and around us the poor and homeless of all ages. We have a huge environmental crisis and shrill voices on all sides saying that their side is the only true voice.

Consider, though, what both Julia Ward Howe and Anna Jarvis were attempting to accomplish against all odds. They refused to see the world around them entirely as “either-or, black-white, us-them” absolutes. They never met each other as far as I know. They had very different lives and stories. However, they did have common ground as far as their ideal for an official Mothers Day. They both sought to build bridges across social and political divides.

According to my notes, I used the opening words from today in that Brunswick service. I like them particularly because they also bridge the gap between labels that keep people apart.

For example, most of the congregations where I have served have had lingering resentment toward traditional Christian doctrines that exclude, punish and condemn unbelievers. That resentment is honest but limits us from doing what great and determined women did to build bridges in the last 150 years. Do we want to really want to toss out the spiritual baby with the theological bathwater of our Christian heritage? Is it fair and inclusive for us to attack abusive religious doctrines of original sin and conditional salvation but to avoid the teachings of Jesus the great subversive radical? He was, after all, our primary religious ancestor and we probably would not exist as a church without his story.

Selma didn't like the idea of liberalism being a valid philosophy. She thought it went against self-reliance. That didn't stop her from bridging the gap between those who were fiscally, socially or politically liberal or conservative. She would have been horrified to be called a feminist but her determination to rise beyond reactive partisanship gave her a special power.

We can do the same here at UUFC. I know that there are people here who are Republican, Democratic, and Independent and none of the above. I know of folks who are politically conservative and can make an excellent case for their views. There are people here like myself who are deeply resistant to a reactive ‘pro-choice/pro-life’ absolutism.

Julia Ward Howe, Anna Jarvis and people like my foster mother were determined to reach beyond convenient labels.

We are their descendents. They were bold and they reached beyond themselves to bear children or ideas hoping for the best possible outcome.

We can do no less. Selma would have been appalled to hear me say she was in the slightest bit liberal. She was willing to listen and to debate

ideas and reached beyond convenient divisions to create a better world. That to me is a bridge between liberalism and conservatism for this day.

In a few minutes we will have time for conversation. Perhaps you will consider how your mothers or the women who have inspired you made the world a better place including carrying and bringing you to life.

Before then, I'd like to invite us to do a variation of a meditation practice I've done here before. Metta or loving-kindness practice is compassion for all beings starting with us. Today I'd like to offer it to all mothers everywhere.

Please get comfortable and close your eyes.

First, center yourself in your own awareness, body, and mind.

May I be filled with loving-kindness.

May I be well.

May I be peaceful and at ease.

May I be freed from fear.

Now I'd like you to imagine your own mother before you. If you have mixed feelings about her, use this time to remember something about her that was or is loving. If there was conflict between you, then see if you can rise beyond it to bridge that place of hurt or pain. Then say these words:

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be well.

May you be peaceful and at ease.

May you be freed from fear.

Now finally, let us imagine all the mothers of the world past and present. They include the mother of Osama bin Laden or the mothers of his children. The mother of Col. Gaddafi and the mothers of all dictators must be included. They wanted the best for their children. Imagine all the mothers who go without food or who struggle to feed their families.

Now silently say these words:

May all mothers in the world be filled with loving-kindness.

May all mothers be well.

May all mothers be peaceful and at ease.

May all mothers be freed from fear.