



Well, I'll preempt all the questions about this stole that I'm wearing. So, this stole was given to me by SACReD, SACReD Alliance of Communities for Reproductive Dignity, for the work that I have done to help SACReD be created. The colors you see are all women, and I wear it both in honor of all women and also my mother who taught me that advocacy should be a key element in my spiritual life. And I know you were going to ask me, so I'm telling you now. You can still ask me, but yeah.

Julia Ward Howe couldn't imagine us today when she wrote her Mother's Day proclamation in 1870. "Arise then women of this day, arise all women who have hearts. Whether your baptism be of water or of tears, say firmly we will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands will not come to us, wreaking 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. We, the women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs." She was not composing a Mother's Day greeting card. She was trying to start a peace movement in 1870. She was fed up with men running things. She was tired of young men being sent to fight wars, and she knew something about loss. The women in her circles had lost sons in the Civil War by the thousands.

Julia Ward Howe with her optimistic unitarian mind also didn't want to be confined or constrained by men. She saw them doing damage to the lives of women with different tools of power. In 1893, she spoke at the World's Fair, in a lecture on what is religion and said, "I think nothing is religion which puts one individual absolutely above others. And surely nothing is religion which puts one sex over another. Any religion which will sacrifice a certain set of human beings for the enjoyment or aggrandizement or advantage of another is no religion. Any religion which sacrifices women to the brutality of men is no religion." Howe was no pushover, she refused to stop writing poetry when her

husband demanded she put her pen down. She refused to stop meeting with her transcendentalist friends named Emerson and Alcott when her husband protested. She even wrote a play about bad marriages.

As she is famous for The Battle Hymn of the Republic, but she might be more famous for trying to start a peace movement she called Mother's Day. But she couldn't imagine what would follow the Civil War, and she couldn't conceive of us when she declared that Mother's Day should bring about peace. She didn't imagine the world wars or the nuclear bombs decimating whole cities in Japan. She didn't imagine drone warfare, the Palestinian-Israeli wars or the Strait of Hormuz. She couldn't imagine having met Lincoln, presidents who didn't comport themselves with grace, or those who might erect golden statues to themselves, just as she couldn't imagine Mother's Day cards and flowers and brunch replacing protests and sit-ins and disarmament. She was a practical, strong Unitarian woman, if not a little hopeful. She believed that women would rule in the future and peace would prevail.

36 years after Howe declared Mother's Day a day of peace, Anna Jarvis said as they declared Mother's Day a national holiday, that she was inspired by her mother's work with Julia Ward Howe to make that day official, and so it was and so it is. Those early Unitarian pioneers in the women's movement who wanted so much got something. A day like this, where lots of goodwill should be showered on mothers of all kinds, and care taken on those who couldn't or can't.

Those pioneers for rights and peace probably couldn't imagine us at all when they hoped for Mother's Day. They couldn't imagine a church spread across the country and the world filled with so many varied feelings and emotions about mothers and Mother's Day. They couldn't imagine how experimental parenting in the '60s would lead to so many therapist appointments in the '90s. They couldn't imagine that women could control their pregnancies no less that there would be culture wars that would shame women for wanting to control their pregnancies. They couldn't know that they were sparking something that a church might hope for, a day to honor mothers for the peace of the world. They couldn't imagine us tiptoeing through how and if we honor motherhood. But 112 years later after Mother's Day was officially designated, where does all this leave us?

I imagine Julia Ward Howe walking in here today and she might understand that this day could be about other things than peace, that a enlightened Unitarian church could celebrate Mother's Day by celebrating the feminine power that changes the world, because at the core of this day really is the spirit and hope of feminine power, the power to create and care, the power to build generosity, to be a generative power in the world to care for creation, to courageously speak truth to power. Howe's words in her proclamation remind us the sword of murder is not the balance of justice. This should be on our minds today as we consider feminine solutions to our problems, which do not include force or violence. These words of Julia Ward Howe come from a generative, caring spirit that shows up not just when mothers speak but when all people live out their lives for peace and sanity and love and compassion. It shows up when we prioritize care over profit, when compassion takes precedence over gain.

I want to tell you a story about this. It comes from a favorite Christian teacher, the late Fred Craddock. He told this story that one day he and his wife were vacationing in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and while they were having dinner one evening, they noticed an older gentleman who had white hair going around shaking hands with everyone in the restaurant. And Craddock, like most of us introverts whispered to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come over here." But the man came over and inquired where they were from. "Oklahoma," responded, Craddock. Again, the friendly man asked, "And what do you do for a living?" Craddock said, "I teach homiletics at the graduate seminary of Phillips University." "Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach to you? Well, I've got a story to tell you. My name's Ben Hooper." And he sat down at their dinner table.

As Hooper began his story, he told Craddock that his mother wasn't married when he was born, so he had a pretty hard time of it. This was some time back. He recounted how at school the children would say things to him that cut deeply. "What was worse," Hooper said, "Was going to town on Saturday and feeling like every eye in town was burning a hole through me, wondering who my father was."

He continued, "When I was at 12 years old, a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early, but one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I couldn't get out without the crowd so I could feel every eye of church on me. Just about the time I got to the door, I felt a big hand on my shoulder and I looked up and the preacher was looking right at me, 'Who are you, son?' He asked. I felt this big weight coming down on me," Hooper said. "It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down." "But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. 'Wait a minute,' he said, 'I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. You're a child of God.' With that, he said, 'Boy, you have a great inheritance. Go and claim it.'"

After Ben Hooper left the table, Craddock remembered his study of Tennessee history that on two occasions the people of Tennessee elected individuals to the state's highest office of governor who were born out of wedlock. One of them was named Ben Hooper. Craddock said of this story, "Even though his father abandoned him, one can thank God that he had a mother who was devoted to him." And what Craddock did not say in this story was that, "Governor of Tennessee, Ben Hooper, for whatever else he was or did, overcame the fact that his mother birthed him without a father and understood that he was a child of God and worked to help children thrive in his state. As governor, he increased public school funding. He regulated child labor in factories and mines. He provided military widows pensions. He established parole and indeterminate sentencing. He required deposit of state funds on interest and ensured mine safety and regulated public utilities, all powered by a mother's love to give a chance to children to live full and happy lives." And that is what we are celebrating today.

Change that comes from a deep generative power, that comes when care is prioritized over profit, when compassion takes precedence over gain. This happens in our lives and it happens in our church all the time. It happens here in our Sunday school when John in his 80s spends Sunday teaching first graders, the Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum to help them name and love the parts of their bodies that the world will tell them are shameful.

It happens when members of our church and the by your side singers enter a quiet room and fill it with song for someone nearing death or navigating illness or new limits. It happens when members listen deeply to the hard truths of local racial histories and vow to do better. It happens when the grief group passes the time with someone giving them attention who is holding up something that represents a loved one, a painting, a rock, an anniversary gift, a Bible. It happens when volunteers play balloon volleyball with members of our unforgettable friends community who are struggling with cognitive decline. And it happens when men at a retreat admit they are lonely and isolated and need one another. These generative, caring, creative responses to the world's pains and struggles are in some sense what we honor today.

Maybe the person who was this kind of caring force for you was your mother. Maybe it was someone else's mother, maybe it's the mothering we offer one another in moments of care and protection, witnessing and blessing and attention that we all can hold today. Personally, I'm not ashamed to tell you that I received all this from my mother. All that in the hours of tearful English and reading and writing homework in which she never gave up on me. I am sure if there were the kinds of classifications and definitions in education then as there are now I would have been told I had a learning disability. Slow in reading, losing focus at every sentence, hiding under the kitchen, crying when it was time to write and do spelling homework. My mother never gave up on me and kept helping me inch by inch, make my way through the torture of school. And I now have a doctoral degree and a published author and have a career that is about writing and speaking, probably mostly because of her.

I know not all of you can tell such a story. I have heard your stories. I know that there is pain and trauma and mistakes and all that, but today we are celebrating more than the particulars of any mother's life. We are celebrating a power to change and transform those around us with a deep kindness, with deep patient commitments. "Attention is love," the poet said, "Patience is giving and caring." To make something, someone, some moment new is the generative power that we honor today. It's the kind of power a friend of mine spoke of when she said that her mother was dying and so they decided they would call all her friends to say goodbye. And when her mother was on the phone with a friend, she would always say, "Take care of my baby when I'm gone." Her baby was 50 years old. This is what we celebrate. The care that never dies that is carried on by us. We celebrate change and change agents and those who nurtured in us love, those among us who are learning to love.

Change is that generative power a member of this church represented to me when she said, "To undo the harm I was taught about black people in my childhood, I'm giving you this big check to do what you will with." We are building something deep about racial equity here with that money, that change of heart with our director of equity initiatives and all the work that we will do. And a colleague of mine who is younger than me and became a grandmother recently said to me smiling, she said, "I'm learning so much from my daughter." We are celebrating generations, teaching generations to love, generative power. There was a governor of Tennessee who understood this powered by a mother's love and God's love who looked out for children. The feminine won in him, power changed him.

For all this, we probably can't and probably shouldn't worry about repaying our mothers for the greatest gift any living creature can give, which is life we all received, no matter who our mothers were to us. There is no recompense for this gift as the poet, Billy Collins reminded us, "Here as a breathing body and a beating heart, strong legs, bones and teeth, and two clear eyes to read the world she whispered, 'And here I said is a lanyard I made at camp.'" And here I wish to say to her now a smaller gift, not the worn truth you can never repay your mother. And that's okay, because today reminds us that lanyards are fine, you still have time to make some today. Brunch is great, right? Right, moms, right? Brunch is great. But better still is repaying the world with your love, fostering peace where you can, making changes in your life that a good mother would want for you, to make it possible for others to thrive, to do it with a commitment that never tires. That is what we honor today in Mother's Day.

So at brunch or on that call that you haven't made yet, or just in reflecting on the one who's died, ponder how your generative power is at work or needs to be. How grateful are you for the gift, beating heart and clear eyes to read the world, how grateful and to what end. That's your Mother's Day homework. Amen. Amen.