

1000 Grandmothers

May 14, 2006

By Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Call to Worship: *Mother's Day Proclamation 1870* Julia Ward Howe

Arise, then, women of this day!

Arise all women who have hearts, whether your 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.

"We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country 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 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 and commemorate the dead.

Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as the means whereby the great human family can live in peace,

And each bearing after her own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

Meditation: Thich Nhat Hahn

"I have a friend who is an artist. Before he left Vietnam forty years ago, his mother held his hand and told him, "Whenever you miss me, look into your hand, and you will see me immediately." Over the years, my friend looked into his hand many times. The presence of his mother is not just genetic. Her spirit, her hopes, and her life are also in him. When he looks into his hand,

he can see thousands of generations before him and thousands of generations after him...He told me he never feels lonely.”

Reading: *1000 Grandmothers*

Holly Near

Send in a thousand grandmothers
They will surely volunteer
With their ancient wisdom flowing
They will lend a loving ear

First they'll form a loving circle
Around the wounded wing
Then contain the brutal beasts of war
Sweet freedom songs they'll sing

A lullaby much stronger
than bombs and threats to kill
A force unlike we've ever known
will break the murderer's will

To the prisons we'll invite them
The most violent men will weep
when a thousand women hold them strong
and pray their souls to keep
Let them rock the few who steal the most
and rule with youthful charm
so they'll see the damage that they do
and will fall into grandma's arms
two thousand loving arms

If you think these women are too soft
to face the world at hand
then you've never known the power of love
and you fail to understand

An old woman holds a powerful force
when she no longer needs to please
She can cut your shallow lie to bits
and bring you to your knees
We best get down on our knees

and pray for a thousand grandmothers
Will you please come volunteer
No longer tucked deep out of sight
will you bring your power here
will you bring your power here

Sermon

I begin this Mother's Day sermon with some words of gratitude and remembrance for my mother. One sunny Saturday she took me on her lap in the big red chair in the living room and with her finger lining the small print of an adult book—my dad's book about horseback riding—she showed me that I *did* know how to read. And later, she taught me how to question authority when she told my first grade teacher, who thought I was an unteachable non-reader, that Dick, Jane, and Sally were boring and that Jane never got to do anything interesting—except to witness Dick while saying “Look, Look, Look” from the fringes of his active world.

My mother taught me how to read the letters on a page and also to read and challenge the culture of dominance and hierarchy that measures and categorizes, and tracks children from day one of school. She taught the lesson by two strong actions: one, holding me on her lap embracing with nurture and two, by standing up when my safety was as stake with the motion of setting limits. Human beings and human culture need both.

The lesson that my mother could not teach me, because she did not know the skill herself, was how to reach out for support, how to reach out in collaboration. Her only options were to be confrontational. As a result, I learned to read, moved up the ranks to the highest reading group, and had a difficult year—living in the middle between two powerful, angry women.

I went to hear Holly Near sing in Cambridge two years ago. I felt like I was sitting on her musical lap as she used her voice and poetry to invite us to find creative ways to stand against the war in Iraq. She sang *1000 Grandmothers* and in the words I could feel the power of aging women to join together powerfully instead of standing on the sidelines saying, “Look, Look, Look” or by competing with each other in the various ways of power.

I bought the CD and played it in my car, feeling the shift in the motion of healing energy of warm embrace to the energy of conscience and backbone in these words:

*A lullaby much stronger
than bombs and threats to kill
A force unlike we've ever known
will break the murderer's will*

*An old woman holds a powerful force
when she no longer needs to please
She can cut your shallow lie to bits
and bring you to your knees*

Apparently I have not been the only person listening to Holly Near's musical fantasy. There is a group in New York, called *Grandmothers Against the War*, aged 59 3/4 to 90, who gathered themselves last fall at a recruiting station and demanded to enlist. They sat down on the ramp leading to the door with some difficulty and led a crowd singing "God Help America" and passed out cookies. Prior to their arrest they read this statement:

STATEMENT OF THE ANTI-WAR GRANDMOTHERS
OCTOBER 17, 2005

We are grandmothers heartbroken over the huge loss of life and limb in Iraq. We feel it is our patriotic duty to enlist in the United States military today in order to replace our grandchildren who have been deployed there far too long and are anxious to come home now while they are still alive and whole. By this action, we are not supporting the use of military force in Iraq—in fact, we are totally against it. But inasmuch as it exists, our goal in joining up is only to protect young people from further death and maiming.

We grandmothers have all had the privilege of living long lives and are willing to put ourselves in harm's way so that our own and other people's grandchildren will have a chance to enjoy full lives as we have.

We believe these young men and women are being used as cannon

fodder in an illegal and totally unjustified war against a nation which posed no threat to us. They were sent there on a web of lies and deceit resulting in untold harm to them and countless innocent Iraqi people.

We hope that by enlisting today we can help bring about the early end of this immoral occupation and the return of our brave young people to their homes and families now.

They were arrested and put in vans while the police carried their canes and walkers. In April of this year all 18 grandmothers were acquitted of disorderly conduct charges after a five-day trial. When one of the organizers, Joan Wile, was asked what the judge's ruling meant, her answer was: "A bunch of old broads like us still have a life to live and still matter... Listen to your granny. And take to the streets like we did."

These were not the first women to stand together for peace. The founder of the original Mother's Day-Mother's Peace Day, Julia Ward Howe, asked herself in her diary, soon after the death of her young child Sam:

"As I was revolving these matters in my mind, while the war was still in progress, I was visited by a sudden feeling of the cruel and unnecessary character of the contest. It seemed to me a return to barbarism, the issue having been one that might easily have been settled without bloodshed. The question forced itself upon me, "Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters, to prevent the waste of that human life of which they alone bear and know the cost?" I had never thought of this before. *The august dignity of motherhood and its terrible responsibilities* now appeared to me in a new aspect, and I could think of no better way of expressing my sense of these than that of sending forth an appeal to *womanhood*...."

Julia Ward Howe was a woman who lived in a time when women had few choices. She received a limited education. She had no access to reliable birth control. She did not have the right to vote. She had to work for the right, as woman, to speak in public. And yet she mobilized herself with others to take decisive action. She immediately wrote a proclamation for peace that was translated into French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Swedish, and broadcast the message to the world. She created the Women's International Peace Association. At home, she organized Mother's Peace Day marches, parades, and demonstrations, lobby days, which were held

annually on June 2 and continued in northeastern cities for more than 30 years.

Julia Ward Howe did not dream up the idea of organizing mothers alone. She was exposed to the work of Anna Maria Reeves Jarvis when she visited Washington during the Civil War. Before the war, Ann Jarvis, mother of 11 children had organized “Mother’s Work Day Clubs” to serve the needs of poor women and sick mothers. The clubs were organized to bring bottled milk and medicines over the back road of Appalachia; once the Civil War began the women mobilized centers of care for thousands of wounded on both sides; after the war Jarvis organized Mothers Day clubs to hold gatherings for reconciliation and recovery for the mothers of both sides. They gathered to share food, sing. On one such Sunday in May, thousands of people came waving scraps of blue and gray from discarded uniforms and violence was feared but did not occur. Instead of fighting, soldiers from opposite sides wept in each others’ arms.

Ann Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe did not dream up the idea of mothers gathering for peace and reconciliation. They like many of the women seeking social and political power in their time were exposed to the ways of the indigenous people-the women of Iroquois-the six-nation confederacy that established peace among themselves before the arrival of Columbus. These women knew both from contact and from detailed newspaper articles of the time that this land was originally settled by a culture in which women’s and men’s powers were balanced in a mutually reinforcing and sustainable cycle of relationship.

They knew that women formed counsels, The Counsel of Matrons, to nominate the office of chief, the negotiator with other tribes. No male could be nominated who had either stolen or been violent against women in any way. The Counsel of Matrons could depose a chief for misconduct. The “chief matron” had the deciding vote. Historian Sally Roesch Wagner writes: “Among the Haudenosaunee, family lineage was reckoned through mothers; no child was born a “bastard” (the concept didn’t exist); every child found a loving and welcome place in a mother’s world, surrounded by a mother’s sisters, her mother and the men whom they married. Unmarried sons and brothers lived in this large extended family too, until they left home to marry into another matrilineal clan. . . . Matilda Joselyn Gage, while serving as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1875, penned a series of admiring articles about the Iroquois for the New York

Evening Post in which she wrote that the: “division of power between the sexes in this Indian republic was nearly equal while the Iroquois family structure demonstrated woman’s superiority in power.”¹

Anna Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe learned from a community of men and women and from each other that mothers have power when they join in solidarity with each other and with men for the benefit of lasting and sustainable peace.

I was sitting in my health club last week (sans sneakers ☺)-having a cup of coffee side by side with a group of women who were watching their teammates in the last rounds of championship playoffs. During a lull, when their side (Winchester) went down a game and were no longer likely to win, they began talking about their children. They were complaining about the amount of homework and pressure they witnessed in those young lives. Each one added a story—staying up until 3 AM to fine tune papers, going from driving lessons, to flute lessons, to SAT tutoring, mothers doing the homework-even by phone to Harvard freshman.

In the midst of this litany of “ain’t it awful” one of the mothers said, “We cannot let up the pressure though. The world my children are entering is becoming more and more like this (gestures with her hand to make the sign of a mountain). If they are not on top, there is no more middle and I cannot guarantee a good life for them. I don’t see any other solution than to push them.”

I swallowed my coffee and wondered what might happen to these mothers whose full-time job is to manage the future success of their particular children in the competitive, “winner take all” world they envision, if a husband losses his job and they would be forced to go to work. I knew these women will not be standing on Winchester Common holding signs against the war because they are carpooling and correcting papers to be assured that their children will never have to join the army to get an education. I looked at them and saw myself.

If there is such a thing as a ”mothering instinct,” I believe both men and women possess it. This impulse to protect children for the survival of the species is a human choice we can all make. The impulse is at its

¹ Sally Roesch Wagner, “The Untold Story of the Iroquois Influence on Early Feminists” (Sky Carrier Press 1996).

evolutionary best when it applies to *all* the planet's children. On this day that celebrates the impulses of Julia Ward Howe and Anna Jarvis, I ask us to wonder about the condition of our children. They are the “canaries in the mine”—the vulnerable edge of our survival as a species. How are they doing? Not on the SATs or in their college acceptances, but as a whole. How are the children?

Here are some statistics a few years old: Among other industrialized nations, we have the highest rates of maternal and child poverty. The mortality rate of our children under the age of 5 is shared by Croatia and Malaysia. We are 54th when it comes to access to health care for women and children. And only four other industrial countries fail to guarantee paid leave from work to new mothers. In other words, when it comes to mothers and children, we don't even rank among the top 10.²

I quote from the MomsRising.com website: “There is a silent crisis in America. Mothers and families are in trouble. A full quarter of families with children under six live in poverty, at least 9 million children don't have any health care, and far too many parents can't afford to stay home with sick children.”

Once upon a time I was educated on the lap of a feisty but isolated mother. Once upon a time I was an isolated mother who worked in a community organization that supported young mothers at risk. Over time I saw that their condition was the same as mine. We were all in search of beloved community—a place and a paradigm that knows how to make a circle of protection that grows out of mutuality rather than domination. The paradigm of beloved community is based, not on winning, but rather, on sustainability. I picked myself up and joined a church and found a place where mothers and fathers shared the work of parenting, gathered themselves in solidarity around issues that affected them, shared food, and songs, fought with each other and forgave each other.

I learned a lot of instrumental skills by belonging to a church—how to take a stand, how to take responsibility for following through on commitments, how to communicate with others who are not exactly like me, how to return calls made by strangers on behalf of shared community. How to forgive and

² Ruth Rosen, San Francisco Chronicle, May 1, 2003

how to be forgiven, again and again. Perhaps you have learned those skills here too. But instrumentality is not all that we might learn with each other.

We can also learn to draw the circle of community larger than this circle of privilege. We can do more than circle the wagons to protect our own from the violence of the market culture. We can learn to draw the circle of beloved community to include our neighbors who can't find affordable housing or feed their children or get access to health care.

We need to know that the social and political vulnerability of immigrants, people of color, women and gays is, in truth, our own vulnerability happening within the larger tribe of humanity. We are all vulnerable to the principalities and the powers that make the rules of the winner take all game that is the primary paradigm of the culture.

The larger circle that we draw will increase our own freedom—freedom to know the reality of our condition. In a game that is not sustainable we are all going to be losers sooner or later.

Small group ministry is one way we are learning the practices of sustainability. Providing caring circles is another. I wonder what else we might be doing, in the spirit of the Iroquois, Ann Jarvis, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Grandmothers for Peace that will emerge from our times of singing and sharing food? I suggest that we begin today by asking each other, “What was your mother’s dream?” over coffee while we listen with real curiosity. This is how we begin to “circle round for freedom”—in the lap of nurturing community.

And so I ask this beloved community to sing our final hymn as a prayer to the children of the world. Their fate is in our hands. In a world without end, amen.

Benediction

Spirit of Life, help us to recover our hope for our children's sake.

Help us to recover our courage for our children's sake.

Help us to recover our discipline for our children's sake.

Help us to recover our ability to work together for our children's sake.

Help us to recover our values for our children's sake.

Help us to recover a spirit of sacrifice for our children's sake.

Help us to recover our faith in mystery for our children's sake.

Marion Wright Edelman