

The Woman Who Tried to Repeal Mother's Day

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Did any of you ever start something that didn't turn out quite the way you'd planned? I can remember one time when I was just learning to cook when I switched the amounts of salt and sugar in a chocolate cake recipe. The result looked like a chocolate cake but was absolutely inedible.

Then there was the time, years later, when I worked, studied, and practiced to go to Berkeley College of Music only to discover that the cut-throat, competitive climate of the conservatory was absolutely the wrong place for me to nurture my artistic ambitions.

And anyone who has ever seen a marriage end in divorce has some idea of how even the best of intentions can go awry.

There was one time in American history when things didn't go the way people expected. Folks up north call it the Civil War, but many down south still call it the War of the Northern Aggression.

It started out as compassionate idealism, really. Many recognized that slavery was an unjust, dehumanizing institution that harmed everyone involved, whether owner or slave. Abolition became a rallying cry for the birth of American progressive social conscience. Members of Unitarian and Universalist churches were at the forefront of the movement.

Julia Ward Howe was a noted abolitionist, author and feminist as well as a Unitarian. Shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, she visited the White House to meet Abraham Lincoln. During this visit, she and Unitarian minister, James Freeman Clarke, stood on a balcony watching Union troops march by, singing "John Brown's Body." (John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in his grave. His truth is marching on.) Clark turned to Howe and said, "That's a great tune, but those words are terrible. Someone should write better lyrics."

And, as we know, Julia Ward Howe expressed her Unitarian ideals for going to war to abolish slavery in the stirring, "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

But then the Civil War happened, but it didn't turn out the way people expected. It had been widely believed that the war would be over within a couple of months. It lasted for five years, and over 600,000 people died, more than six times the casualties of WW II as a percentage of the population. The carnage was ghastly. Almost no one was spared the loss of a friend or loved one. The war ended the institution of slavery, but failed to restore the broken spirit of a nation. Brother fought against brother, father against child as the nation divided against itself.

Julia Ward Howe's "Mother's Day Proclamation" of 1870, which we read together, expressed her change of heart. She became a staunch pacifist following the war, combining it with her feminist advocacy. The ending lines of her proclamation, while not printed in our hymnal, are telling: "In the name of womanhood and 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 called for changing July 4th from Independence Day to an International Mother's Day to celebrate peace and motherhood.

One foundational belief of nineteenth century feminism was that women were lifted up as being morally superior to men. Women were seen as peaceful nurturers whose deep values would make war an impossibility. Empowering women was equated with moral progress. Given women the right to vote was equated with bringing an end to war and many other social evils.

It seems that women's suffrage didn't bring war to an end.

But then again, prohibition didn't exactly work out the way they'd planned, either.

Ann Marie Jarvis was born in West Virginia in 1832. A lifelong progressive, she organized a series of Mother's Day Work Clubs to improve health and sanitary conditions. These clubs raised money for medicine, aides to help women suffering from tuberculosis, and health inspections for food and milk.

West Virginia was a strategic site during the Civil War. Ann Jarvis urged her Mother's Day Work Clubs to declare themselves neutral and to care for both Confederate and Union Soldiers, which they did. Jarvis' work provided an element of peace and stability in an area that was otherwise torn apart by political hostilities.

Following the war in 1865, Jarvis organized a Mother's Peace Day event to bring together soldiers and people from all sides of the conflict. Despite anxieties at the outcome, the event was a great success and was celebrated annually for several years thereafter.

Ann Jarvis moved to Philadelphia to live with her daughter, Anna Jarvis, in 1905, where she died in 1907. The following year, Anna Jarvis led a small tribute to her mother's legacy of peaceful reconciliation, distributing white carnations to all the mothers of the St. Andrews Methodist Church in Granville, West Virginia, where her mother had lived and taught Sunday school.

Anna Jarvis continued to promote the establishment of Mother's Day as a holiday uplifting the values which her mother had worked so hard to promote: peace, reconciliation, and care, but had little success until she received the support of Philadelphia's premier merchant and philanthropist, John Wanamaker, who was often cited as the father of American advertising. Wanamaker's advocacy ensured the day's popularity – but things didn't work out the way she'd planned. It was the equivalent of being supported by Donald Trump: Wanamaker's support inevitably linked the holiday to the sentimentality of commercial opportunism.

West Virginia was the first state to make Mother's Day an official holiday in 1912, and it became a national holiday in 1914, when the second Sunday in May was officially declared "Mother's Day."

One consequence was that carnations became the symbol of the holiday – a tremendous boon for the floral industry. A florist's trade magazine actually encouraged florists to take advantage of this opportunity, saying that "this is a holiday that could be exploited." The budding commercialization of the holiday galled Jarvis, who vociferously protested this misuse of the holiday.

In 1923 she sued to stop a Mother's Day event, and was later arrested a number of times for disturbing the peace with her protests against the sale of flowers. She tried to regain control of the holiday by incorporating herself as "Mother's Day International Association," and trademarking the phrases, "second Sunday in May," and "Mother's Day," but it was really too late – the terms were already in general use. Jarvis also fought against the issue of a postage stamp picturing a vase of white carnations with the words, "Mother's Day" below – and won a minor victory. The words were removed.

Anna Jarvis wrote, "What will you do to route charlatans, bandits, pirates, racketeers, kidnappers and other termites that would undermine with their greed one of the finest, noblest and truest movements and celebrations?" When flower sales continued to grow despite her protests, the Florist's Review proudly announced that "Miss Jarvis was completely squelched."

In her 1948 obituary, The New York Times quoted her as saying, "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."

Anna Jarvis died blind and penniless and would have been galled at the final irony: her funeral arrangements were paid for by the Florists' Exchange. Things just didn't work out the way she'd planned.

What can we do? How can we best honor Anna Jarvis and the original purpose of Mother's Day? To begin with, we can take up the cause of compassionate pacifism as expressed so eloquently in Julia Ward Howe's "Mother's Day Proclamation," which we shared together this morning. How does her cry of, "The sword of murder is not the balance of justice! Blood does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession," resound in our culture today, where the death penalty is seen as "closure," and assassination is seen as a valid and useful political gambit?

We can celebrate this holiday by honoring the sacrifices of the caregivers amongst us, whether they are mothers or fathers, sisters or brothers, or any of the myriad friends and strangers who reach out compassionately to those around them without counting the cost to themselves? I believe we should increasingly

include teachers and nurses in this number, along with the countless others who have chosen their professions, not on the basis of economic reward, but on the basis of how much good they can do with their lives.

And we can celebrate the work of Ann Jarvis by working to bring together people with disparate viewpoints into compassionate community without hostility, conflict, or resentment. How would that play out in American society today, where the political rhetoric of both the left and the right serve more to demonize and inflame than to humanize and reconcile? Can we actually build bridges between our divisions by agreeing that, no matter what our theological or political stances, it is important for us to be kind, compassionate, and just? Could that help us to remake our world into a more beloved community?

Mother's Day can be a difficult holiday. It's not easy to be a mother. And it's often not easy to have a mother. Whether parent or child, things often don't work out the way we'd planned.

My mother was a woman of strong emotions. I thrived on the bright sunshine of her love and approval. And I suffered from the dark thunder of her disapproval and anger. Both influences have become parts of my self. There's no way to have only the light without the darkness, whether between a mother and child or in any other relationship.

We can honor our mothers by working to transcend the emotional issues that can separate us from each other, and can also separate us from our own, inner, sometimes hidden, wholeness.

Honor, peace, reconciliation, and love represent the work of this day as we pause to acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of others and the sacrifices they have made for us. May we continue to pay this debt forward by giving of ourselves to others in need. Things might not work out the way we've planned, but we're called to do it anyway.