

“Mother’s Day: May 9, 2010”

“A New Look at an Old Idea”

Rev. Chip Wright

‘Apple pie, baseball, red, white and blue
This all seems to go with Mother’s Day too!’

It is the season and our celebration of Mother’s Day with all its Hallmark cards and flowers is a real entrenched event in most of our lives, likely more so than baseball for many of us, certainly me. But it is actually a fairly recent phenomenon in the way we understand it today.

Mothers Day is a prominent piece of our national character true, but it is a festivity and holiday born in something quite different than most folks think.

We can actually trace Mother’s Days back to the spring celebrations of Rhea of ancient Greece, who was considered the mother of all Gods. This identification as mother in this religious way then spread as the population grew. In the Renaissance it became associated with The Church, as everything was, and so the church became the Mother Church. At this time institutional religious efforts were blossoming and the great cathedrals were becoming the centers of religious and spiritual life.

Also during this time the idea of the Mother Church started to give rise to the mother cults. These cults were quite powerful for a time and largely populated by women. During their peak in the early Renaissance the icon we know as Mother Mary gained countless followers and eclipsed Jesus as an intermediary to the divine.

The Church Fathers were not impressed by this so they designed a strategy in response. The thought was, that if they re-inserted the mother into church liturgy it would present a symbol which might bring folks back to the fold who had drifted away into what is historically known now as Black Madonna worship. And so the Virgin Mary was inserted into the doctrine of the Church and eventually became part of its dogma.

As time passed, in the early sixteen hundreds there rose in Europe another Mother church day celebration which was once again focused on the institution of the church and what American churches looked to when we finally established an official date for our mother's day.

This tradition was called "Mothering Sunday" which was held on the fourth Sunday before Lent; the forty days leading up to Easter. Mothering Sunday is still recognized in some churches. But the way mothers days was arrived at here in the United States was a very different story.

Though our current Mother's Day has been co-opted in much the same way as Santa was by the coca cola company when they decided to dress him up in the colors of their products label, now the dominant image of Santa, in a red suite; so now mother's day is thought to be about mothers with an apostrophe S.

Don't get me wrong. I am not advocating that we should be dismissing our mothers and not honoring their unique role in the community.

Buy them flowers, give them cards, and even take them out to dinner by all means, if they are still around. There are good reasons to respect mothers as holding a specific role in the human dance. And I consider myself lucky to have had the mother I did and would always let her know, come Mother's Day how much I loved her.

However I think that Mother's Day, as it is now generally thought of does not honor the fact that all people do not necessarily have a birth mother that they wish to have dinner with or even talk to on the phone with; and flowers are out of the question. Recognizing all the realities in family dynamics having a mother may not be the universal joy this day seems to claim. Some mothers are just more Hallmark types than others!

There are and should be, limits to loving a mother. Just because one is a mother, or a father for that matter, does not make a parent, cart blanche, a great person. And in the gay community some children just don't have mothers at all, just two fathers.

As we look at the dramatic shifts in roles of parents today and the mother, a review of the historical context of our Mother's Day can be helpful. It was conceived as a much larger idea than we have come to think about it. Originally it was not a day about our respective mothers; but rather a day about the whole idea of the feminine, the nurturing aspect of our human family and here in the United States just what that meant in a conflicted world.

This all brings me to our story of this unique American holiday; a day highly influenced by our Unitarian Universalist values and connections. I'm sure some of you have heard me talk about our Declaration of Independence as being fundamentally a Unitarian document. It was written and placed into the context of our nation by self identified Unitarians, such as Thomas Jefferson, Ethan Allen, Benjamin Franklin, even Paul Revere.

However, I would bet not very many of you know our unique Unitarian relationship to Mother's Day, and why we adopted it here in our nation.

Unlike Denmark, Finland, Italy, Turkey, Australia, and Belgium which honor Mother's Day to commemorate the Mother Church, Mothers Day here in the United States was originally about remembering peace and the importance of forgiveness, reconciliation.

It started here as a "Mothers Day for Peace" an annual event to help heal us after our extremely divisive and bloody Civil War. It was a time that needed a ritual to overcome the scars of brothers, fathers and sons, literally facing and killed one and other on the battlefield.

"Mothers Day for Peace" was suggested by a woman, who along with her husband had been staunch abolitionists in the 1840's and supporters of John Brown and his slave revolt. This couple had to flee to Canada after the revolt at Harpers Ferry had failed. Can you name her?

She was also instrumental in leading and developing the first U.S. sanitary commission after the Civil War. This commission was first conceived of and funded during the war by our own Thomas Starr King, for whom our seminary in Berkeley is named and who was the first Unitarian Universalist minister of the San Francisco Church. The sanitary commission later to be renamed the Red Cross.

But let us return to the Mothers Day for Peace with the final clue to identify this Unitarian who initiated this day. She also wrote the words to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”: *Julia Ward Howe*.

Julia Howe held the first organized Mothers Day gatherings in the recently reunited United States in 1870. She would go on to organize and hold a “Mothers Day for Peace” meeting each year in Boston.

These went on year after year right up to Julia’s death in 1910. By this time the practice had spread throughout the nation with ‘Mothers Day for Peace’ gatherings in almost every state.

By the early nineteen hundreds when the tragic Civil War had become an old memory, many had dropped the long name of the celebration day in favor of just ‘Mothers Day.’

In 1907, in the heart of the final years of the woman’s suffrage movement, Ana Jarvis a woman from Philadelphia started to campaign to establish a national Mothers Day. During her time, the national focus had shifted to the plight of women, primarily mothers, who were suffering in the wake of a culture of addiction and alcoholism, along with the unavoidable gender inequity of the body political and governance of the nation.

So Ana Jarvis went to her mother's church and talked the minister there into celebrating Mother's Day to support women in the community at that time. This church in Grafton, West Virginia chose the second Sunday of May as it coincided with similar mother church traditions in Europe. The celebration grew and spread rapidly through the nation.

Women who were just becoming empowered through the suffrage movement and its clear march towards success were writing businessmen and politicians to establish a national Mother's Day. In 1914 Woodrow Wilson made an official announcement proclaiming the second Sunday in May as a national holiday that will be called, "Mother's Day".

So our present celebration, originally the 'Mothers Day for Peace' rooted in a very real and universal understanding of the feminine, and the care and nurture inherent in the human spirit, has resurfaced shaped anew.

This particular segment of our Unitarian Universalist living tradition is one that connects us from equal rights for women back through our history as abolitionists and to the promise of inherent worth and dignity. Ideas reflected in the founding documents of our nation, particularly in these Unitarian's words by Thomas Jefferson that "all people are endowed with certain inalienable

rights, among these the right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” There is a convergence here that lies along a common road of compatible ideas traveling the same path to the same place.

A path as William Ellery Channing, the man our street is named for and the first president of the American Unitarian Association called “the Arch of justice.”

As both a citizen of this nation, as well as a liberal religious person, I am fascinated that we have in this nation taken a different or actually opposite path from our European counterparts who started their Mothers Day celebrations as ways of ritualizing the mother church.

Here in our country we moved in a very different way from a secular day of peace in recognition of a tragic war amongst ourselves eventually to end up in the church (co-opted once more) and then back to a secular day though unconnected to the original reasoning that brought it to our national mind; quite a journey.

Still even with all these shifts there remains for us a very common holiday now. And in truth it is all interconnected in its own ways; and there is something about honoring this idea of the mother that is an archetype, a universal innate within the body of human experience.

But whether we are male or female, mineral or biological for that matter, we are all children of the greatest creation we will ever be aware of. We have been cast in a form that brings us a level of consciousness -- be that a blessing or a chore -- that is truly magic and a reality of this infinitely fine work of creation. And as such we are given an opportunity to co-create, to understand and find meaning in our experience of living. In this way we have the potential to nurture and move forward that which sustains us.

This word mother has come to symbolize selflessness on many levels. It speaks to nurture, to care, as well as to a primary creativity force symbolized in birth. But also this idea of mother be it mother earth, be it mother spirit, be it even the mother church, has in it also the more masculine identified traits of responsibility, action, discernment. All of these are tools for the work of stewardship and preservation. They give us all the abilities to birth anew, time and time again, if we but choose to.

So if we care for this gift of living then it is on us to remember and act as the stewards of this place that gives us life. It is on us to treat it with the respect and to know it as our true mother. To see it in all the ways it happens, in a flowering bulb, a fish in a rippling river, towering pillars interlocked basalt with great bird soaring over

head, or a star filled sky bursting with the dust of life in all directions.

Let us remember that we are charged with not only being one of the primary creative forces, but more importantly the preservers and the birthgivers of new understandings and ways of wellness.

Each and every portion of this thing we call existence happens in a delicate balance and time frame resting outside of our tampering. It is our job to learn this and work within this reality, to be in relationship and stewardship; and to bring our concept of peace into the equation of balance.

We need to continually birth and grow peace between peoples, lands and all life and matter. For without that there will be no flowering of tomorrow heralding in another new and rich understanding of our mother.

So on this day which we set aside to recognize our mothers may it also be about sustaining the wider world. As conscious children of nature we can look out and truly understand **that each and every part of this interconnected web in its own way is a mother to another part.**

When we care and act in this understanding, we each nurture and sustain the next heartbeats, the next vibration of creation in the continuation of this magical and marvelous dream of life.

So today let's remember and honor our own mothers certainly, by giving our care, our willingness, our ability to respond to the tears of our earth, and to nurture the blossoms of life that spring from a soil well cared for and tended with love.

When we do this we will find our own hearts flowering, with the deep colors and vibrancy of a life well led. And you can be assured that at that time the nature of life surrounding us all will smile broadly and know that Mothers Day is truly a good day.

Go in peace.