

## Testimony to Julia Ward Howe by Angela Klassen

Our TFAA today honours Julia Ward Howe, a Unitarian forebearer who lived in deeply challenging times and whose actions and words can inspire us in our times. As an activist, Unitarian Julia Ward Howe worked for the vote for women, for freedom from slavery, for rights for poor women and above all, for peace. A member of the wider circle of Transcendentalists who were closely intertwined with Unitarians of the day, Julia was a sought-after speaker and writer. Best remembered as the poet who wrote the words to The Battle Hymn of the Republic – familiar to some of us for its chorus “Glory, Glory Hallelujah ...” We honour her on this particular day, to remember her work to establish a Mother’s Peace Day.

Today’s customs of cards, flowers and brunch to honour Mom are poignant and precious for so many – but they bear little resemblance to Howe’s original idea. Julia issued her “Mother’s Day Proclamation” as a radical call to urge women to rise up and oppose war, which read in part:

“Arise then women of this day. Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of tears ... 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. From the bosom of the devastated earth, a voice goes up with our own and it says “Disarm! Disarm!” The sword of murder is not the balance of justice!”

You see, Julia had nursed and tended the wounded during the civil war. She had worked with the widows and orphans of soldiers on both sides of the war, realizing that the effects of war go far beyond the killing of soldiers in battle. The Franco Prussian war had broken out within a few years of the end of the Civil War and Howe continued advocating for the creation of a “Mothers’ Day for Peace” to be held on June 2 every year.

A day for women to commemorate the dead and to solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the Great Human family can live in peace”. The initiative lasted about 25 years, eventually losing popularity and disappearing in the years leading up to WWI. But the higher vision of her proclamation, through these words, went on to endure beyond her time:

“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 someplace deemed most convenient  
And 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.”

Juli was not the only woman who had called for such a Congress. The International Congress of Women took place in Paris in 1878 and continued to meet with increasing

frequency, (including in Toronto in 1909) until the Great Congress calling for the end of WWI in 1915. After WWI the congress in 1919 regrouped to form a new organization - The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. WILPF still exists and is active in Canada today with a goal to bring together women and diverse people to unite in their determination to advocate for peace.

Mother's Day, like the job of "nurturing," and action for change, can be varied and diverse. On this day may we honour the plea for peace of our Unitarian ancestor, honor the ways in which so many have nurtured their communities, their countries, and the larger world and bear in mind that even when it appears progress is slow –we can still get there.

*Ambitious people climb, but faithful people build.*

-- Julia Ward Howe