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Mothers' Day: Rooted in Peace
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We're happy to have a special Mothers' Day focus this week, not because the holiday is so big for card, gift, flower and restaurant businesses, but because Mothers' Day has its roots in the Peace Movement.

Julia Ward Howe (of Battle Hymn of the Republic fame) was an abolitionist activist who worked with families in hardship and economic turmoil on both sides of the Civil War. She saw, first-hand, the broad effects of war and how it reached beyond the wounding and death of soldiers, into the lives of the families and communities they left behind. Gradually, she conceived the idea of establishing a day to focus on world-wide peace, and an end to the slaughter of human life.

A few years after the end of the Civil War, she made an attempt to reach out to mothers and bring them into a growing Peace Movement by establishing Mothers' Day for Peace. Although observances were held for several years, the Movement eventually lost momentum, the observances ceased and her attempt to establish a specific global holiday failed. What remains, however, are the words of her proclamation, made in Boston 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 decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us reeking of 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 to those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of a 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 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 solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after his time the sacred impress not of Caesar, but of God.

"In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality 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."

Julia Ward Howe was building on work begun in 1858 by an Appalachian woman, Anna Reeves Jarvis. Anna Reeves Jarvis had been working to improve sanitation and medical care by forming Mothers' Work Day Clubs among both Union and Confederate women. Members cared for all affected by the war, including Union and Confederate soldiers, whose encampments were rife with outbreaks of typhoid. After the war, Anna Reeves Jarvis developed Mother's Friendship Day in an effort to reconcile families estranged by the war.

Toward the end of the 19th century, Anna Reeves Jarvis' daughter, Anna M. Jarvis, influenced by the work of both women, began her effort to establish a Mothers' Day for Peace. Her work took root, first in May of 1907 at her late mother's church, Andrews Methodist Episcopal Church of Grafton, West Virginia (rededicated in 1982 as the International Mother's Day Shrine). There, she made a request for a special service for mothers, in memory of her own, and donated 500 white carnations, her mother's favorite flower, for the mothers in the congregation to wear. A year later, another church joined in the observance, this one, her church in Philadelphia, the city where her father had been a minister, and to which she had moved to teach school.

Within a few years, Mothers' Day services were widely celebrated. Anna M. Jarvis then organized a letter-writing campaign to lobby for Congress to pass legislation to establish an official Mothers' Day on the 2nd Sunday of May. The efforts initially received derision from some of the legislators, at least one of whom railed against the idea, stating that establishing such a holiday would lead to frivolous holidays for brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. Eventually, however, the long letter-writing campaign won over Congress and on May 8th, 1914, President Woodrow Wilson signed House Joint Resolution 263, "A joint resolution designating the second Sunday in May as Mothers' Day, and for other purposes."

As seems to be so often the case, one intention turns into something else entirely. In

signing the legislation, President Wilson also issued a proclamation which "call[ed] upon the Government officials to display the United States flag on all Government buildings, and the people of the United States to display the flag at their homes or other suitable places on the second Sunday in May, as a public expression of love and reverence for the mothers of our country." The idea of a Mothers' Day for Peace had morphed into a nationalistic display as an "expression of love and reverence for the mothers of our country" instead of a call to world-wide Peace.

Odd, what can happen when a president gets hold of a piece of legislation for signing.

From there, the custom of wearing a white carnation in memory of a deceased mother and a pink or red carnation in honor of a living mother took hold. As the custom grew, so, too, did the price of flowers (particularly carnations) when the second Sunday in May approached. In 1920, Anna M. Jarvis, by then the president of the Mothers' Day International Association, asked that people not wear carnations. Thus began her personal struggle with florists, candy makers, gift shops, card manufacturers and all who sought to benefit financially from the holiday.

By 1923, Mothers' Day celebrations included events to honor Gold Star Mothers who had lost sons in World War I. Again, the holiday was celebrated for something other than its original purpose of establishing a Peace Movement. In the 1930s, an aging Anna was arrested for disrupting a meeting of the American War Mothers when she learned they were selling carnations for Mothers' Day. She saw the difference between honoring war (albeit sometimes the wrenching loss from war) and working for peace and reconciliation. Finally, after spending years in a nursing home, Anna M. Jarvis passed in 1948.

Beginning in the 1960s with Mothers Against the Vietnam Draft - "Not My Son, Not Your Son, Not Their Sons" - Mothers' Day has seen a rebirth of a Mothers' Day for Peace through direct peace actions and actions for associated issues. In 1968, Coretta Scott King, widow of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., lead a Mothers' Day march to focus attention on the plight of women and children in poverty. The 1970s saw Mothers' Day rallies held by the National Organization for Women (NOW) to raise awareness of the need for the Equal Rights Amendment. In the 1980s, several marches for Peace marked the day, while in 2000, the Million Mom March garnered support for gun control.

We mothers all have a connection with that history; we are a result of that history. For me, that connection comes mostly through my father's mother.

As a Philadelphian, my Nana, born in 1890, probably attended some of those early Mothers' Day services as they spread, first in churches throughout the city, then throughout the country. As a suffragist, some of the marches in which she participated may have occurred on Mothers' Day. But I knew her as the grandmother who took on the mothering of my sisters and me when our own mother died.

She cooked and baked, she took me, as a small child "in town" to Philadelphia to shop, she sewed dresses, play clothes and even coats, knitted, crocheted, cleaned scraped knees and tended to tears. To me, she was Nana and her world revolved around us.

Years later, however, she let me in on a few details of that part of her life she hadn't shared before. She had often told me that I could grow up to do anything I wanted, but it was much later that I learned that she had been an accountant at a time when women were *not* accountants.

One night I sat in her kitchen, feeling lost as a young, new war widow with a new baby. It was then that I learned of her anti-war conviction and discovered a new kinship with her. When almost everyone around me was telling me how "noble" my husband's death was, Nana understood the truth. She had lost her brother in WWI, and knew, as I did, that death in war is not "noble" – it's not anything but death, and a waste. I wasn't able to cry, but she cried for me. And then she reminded me that I could be anything I wanted to be, and helped me to see that although my life would not be what I had thought it would be, I could make of it something else – something good for my daughter and for me. She helped me to feel some peace that night, sitting in her kitchen.

One of Nana's "life instructions" was always to wear a slip under one's dress ("you never know when you'll be in an accident"). Her advice came in handy when I got caught in the "wind tunnel effect" while walking through a "tunnel" of office buildings in Boston, and again when my wrap-around skirt unwrapped itself as I was giving a presentation to the board of the non-profit agency where I worked.

Nana has been gone for thirty years now, but this Mothers' Day, I'll reflect on the good life I did make for myself and my daughter, and on the varied and fulfilling career I created. I'll plan my next project – sewing or crocheting – that I'm going to make for my grandson. I'll reaffirm my commitment to working for economic justice, social justice and peace. And with apologies to Anna M. Jarvis for purchasing a flower from a florist, I'll pin a white carnation to my dress, under which – of course – I'll be wearing a slip.


BlackCommentator.com Managing Editor, Nancy Littlefield, has worked in social services, acquired an MBA and had a career in Corporate America, and ditched that to work with and for *BlackCommentator.com* – a much more fulfilling career choice. Click [here](#) to contact Nancy Littlefield.

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