

**Mother's Day: A Great and Earnest Day of Counsel
May 13th, 2007**

On a bookshelf in my apartment is a small sepia photograph in a round frame whose felt-covered stand has lost its stamina, and so the photo leans precariously against the spine of some book—Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* or Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, or maybe the collected poems of Elizabeth Bishop, perhaps Georgia Heard's *For the Good of the Earth and Sun*, from which we heard Jan read earlier, or perhaps the book is *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*.

Whichever the book, the photograph is of a large wicker basket, filling most of the frame, and out of that basket appear two sleeping infant faces—one being my mother's, the other being her twin brother, her womb mate, they used to say. The photo is from 1926, sometime in the summer, I imagine, as they were born in March. It was 1926, and my mother's life had just begun.

Much of her early childhood would be formed during the Great Depression, and she moved into and through adolescence amidst the Second World War. My mother married

my father “late,” at the age of 25. They went on to have five children, with the grand finale—me—born in 1965.

The childhood stories I could tell you of life with my mother would include my riding on her back, as she gracefully, slowly, swam the breast stroke in a pool, or our selecting yarn together at the wool store, for my mother knitted every sweater I ever wore. I could tell you of the way she leaned on one leg whenever she worked in the kitchen, or of how my brother and I sat on each arm of her reading chair as she sat there reading to us *James and the Giant Peach*. All of these stories are still within easy reach for me, though my childhood’s long gone, and my mother’s no longer here to share those stories with.... But if she were, I can guarantee you she’d quickly correct me for having ended that last sentence with a preposition! That was my mother.

Who was, who is, your mother? Into what context was she born? Were there telephones or televisions when she was born? Did women yet have the right to vote? Was she born into Jim Crow? Was English her parents’ native tongue, or did they speak Spanish, Cantonese, Yiddish or Hindi? What did your

mother grow up loving and what did your mother teach you to love?

Not that motherhood is only about love. Though I've never experienced it from the hub, I've witnessed, and contributed to, I'm sure, motherhood being about letting go—and holding on—and letting go again. I've seen it be about anger, grief, fear, and I've seen it be about faith. “This too shall pass” might be a mantra many mothers find the need to practice. Perhaps many a son and daughter and partner, too.

But on *this* Mother's Day, in the context of these days of war and struggle and an awakening, finally, to the fragility of the earth, I hope to speak not simply to how we can each honor the individual motherhood and mothering that fills this room, but to honor as well the necessarily interdependent nature of motherhood. That is, I hope to explore with you the notion of Mother's Day in Julia Ward Howe's original intention of the day being Mother's *Peace* Day, and what that would entail. Remember Howe's words we read together. Back in the early 1870's, having lived through the American Civil War, then witnessing the brutality as well of the Franco-Prussian

War, Howe was impelled to call out, “Arise then women of this day!... Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience....” Howe also called women to look beyond their national identity, to see, as I believe we must see today in the faces of Iraqi and Afghan mothers, Sudanese and Somalian mothers, the soul-depth of love for one’s child. “We women of one country,” said Howe, “will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.” Love for one’s child must also be love for all children. That is the interdependence I believe Howe was demanding people see and live into.

Now, admittedly, Howe’s passion was springing from not only a whole lifetime, but a whole human history of women’s voices standing in the too often silent periphery. There is an unmistakable bite in her words when she proclaims, “We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies.... our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause,” and there is bite too when she juxtaposes men’s forsaking the work of the fields for war with

women's leaving the home for counsel toward peace. While Howe's adamancy that women step out of the domestic domain and thus out from silent complacency of men's war-like ways was, I believe, a necessary spring forward, it is also important these days, to come full circle and consider the sons of mothers who have heeded calls like Howe's that "the sword of murder is not the balance of justice," that "blood does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession."

Returning to my bookshelf for a moment, consider, for example, Christopher Hedges and his book, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. Hedges, a former war journalist who has covered wars in El Salvador, Colombia, The West Bank, Algeria, Bosnia, and Kosovo, to name only some, writes in his introduction, "The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug, one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by mythmakers..." Continuing on, Hedges writes, "The myth of war is essential to justify the horrible sacrifices required in war, the destruction and the death of innocents. It can be formed only by denying the reality of war, by turning the lies, the manipulation, the inhumanness of war into the heroic ideal."

Hedges' words reflect back to Howe's refusal to mix heroic ideal with brutal reality when she proclaims she will not be a part of receiving "with caresses and applause" husbands "reeking of carnage."

That is not at all to say that we should deny love and compassion toward those who have experienced war, be they citizens or soldiers. Hedges concludes, "To survive as a human being is possible only through love.... The instinct must be to reach out to those we love...and to recognize love in the lives of others—even those with whom we are in conflict."

Now, if there is one man who illustrated tirelessly reaching out in love to those with whom he was in conflict, I would have to name the middle child of Alberta Williams King. Writing from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed with all the love he could muster his deep disappointment in white moderates' failure to ally themselves with the civil rights movement. And in his statement, King made a clear and important distinction that speaks to what Julia Ward Howe may have been thinking of when she called for a Mother's *Peace Day*. King writes,

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.

This distinction between a “negative peace” and a “positive peace” that King was calling for as an African American man living in a racist society is the same distinction Howe made when she, as a woman living in a patriarchal society (both societies being one and the same), sprang forth from deference to empowerment. Of that experience, Howe once wrote,

During the first two thirds of my life, I looked to the masculine idea of character as the only true one. I sought its inspiration, and referred my merits and demerits to its judicial verdict. . . . The new domain now made clear to me was that of true womanhood—woman no longer in her ancillary relation to ... man, but in her direct relation to the divine plan and purpose, as a free agent, fully sharing with man every human right and every human responsibility.

Fully sharing every human right and every human responsibility. That is the call not only of men alongside women, or of white people alongside people of color. It is the call of the interdependent web of *all* existence of which we are

a part. It is the call of life, it is the call of creation. It is the call, I believe, of that one great mother we all share and are born into, the earth herself. Julia Ward Howe saw that the effects of war went well beyond human experience, including in her proclamation, “From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, ‘Disarm! Disarm!’”

How, though, shall we disarm? How shall we mother our way into a more peaceful world, a healing world? Might the answer lie in the story of a woman and a boy and a poem about a cat? The woman, Georgia Heard, and the boy, Jason, are not mother and son. In fact, until that day, in that classroom, they had never met. But Heard, as a teaching of writing consultant, had a job to do—to show a classroom teacher how to teach poetry writing to young children. Now, having taught in various contexts myself, with varying degrees of success, I know Heard had two choices of how to teach. She could teach out of a desire for order, or she could teach out of a desire for justice. Heard admits, upon hearing Jason’s first draft of his poem—“Cats are cute/cats are great/cats can’t be beat”—that “The old me wants to evaluate Jason’s poem.” That

is, she wants to appraise its value, put it in its “proper” place, put it where it belongs in the “order” of things.

Fortunately, Heard doesn’t settle for the negative peace of evaluating Jason’s poem—and Jason—and then moving on. “The researcher, the curious me,” she says, “notices what Jason knows about poetry.” And so Heard practices positive peace. She does Jason justice, by staying with him, going deeper into relationship with him, listening to him, thus enabling Jason in turn to do justice to his own creativity, as well as to his own cat who brings him so much love.

My cat is black and white.
I pretend he is my son.
I love him.
His feet smell like popcorn.

This small poem, this small scene is a long, long way from the Franco-Prussian War, or the jails of Birmingham, Alabama. It is a long way away from the daily, relentlessly rising toll the war in Iraq and wars everywhere are taking on countless mothers, fathers, families, entire beloved communities. But Heard, in her own way, has obeyed Howe’s call, to give and receive great and earnest counsel. She has chosen to ally

herself with this boy, to listen to him, be with him, to help *him* give birth to beauty.

On this Mother's Day, may we do the same. And may we indeed honor our mothers. If we have photographs, may we take the time to look at them, and strive to understand the contexts our mothers were born into—or as my mother would prefer, the contexts into which our mothers were born. May we, with love, humor, compassion, and soul-depth, remember just how much mothering entails, so that we truly can, as part of this interdependent web of all existence, ally ourselves with peace.

And to that I say, "Amen."