

Women's Issues: A Mother's Day Sermon
May 9, 2010

Don't tell Sarah Palin, but Mother's Day was conceived by a radical Unitarian, Julia Ward Howe, to draw attention to several basic liberal values. In her Mother's Day Proclamation issued on June 2, 1870, she wrote in part:

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 answered by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands will 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 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 voice 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.'"

I think Julia Ward Howe may have walked in shoes so loud it was deafening.

The object of her Mother's Day Proclamation was contrary to any Hallmark image of mom on a pedestal. She wanted women to stomp loudly out of their kitchens and bedrooms, into the public square to wield their power as a force for ending all wars. As mothers they needed to unite around the world to protect the children from war, or as she put it, "to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interest of peace."

I find it utterly fascinating that she did not call for an Annual International Day of Peace, but she called it --- Mother's Day. Who else would care so deeply about saving the children?

Nurturing life. This is how every generation seems to regard their mothers. Although not always perfect in nurturing, this is how we kind of regard their job description. Nurturing life by whatever means: providing comfort food, band aids, reassuring hugs, and always protecting the children. What is often overlooked, however, is the tricky part of nurturing: That some sacrifice is implicit in placing the needs of others ahead of oneself. Moms are expected to sacrifice or at least modify their own ambitions in what they hope to draw from life in order to fulfill their nurturing roles. And should they stray from the task of always caring for and nurturing the children by -say - seeking a career or even a room of their own, they feel somehow and to some degree that they have failed.

Julia Ward Howe herself serves as an interesting example. She married a man twenty years her senior, Samuel Gridley Howe, a tyrant, who took over control of

her entire economic fortunes, lost it all through bad investments, and forbade her to work outside the home. He stood firmly on the idea that the careers of women should be confined to wifely duties.

Julia Ward Howe has written about her stress and depression, which I believe may stem from the fact that her own mother died shortly after delivering her seventh child, and the children were all raised by their father. So Julia had at least an inkling that men were capable of raising a family. With so much talent as a writer and thinker, Julia's own productive life was squelched by a despot of a man from whom she later separated and eventually divorced.

The concept of women nurturing life through international peace efforts is huge: Perhaps too big to fit into our world today. And even the idea of "nurturing" comes with new connotations and agendas in our present age.

The image of nurturing women has evolved into a thorny issue. The feminist professor from Brandeis University, Linda Hirshman, urges women not to worry about nurturing a family but that their goal ought to be "human flourishing." (Interesting contrast). What she actually writes is this: "The family, with its repetitious, socially invisible, physical tasks – is a necessary part of life, but it allows fewer opportunities for full human flourishing..."

She quotes Mark Twain who said, "A man who chooses not to read is just as ignorant as a man who cannot read." Hirshman then argues by extension: "A woman who chooses to stay at home with her kids is just as weak as a woman who can't get out of the house."

Obviously in 2010 women are getting out of the house. I'll spare you the statistics of the staggering increase of women in the work force, in graduate schools, in professional lives, but still - - as a microcosm of the big issue - look at what happened just a few weeks ago to academy award winner Sandra Bullock. Many in our society believe she actually traded marital bliss for an Oscar. Given the antics of her now divorced husband it seems inconceivable that a consensus in this day and age still holds fast to the message that women take great risks while seeking full human "flourishing." Personal relationships, it seems, ultimately bring more happiness for women than does success. However, there was never any discussion of the personal price success brings when in 2009 Sean Penn received his Oscar as his marriage to Robin Wright collapsed.

Society thinks this is a woman's issue: Will their lives be nurturing or will they opt for the flourishing life. They need to choose one or the other.

I am of that generation that bears the burden – the first generation which thought that women could be both nurturing and flourishing. Women can have it all we insisted. That rumor started about 35 years ago. That was when the rock music we listened to, according to Mary Eberstadt, was filled with abandon. Eberstadt is the

antithesis to Linda Hirshman, who as a conservative writer and thinker, author of "Home-Along America," claims there are human limits. Nobody can have it all nor should they. Pointing to the striking change in rock music from my generation to more contemporary songs, we have gone from music of "abandon" to the music of "abandonment." She cites the music of Pearl Jam, Everclear, Snoop Dogg and Eminem whose lyrics speak to feeling neglected by their parents.

Eberstadt would claim that human flourishing is too high a price to pay because the children will not receive the nurturing they need. (And then they will write nasty songs about it and really drive home the pain). But trying to think it through logically, it seems inevitable that in casting out for a flourishing life, some aspects of nurturing need to be forfeited. This is painfully difficult to accept as we hear the words of feminist psychologist, Carol Gilligan: "Women's sense of integrity seems to be entwined with an ethic of care, so that to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection."

This is a harsh reality for a gender which (I think) also aspires to a flourishing life. This may be why Erika Jong is noted for having said: "Show me a woman who doesn't feel guilt and I'll show you a man."

When the author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert, wrote her next book, *Committed*, I scribbled a little note in the column next to her statement: "Maybe it is precisely because I have seen the cost of motherhood in the lives of women I love and admire that I stand here, nearly forty years old, feeling no desire whatsoever for a baby of my own."

Gilbert has consciously chosen a life of flourishing with her own clear-eyed assessment that this would preclude motherhood and the whole debilitating costs of nurturing – debilitating that is, to one's own sense of accomplishment. Inherent in the word "nurture" is a sense of sacrifice, is it not? One gives up something of one's own life to take care of another life, even one's children. One sacrifices the time needed to devote to one's own "flourishing." **This is true for women as well as for men.** but be it that women are either socially expected to sacrifice personally to nurture others, or it is biologically determined that they do so, women feel the weight of the decision-making between nurture and flourish far more than men. It's far more the women, not the men, who shoulder a large burden of guilt from today's younger generation's lyrics on abandonment.

I wonder if someone like Angelina Jolie, born the same year I was first married, speaks for her generation of women. She's an Oscar winner...and twice divorced. She's a promoter of humanitarian causes much like Julia Ward Howe. Angelina's parents with both actors, John Voigt and Marcheline Bertrand, but when they divorced, not only did Angelina's mother take care of the children but the mom ended all acting ambitions. Her mom saw the cost of her own flourishing life and gave it up entirely to preserve the relationship with her children...devoted to nurturing them fully.

Given Angelina's experience where her mom "sacrifices" to take care of the children, then how does she reconcile her own acting career with the choices her mother made ... and she loves her mother dearly. What does Angelina really mean when she says: "I don't believe in guilt. I believe in living on impulse as long as you never intentionally hurt another person...I think you should live completely free."

Is that the caveat: Not hurting, depriving, neglecting anyone "intentionally?" We should live completely free...even impulsively...as long as there is no "deliberate hurt?"

We are still a number of years out to hear the kind of lyrics her children may write.

Women are not in the midst of a new quandary. The same internal battle continually rages in the guts of women between acting selfishly or selflessly. And what on earth do those terms really mean and who in the hell gets to define them...this struggle has played out on the stage of women's lives forever.

I am in the middle of reading a stupendous biography on the famous photographer Dorothea Lang, who was born in 1895, contracted polio in 1902, and when her parents divorced five years later, she was so angry at her father for deserting her that she took on her mother's maiden name. A pivotal part of her life was her friendship with fellow photographer, Imogen Cunningham, whose experience as a child could not have been more opposite than Dorothea's. Both photographers were extremely gifted artists, both had several husbands and many children, and their lives gave open testimony to their decisions of opting to flourish rather than nurture.

But for Imogen Cunningham, she viewed her mother with great disdain as a drudge to husband, children and housework. Cunningham's life lesson drawn from her mother's example was never to repeat a life like the one her mother led. One photo portrait of her mother is a double exposure showing her mother's head encircled by a crown of kitchen utensils. (Her own prison). Cunningham blamed her mother for her weakness rather than her father for his domination.

Dorothea Lange and Imogen Cunningham, cutting-edge artists of their day, women who defied all convention about expected roles for women and mothers, traveled whenever and wherever they needed to for the sake of their art and assignments. And as mothers, would drop their children off at foster homes, and collect the children again upon returning home. The kids were farmed out to foster parents hither and thither with no care given to keeping the siblings together.

Lange and Cunningham most assuredly lived impulsive lives and they NEVER had any intention of hurting another person, especially their own children. They lived, as Angelina Jolie now advises, "totally free," but does that not come with a price?

How do we even put that “price” into words? I can’t agree with those who claim that to nurture others means stifling their own lives. I can’t agree with the other side either, that to opt for staying home with the children will cure society’s social ills, and enhance their school performance. These are too easy and glib assessments of the real dilemma that faces all of us who love our children and love our own lives, too.

We’re still left trying to understand what “good parenting” actually means. We’re still left wondering about the balance between nurturing and flourishing: Are they mutually exclusive? Of course not, but how do we gauge the effects when a bit of impulse comes knocking on our door? Must we feel guilty; must we feel selfish; can’t we figure out a combination and have it all?

There have been more than 100 Mother’s Days since Julia Ward Howe coined the term, and I can’t help but think that each Mother’s Day, including this one in 2010, was and is filled with tremendous ambivalence about the role of women and mothers and nurture. And I’m not letting men off the hook either, for they too, have much to reflect on including their role as nurturing parent and how much or little they can devote to a life of human flourishing.

And I’m not letting same-sex couples off the hook either, because it’s all about how best to partner for the sake of the children while not surrendering that part of us that desires more. How do we share all the responsibilities that life throws at us so each has some chance to savor life’s rich opportunities – a chance to “flourish” in this brief gift of life without suffering the guilt for having nurtured less?

These are the human issues that bring no satisfactory answer, or can be balanced by an easy formula. We muddle through the best we can, ultimately not trying to hurt anyone, hoping for a taste of freedom to be ourselves...while loving our children constantly, without fail Amen.