

Born of Woman
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The United States of America was at war with itself.
Like the slice of an axe through brittle logs,
economic differences and moral righteousness split the nation
from one end clean through to the other.
Even Christian religions, founded on love of one's neighbor
and compassion for the least among us, split in two.
Methodists remained in the north,
while the Methodist Episcopal Church reorganized itself in the south;
Baptists became American Baptists in the north,
and Southern Baptists in the south.
Territories with a desire to enter the embattled Union
fell into vicious disputes
over whether or not they would incorporate slavery into their statehood.

Missouri joined the Union as a slave state,
while California, through the tireless work and guidance
of the Unitarian minister Thomas Starr King,
joined the Union as a state free of slavery.
In Kansas, a bloody battle with the loss of many lives
was fought to keep that state free.

One spring in Washington, D.C. after a contentious session on Capitol Hill,
Preston Brooks, a pro-slavery Congressman from South Carolina,
snuck up behind Charles Sumner, an abolitionist U.S. Senator from Massachusetts.
Brooks used his walking cane
to beat Sumner bloody and unconscious
on the floor of the Senate.

A few years later, a radical abolitionist by the name of John Brown
staged a raid on the U.S. armory in Harper's Ferry, Virginia.
He planned to steal weapons, distribute them to slaves,
and incite an anti-slavery revolution.
The raid failed and Brown was executed for "treason,"
but he quickly became a martyr for the abolitionist cause.
New words were written to an older hymn
and the song was renamed "John Brown's Body."

So it was at the beginning of the United States Civil War
when Julia Ward Howe and Samuel, her husband,
traveled from their home in Boston to review Union troops
surrounding and protecting Washington, D.C.
Because he was too old to serve as a soldier, Samuel
was appointed head of the Sanitary Commission for the Union Army.
Julia, a Boston-bred Unitarian, poet, and abolitionist,
accompanied her husband on his journey.

As they approached the nation's capital in November 1861,
Julia saw on the plain spread out before them
thousands of Union soldiers around campfires
and lining the railroad tracks for miles.
She described the Army of the Potomac
as "lying like a steel girdle around Washington, to protect it."
It was her first personal encounter with war.

Early the next morning, unable to sleep,
Julia Ward Howe arose.
In the gray light of dawn,
inspired by her vision of the Union army,
inspired by the moral purity of the cause of the abolition of slavery,
inspired by her intimate knowledge of both Hebrew Scriptures
and of the Book of Revelation,
inspired by the tune of "John Brown's Body,"
Julia Ward Howe began writing:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.
His day is marching on.

Within a few hours, Julia had penned words
to a song that would later be titled "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."
The hymn touched a deep nerve in the soul of the northern United States.
First published in the Atlantic Monthly,
it was immediately picked up and printed
by newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and army hymnals.
The hymn became a marching song for troops as they charged into battle.
It inspired Union soldiers in Confederate prisons
and comforted Union patients as they lay bloody and dying in military hospitals.

It is, perhaps, the final verse
that is most terrible and inspiring
to a Christian nation
fighting a holy war
against the evils of human bondage:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

President Abraham Lincoln was dead.
Five years earlier he had been shot in the back of the head
at point blank range by a Confederate sympathizer.
Georgia, Mississippi, Texas and Virginia had finally rejoined the Union,
dissolving the Confederate States of America.

Northern business leaders and politicians flooded the South.
They crawled through the cities, villages and rural countryside
exploiting the power vacuum
created by the end of the Civil War.
Five years after the war ended,
the 15th Amendment to the Constitution
of the United States of America was ratified,
stating, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote
shall not be denied or abridged
by the United States or by any State
on account of race, color,
or previous condition of servitude.”
Black men – but not women – had been granted the right to vote.

In the United States,
whole towns and families were torn apart by the Civil War.
Fathers fought against sons
and brothers fought against brothers.
As the result of active battle, wounds,
and a variety of diseases
almost 400,000 people died
in this very uncivil Civil War.
In Europe,
the Franco-Prussian War began.
Though it lasted less than a year,
it could boast over 250,000 casualties.

Julia Ward Howe
looked around and was angry.
The Lord’s “terrible swift sword” she wrote about
in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”
had struck the world again and again.
Suddenly a thought came to her,
a thought that had never occurred to her:
“Why do not the mothers of mankind
interfere in these matters,
to prevent the waste of that human life
of which they alone bear and know the cost?”

Once again in passionate enthusiasm,
ten years after writing the Battle Hymn,
Julia Ward Howe
sat down at her home in Boston and wrote
what she called the “Mother’s Day Proclamation – 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 answered by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with 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."

Blood does not wipe our dishonor,
Nor violence indicate possession.

As men have often forsaken the plough 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 own time the sacred impress,
not of Caesar, But of God -

After laying out this proclamation,
Julia Ward Howe
translated the document
into French, Spanish, Italian, German and Swedish,
and distributed it widely around the world.
She corresponded with women
throughout Europe for two years.
She traveled to London, attempting to organize
an international Women's Peace Congress,
and was disheartened by its failure to materialize.
Still, she was energized by her work
and by the women she met.

She returned to Boston,
initiating a lasting Mother's Peace Day observance
on the second Sunday of every June.
She also continued her work
with the New England Women Suffrage Association,
which she had helped start many years earlier.

Today I am deeply troubled by our war against
and occupation of Iraq.
Today I resent that my nation,
a nation that holds within its ideals
a true vision of democracy and freedom,
has blundered into the world,
assassinating families, forced "free" elections
in a sovereign nation in the midst of war,
and sexually abused and humiliated prisoners of war.
Today I am angry that, as a citizen of the United States,
my name is attached to this list of policies and behaviors.

Today I am sick to death of military commercials
that show strong men who rock climb
and confident women getting a college degree in the army,
when the reality is that our youngest adults are being sent off to fight
in an ill-defined war lacking popular support and commitment,
and are being sent home
with psychological war trauma
or in flag-draped coffins.
I resonate with Julia Ward Howe
when she said firmly,
we will not have "our husbands...come to us,
reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause."

President Bush recently asked for a \$70 billion (out of a likely \$200 billion)
supplemental budget
for the continued war against and occupation of Iraq.
The total cost to date is over \$500 billion.
The numbers list at least 4,000 U.S. dead,
and depending on what source is used,
anywhere between 50,000 and 150,000 Iraqi dead.
Is our war justified by the sentiment
expressed in "The Battle Hymn of the Republic,"
or is it time to be reminded of the "Mother's Day Proclamation" of 1870?
On this Mother's Day 2008,
are we charged with continuing a holy war,
or called into holy peace?

Julia Ward Howe
wrote The Battle Hymn in the first months of the Civil War,
within the first few days of her first encounter with the Union Army.
Her cause, and the cause of the North,
the cause of abolition of human slavery, was a noble one.
By 1861, in both the north and the south,
very little ambiguity remained in the hearts and minds
of the people about what was righteous, and what was evil.
In the Battle Hymn, the righteous God clearly lives in the Union Army:

I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:
“As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.”

Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel.
The serpent in this case, of course, was slavery,
and by extension, all the southerners
who upheld that cruel and immoral social institution.
So what happened to Julia in the span of ten years?
What happened to her “Hero, born of woman,”
sanctioned with a blessing to destroy the enemy
under the boot heel of righteousness?

War happened.
The reality of disease and filth
ravaging the prisons and hospitals
of both the Union and Confederate armies.
The reality of a dead child.
The reality of legs and heads blown off by cannonballs.
The reality and the reminder that “winning” a war
comes with death as a price tag.

I am not aware of Julia Ward Howe ever becoming a pacifist,
but I do know that she was continually introduced,
honored and revered as the woman who wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic.
I do know she cherished the praise and honor.
But she also wrote the Mother’s Day Proclamation.
She also wrote a call to the spiritual awakening of motherhood,
a call to mothers around the world
to end violence and strive for peace.
It may not be surprising to discover
that this call to mothers around the globe
occurred during her own inner awakening.

In the final 30 years of her life,
before dying in 1910 at the age of 91,
Julia Ward Howe transformed.
Earlier, she looked to the masculine
as the only true idea and definition of character.
“The new domain now made clear to me

was that of true womanhood," she wrote.
Rather than existing solely
as an appendage or reflection of men,
she realized a womanhood that was, in her words,
"in direct relation
to the divine plan and purpose,
as a free agent,
fully sharing with man
every human right and every human responsibility.
This discovery was like the addition of a new continent
to the map of the world,
or of a new testament to the old ordinances."

With a deeper awareness of her own humanity
came a deeper awareness of the world.
With a deeper delight in her own abilities came a deeper delight with the world.
With a deeper knowing of herself came a deeper sense of peace.
With a deeper sense of inner peace came a desire to sow that peace in the world:

Arise then...women of this day!
Say firmly: "Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with 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!

Julia Ward Howe,
abolitionist, poet, musician, Unitarian, Suffragist,
retained a lifelong passion
for human dignity and equality.
Earlier in her life this showed up
as unambiguous righteous certainty,
and later developed into a compassion
large enough to feel a kinship with the larger world.

On this Mother's Day 2008,
let us remember the origins of one call to peace.
We hold the capacity for creation
and the capacity for destruction.
In one ancient story told in the words of a sacred text,
God tells the first woman and the first man,
"I hold before you the way of death and the way of life;
therefore, choose life."