

The Real Meaning of Mother's Day

Written and delivered by Judy Howe at the FUSW Service on May 8, 2022

Happy Mother's Day to all of us mothers in the congregation. Today we reflect about our mothers – here or gone – and how we connected, didn't connect, the roles that they played or didn't play in our lives, and our gratitude for what they have given us. I want to acknowledge that it is a complicated, lonely, and sad day for many, particularly given all of the commercial hype. For all of those who are not birth, adoptive or foster mothers, or caregivers, I bet you have been a "mother" to more people than you are aware of. "Mothering" is a state of being.

So, here's the real deal about Mother's Day. It has veered away from its intended purpose, a day for peace. Now a Hallmark Holiday, it has been super commercialized for decades. I am betting that very few Americans are aware of the roots of this special day, much less its complicated history, proudly rooted in the UU tradition.

In 1870, almost 40 years before it became an official U.S. holiday in 1914 under a Presidential Proclamation by Woodrow Wilson, Unitarian Universalist Julia Ward Howe, a social justice advocate and pacifist, issued her famous Mother's Day Proclamation, which will be read later in the service. She advocated for a day when women throughout the world could gather together to discuss ways to establish world peace. Howe suggested that June 2 be annually celebrated as Mother's Day and should be dedicated to peace. She wrote a fiery appeal to women and urged them to rise against war in her Mother's Day Proclamation. She also initiated a Mothers' Peace Day observance on the second Sunday in June in Boston and held the meeting for a number of years. Howe worked to champion the cause of an official Mother's Day for years on the second Sunday of June, and her idea spread, but it was replaced by the second Sunday in May.

Earlier, Anna Jarvis, also a peace activist and a friend of Howe's, wanted to honor her mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis, who was also a peace activist who cared for wounded Civil War soldiers. Her mother herself had worked to establish a "Mother's Friendship Day" and Anna took up the cause after her mother died. On May 10, 1908, three years after her mother's death, Jarvis held a memorial ceremony to honor her mother and all mothers at Andrews Methodist Episcopal

Church, today the International Mother's Day Shrine, in Grafton, West Virginia, marking the first official observance of Mother's Day.

However, it did not take long for the commercialization of Mother's Day which led Jarvis to bitterly campaign against the holiday that she had a major hand in establishing. She said, "*A printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world,*" *And candy! You take a box to Mother — and then eat most of it yourself. A petty sentiment.*" She began accusing those who profited from the day, such as florists, candymakers, and card companies as "charlatans, [and] bandits". With her mental health declining, she organized boycotts, threatened lawsuits and disrupted a candymakers convention in 1923. Eventually she was committed to the Marshall Square Sanitarium in Pennsylvania and reportedly individuals associated with the greeting card and floral industries paid her bills. She died in November 1948.

Today, let us remember the real meaning of Mother's Day, a day dedicated to peace and disarmament. Let us remember the women who crusaded for the authentic Mother's Day – Howe who bore six children in a troublesome marriage and Jarvis who had no children – and honor their steadfastness. And let us pray for the mothers of Ukraine and Russia and all mothers around the world who are suffering because of the loss of their husbands, sons, daughters, grandchildren and other friends and relatives because of unnecessary and senseless war.