

Daffodils and Motherhood  
(A Springtime Reflection on Charity, Mercy and Patience)  
May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

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Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I miss you all so terribly. I am honored to serve as minister here, at North Chapel in Woodstock. Today is Sunday, May 9<sup>th</sup> and we are getting through this thing. Personally, I am dealing with the after effects from my second COVID shot. I'm fully vaccinated and in the 14-day window until...until we don't know what. What a crazy experience this has been and continues to be.

So, I got the second shot but now I'm achy and whiny and grumpy and I want my mom to fix this but I'm basically doing ok. The title of this morning's reflection is Daffodils and Motherhood (A Springtime Reflection on Charity, Mercy and Patience). Happy Mother's Day! It is so good to be together.

May spring daffodils are blossoming for us!!! They are the symbols of rebirth. They are perfect for early spring. Happy Mother's Day, everyone. I came across an old picture from 1986. I was in college, in my junior year. I was the music director for the Beelzebubs, the all-male acapella singing group on campus. The picture was from our Mother's Day concert and four of our mothers were there. We invited them up on stage and we sang to them. I had transcribed the Four Freshmen arrangement of After You and we laid it on pretty thick.

After you there is no-one for me,  
After you there is no-one I can see;  
Tell me, how many angels can there be?  
If there were more like you, what a great world this would be!  
After you all my laughter is gone,  
After you took my heart to live on!  
There was no-one before you who could thrill me like you do,  
And there'll never be anyone, never be anyone after you!

Here is what it looked like back in the day. [pause] We got to celebrate our moms and create a memory. It was funny and a little embarrassing but we made the gift to last.

Happy Mother's Day to everyone...and I do mean everyone, not just moms but each and every single one of us...even though I might mean mothers most. I say that as a kind of caveat, as a means of keeping myself safe. I don't want to get into trouble with my own mom. She's in her 80s but she's still tough as nails. I don't want to mess.

I love my mom. I feel like we are closer now than ever. We are more real with one another...and that took a lot of work...and a lot of courage, especially for me. I'm the youngest child. There are two of us in my immediate family. There are four

of us in the inner Dunkley circle, if you will—me, Pam, Donna and Lisa. I was the youngest and I was the only boy. So, when I was growing up, I had three other people in my family who were more or less my age...which really means less my age. My two cousins Pam and Donna and my sister Lisa were glad to visit with me for a little while on holidays. That was fun. I was the center of attention for a little while. I was into that. And they poured over me. They loved me up. I was in seventh heaven...until it ended and they'd rush off and have a great time with one another. I was on my own because I wasn't a girl. I was ok with that. I had a vivid imagination and I was precocious and far from shy. I found other things to do. I wasn't lonely. Plus, they were into doing boring things like talking. They didn't like baseball or G.I. Joe games or trucks or tanks or playing in the dirt. For many years, I doubted that they would become mature, well-rounded people...but, you know, they did just fine. I love them all so much.

On my mother's side, there was Sandy and Dougie. I lonely got to see them on holidays at my grandma's house in Harlem. That's just how it was. Dougie is an artist and he is into science fiction. When we got to be old enough, we would sneak away from family gatherings and check out whatever Star Trek film was in the theaters.

I learned about my cousin, Paul, when I got into the Jamaican part of the family history, when I found out that I was part Arawak. My great grandmother was an indigenous woman in the Caribbean...with the fiercest and most beautiful face I had ever seen. I was fearful of her...even though I had no reason to be...dark-dark skin and an angled nose. She looked like she was absolutely magical. I never knew her. I only met her once when I was only four years old but she's still dreamy, wild and wise in my vivid imagination and memory. My great grandmother was Arawak... I wonder what she would have thought of Mother's Day? [ ... ]

Officially speaking, Mother's Day is now 107 years old. It's younger than my great grandmother in Jamaica. Still, for more than a century, we've been celebrating Mother's Day. Woodrow Wilson proclaimed this clearly in Washington in 1914. He said,

WHEREAS, by joint resolution [] the President is authorized and requested to issue a proclamation... Now, Therefore, I, Woodrow Wilson, the President of the United States, by virtue of the authority vested in me [] do hereby direct the government officials to display the United States flag on all government buildings and do invite the people of the United States to display the flag at their homes or other suitable places [] as a public expression of our love and reverence for the mothers of our country.

In witness whereof I have set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be hereunto affixed.

The document was signed and BAMM! It was sealed and stamped and all official and everything. And Mother's Day was newly underway. It was a good day...for Hallmark and for assorted chocolates and various flower companies.

So it was that the commercial story of Mother's Day informed me when I was younger...that informed my whole family—me and Pam and Donna and Lisa and Dougie and Sandy and Paul. We knew what Hallmark was teaching us:

1. I know what love is because of you. Happy Mother's Day!
2. Being a full-time mother is one of the highest salaried jobs in my field, since the payment is pure love. —Mildred B. Vermont
3. All that I am or hope ever to be I owe to my angel mother.

That one was from Abraham Lincoln...a man who was, by Woodrow Wilson standards, significantly ahead of the curve. Trend-setter status, some critics say...because Abraham Lincoln was 56 years old when he was shot and killed by an actor named John Wilkes Booth in the Ford Theater in 1865. Even if he paid his lovely tribute to his mother at the very end of his life, he was still ahead of the curve...but not by much...not according to the in-house records we have from church history.

According to church records, the history of Mother's Day predates Woodrow Wilson and his presidential proclamation. This history actually dates back to the 1870s, to Boston and to a Unitarian woman named Julia Ward Howe. This name is a famous name. Julia Ward Howe is the author of The Battle Hymn of the Republic. We know these words...

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.  
 Glory, glory, hallelujah!

We know these words. They are familiar to us. They come to us from many sources. Perhaps, the most famous and most dramatic of these sources is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. In 1968, he shared with us prophetically,

I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain.  
 And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Martin Luther King adored his mother. She was beautiful and powerful and a central figure of the church. What was Mother's Day like when Alberta Christine Williams King was the center of attention? And what was it like for Coretta Scott King, Martin's wife? What was it like to be in their shoes?

I was in their house. That was as close as I got. The UUA sponsored what they called the Living Legacy Tour. We got on a bus and toured all of these famous sites along the road to freedom in the Civil Rights Movement. We went to Brown Chapel in Selma, Alabama where a great deal of the planning for the civil rights movement took place. We went to the Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery where Martin Luther King served as pastor...and we went to the home...where the family lived. I stood in the living room. I sat on their couch and looked out of the window. I leaned against the counter by the sink in their kitchen. It was all quite strange and

normal. It's like a fantasy in my memory now...a fantasy that makes history all the more real.

They were average people—people just like you and just like me—but they were driven by a fire. They were on a mission. They had the highest of goals in mind. They aspired—fire-driven—not for monetary gain, not for material acquisition. Theirs was a humble home, a modest home...unassuming. The Kings aspired—fire-driven—to the highest goals of faith and freedom. What was Mother's Day like for them, for ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.

And I wonder as I wander farther back down the freedom's road, beyond the Civil Rights Movement to the time of the Civil War. I wonder what Mother's Day was like for a woman like Julia Ward Howe. Her eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord but I doubt that she foresaw the coming of Mother's Day—at least not how it currently exists. In the 1870s, she made a very different plea. In her Appeal to womanhood throughout the world, she said,

Again, in the sight of the Christian world, have the skill and power of two great nations exhausted themselves in [violence]. Again have the sacred questions of international justice been committed to the fatal mediation of military weapons. In this day of progress, in this century of light, the ambition of rulers has been allowed to barter the dear interests of domestic life for the bloody exchanges of the battlefield. Thus men have done. Thus men will do.

These words, these anti-war words were the radical beginnings of Mother's Day. They had nothing to do with men and nations, nothing to do with flags and fighting. Julia Ward Howe's Appeal to the Christian mothers of the world was a gesture of peace. She said,

Arise, then, Christian women of this day ! Arise, all women who have hearts, Whether your baptism be that of water or of tears ! Say firmly : We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us, [fresh from war], 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 of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: Disarm, disarm!

Charity, mercy and patience... These were the true elements of motherhood...whether or not one's own body ever bore a child. There are many ways of bringing life into this world. Julia Ward Howe's Appeal to women was a radical gesture of non-violence. I am not surprised that Martin Luther King was impressed by her. To the women of the world, she commanded,

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, man as the brother of man, each bearing after his own kind the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

You know, some of us believe that certain aspects of human history don't belong to us. Some of us believe that we can outsource particular parts. I believe it sometimes...and I get trapped in my beliefs—and maybe you do too—beliefs that lead me to think that I can pick and choose when, really, it is the wholeness of a thing that is most deeply meaningful.

I used to work at the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee when I lived in Boston and there was a poster on the wall with one, complex, nine-word question that was broken into five, simpler and less meaningful parts. These five parts were progressive. They grew in their complexity until the whole was finally achieved. It read as follows:

What?

What makes you?

What makes you think?

What makes you think you can?

What makes you think you can change?

What makes you think you can change the world?

You can't really say that the complex whole is greater than the sum of its simpler parts but I think you know what I'm trying to say. If we choose to be charitable with ourselves... If we choose to be merciful and if we're patient, it becomes possible to see ourselves in one another...no matter how unimaginable the prospect seems to be at first. Opposing things can be reconciled. We just have to have faith enough in the journey. Joni Mitchell writes,

I'm traveling in some vehicle

I'm sitting in some cafe

A defector from the petty wars

That shell shock love away...

In our possessive coupling

So much could not be expressed

So now I'm returning to myself

These things that you and I suppressed

I see something of myself in everyone

Just at this moment of the world

I see something of myself in everyone...

On a whim, I wondered how Mother's Day was recognized in the Buddhist tradition and I came quickly across this article in *Tricycle—The Buddhist Review*. An interesting magazine. The article was called, quite simply, *Celebrating Mother's Day*. It was published last year, in May of 2020. The author writes,

During this time of pandemic, loving, attentive care is in high demand. Many of us may find ourselves reflecting on the people who have taken care of us in the past or continue to offer a loving presence in our lives, whether they are our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or caregivers. There's a Tibetan Buddhist teaching that describes how all beings have been our mothers at one point in

the cycle of rebirth. [pause] This Mother's Day, we practice seeing everyone we encounter as our mother.

There's a practice for us. Let's try it and let's see how things turn out.

It's a painful story—and a triumphant one—but Joni Mitchell is mother. She is a mother who chose not to raise her own child. In 1971, she shared what she could of that story in song. She wrote,

Born with the moon in Cancer  
Choose her a name she'll answer to  
Call her green and the winters can not fade her  
Call her green for the children who have made her little, green  
Be a gypsy dancer

Joni Mitchell wrote,

Child with a child pretending  
Weary of lies you are sending home  
So you sign all the papers in the family name  
You're sad and you're sorry but you're not ashamed  
Oh, Little Green, have a happy ending

...there'll be icicles and birthday clothes  
And sometimes there'll be sorrow

And there was sorrow but then, things changed. The sun came out again somehow. After many years apart, they found each other one again. A mother and a daughter found each other and they built a deep relationship. This doesn't always happen. In fact, it doesn't often happen but they are quite close with one another now. "I had the great fortune to see her in Vancouver," Herbie Hancock said. He said,

I had the great fortune to see her in Vancouver, Canada when she was with her daughter for the first time. She was so overjoyed. She was like a little kid. Joni's face had changed.

And Joni Mitchell elaborated,

We both were very excited about meeting. I'm thinking, 'What if she doesn't like me? Probably, she won't like me.' You know, there's gonna be issues here. She arrived and I was upstairs. I was painting. So, I walked out on the balcony of the house and I saw her...in the dark. It was like Romeo and Juliet.

And Kilauren Gibb, Joni's daughter continued, saying,

She had paintbrushes in her hands. And we met at the front door in the kitchen with hugs. It felt like I had gone away on a trip for a couple of months and I was coming home.

So much is possible...with charity, with mercy and with patience.

Motherhood—and womanhood—has so many different meanings. And what do I know. In this body of mine, I'm only a deeply respectful admirer.

Julia Ward Howe concludes her Appeal in the following way. She wrote, In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women, without limit of nationality, may 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.

I'm strangely proud that Julia Ward Howe was Unitarian. I love that she believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person long before the Seven Principles were codified. I love that she thought freely and used reason as a guide for the steering of life. And I love that her wisdom is our inheritance that does not belong to us but belong to the whole, wide world...belongs to the earth, forever turning to the skies and sea and stars and sun and rain and thunder.

We've all been through so much over the past fifteen months or so—the contested presidential election, the insurrection at the Capitol, the Derek Chauvin case, police violence in major cities and the mounting tension about intellectual property and private patents in the context of a public health crisis and global pandemic that is conditioning its second Mother's Day. It is a good time to reflect on Julia Ward Howe and bring new life to her Appeal to womanhood; new meaning to the values of charity, mercy and patience; new depth to the Hallmark cards that read, "I know what love is because of you. Happy Mother's Day!"

As we are now in the season of spring and as the daffodils are fully in their glory, may they rebirth in us the deep and powerful meaning of Mother's Day. May the daffodils gently remind us that there are many ways of bringing life into this world. Happy Mother's Day. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.