

# *Maternal Legacies*

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak  
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First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, a Unitarian Universalist congregation

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This morning I am taking my cue from Julia Ward Howe, and preaching on social justice on a day when many are honoring Mother's Day. As a daughter and a mother whose experiences in the maternal area are decidedly mixed, I, like so many others, feel conflicted on this Hallmark holiday. the sentimentality of the way the day is marketed does not sit well.

And when the society we live in sometimes seems so unhinged, so bizarre politically and so frightening socially, with hate filled discriminatory language and laws and gun violence continuing to take lives one after another... what else can I do? What else can we do?

We hear these words from many generations ago... they were penned in a very different era and in a formal, almost corny voice... Julia Ward Howe's response to the carnage and futility of war still carries a sting - her words stir our hearts and prick at our conscience even now, so many years later. For we have still to learn the ways of charity, mercy and patience. The sons and daughters of too many women and men have been taken by violence and war. Nation against nation, tribe against tribe, person against person... perhaps it is time to recall this courageous woman's call for peace. If we but listen, we still hear and know the urgency of this call. It may be the most important legacy we give to the generations to come.

I've been thinking a lot about what we need to do, how we need to be, to create a world worthy of our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It's been on my mind a lot, especially after returning from a conference in New York City called Revolutionary Love.

Revolutionary Love... the conference was aimed at religious leaders who are engaged, at some level or other, in dismantling oppression in the age of Black Lives Matter. It's focus was on thriving and surviving in community as we engage this work.

Reverend Jacqui Lewis, pastor of Middle Collegiate Church, organizer of this annual conference for 10 years now, spoke about how hard it is... how hard it is to do this work; how hard it is for us to hear the stories - how it hurts; how exhausting it is to stay in the struggle when it keeps happening over and over again.

After the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2013 she organized a protest in the congregation, members and ministers all donning hoodies and marching in the streets. Middle Church was featured in the news in the New York City area after that. But it didn't stop there. When Freddie Gray died in police custody saying the words "I can't breathe" the phrase became a rallying cry in her church and on the streets. But you know, even a church as progressive and inclusive and cutting edge as Middle Collegiate started to complain - it started to rub some folks the wrong way, all this focus on "Black Lives Matter." I thought to myself, wow, if Rev. Jacqui's church - a welcoming, artistic,

inclusive congregation committed to living their Christian faith as a “bold new thing” - can get tired of it, what about the rest of us?

The church worked through the disagreement and she continues to be a spiritual leader in guiding folks - all kinds of folks - into taking action and stepping up in this racial justice issue. That's what this conference was all about... Revolutionary Love, she and other presenters told us, is what's needed.

What is this Revolutionary Love? How can it be a tool in dismantling racism and oppression and hatred in such a crazy, messed-up and mixed-up world? For starters, Revolutionary Love is something deep, challenging, demanding, nurturing, personal and communal. Its aim is not comfort or happiness but justice and joy.

Author, feminist, and social activist bell hooks wrote:

Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination. Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination - imperialism, sexism, racism, classism. (*Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation*, 1994)

She's echoing Martin Luther King's call for love to be center the work for justice. He had the prophetic insight to recognize that a revolution built on any other foundation would fail. Again and again, King testified that he had "decided to love" because he believed deeply that if we are "seeking the highest good" we "find it through love" because this is "the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality."

To root the work for justice in an ethic of love does not ease or soften that struggle. This love, this revolutionary love means we need to understand power and look hard and long at some very unpleasant truths. We have to hear things we'd rather not hear and see things that may sear into our memories images of pain, suffering, injustice. If we work for justice or struggle to end domination only when we perceive our own needs or rights threatened, we are working to end the thing we believe is hurting us.

That motivation is not a move to end a collective transformation of society but a small bandaid. This revolutionary love is offering is something more than simple reforms that might ease things for awhile. That why it is revolutionary.

This love does not ask for a simple fix or a short-term easement. Nor does it require a complete overthrow of the system. It begins though as a revolution within each individual and within our communities. A revolutionary love that mirrors M. Scott Peck's useful definition of love: "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."

And when we say “spiritual growth”, we're not just talking about feeling holy (you know, like saintly) but feeling *wholly* - body, spirit, mind and soul.

The civil rights movement of the past century had the power to move masses of people to act in the interest of racial justice because it was profoundly rooted in the transcendent reality of an ethic of love. When a movement for change comes only out of anger or frustration, it doesn't have the ability to deeply change things and people. It's staying power is limited, its vision short-sighted. Any movement for serious, real, lasting change must be rooted in this revolutionary love ... not just in rhetoric or sound reasoning.

So today I am thinking today about the mothers who have stood in the spotlight of our national media, mothers who have lost children to gun violence, especially in those cases where the death was at the hands of those called to serve and protect. Mothers who have watched as those who were responsible for the death were not charged with the assault, or were acquitted in questionable circumstances. Yet they stand before us and with us and witness not only to their pain, but to all that we have yet to do. This past week Samaria Rice, Tamir Rice's mother, stood in solidarity with Kent State University at their annual remembrance of the shootings there in 1970... you remember that,... yes, when armed National Guardsmen policing an antiwar rally shot into the crowd of students, killing four.

Samaria Rice was there at the commemoration - not without some controversy, of course - to speak out against police-involved shootings and to support the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Again, a mother's anguish pleads with all of us to end this violence, calls us to stand for more than a slogan... for it will take more than words and banners to end police brutality against black people, to recognize white supremacy and its terrible legacy.

It will take a **revolutionary love...** not a *reforming* love, that might make some incremental changes in laws and such. But a revolutionary love that starts here... here, right here in every heart.

Julia Ward Howe reminded us that there is something we can do beyond sentimental expressions if we are to truly celebrate maternity and nurture. That being a mother, or being a parent, is not solely about biology or legal papers - it's about a strong ethic of love that goes beyond the family circle. That loving my child is not enough. It is certainly what my child needs - what every child needs - but we can't stop there.

So now, on Mother's Day, revolutionary love asks that we listen to the stories of our hearts, and our families, the stories that have been shared through the generations, the stories we are writing right now. And the stories out there that are crucial to the larger struggle... stories that might challenge us, that should inspire us, lift us up towards this Revolutionary Love. Stories of mothers - mothers of Tamir Rice and Sandra Black and Trayvon Martin and so many other young men and women who have died violently in a war being waged on black bodies.

So yes, there's the uncomfortable truth we have to tell.

Melissa Harris Perry spoke to the conference about the role of black bodies in our history - the history of white supremacy... that the body carries a memory in it that is passed to generations. That infant mortality or premature births for black mothers may not only be the result of racism in the health care system and persistent poverty, but also an internalized stress reaction to violence

passed on generation to generation since slavery. I'm not going to argue the science of that, but considering the credentials of who spoke those words, I have to believe there is truth running through it... something we may already suspect deep in our bones. *The mothers who mourn now are crying the tears their ancestors cried on the auction block.*

Maternal legacies are not just the traits, talents, proclivities, knowledge and feelings we inherit from our mothers and grandmothers. They are impressions and deeply embedded feelings and fears, sorrows and joys and the expectations we may have of life and its meaning - some inherited, some learned. And that pain and sorrow and distrust and fear that may be passed down generation to generation. It doesn't mean we can't celebrate today, if celebrating is in order... but it means we take every opportunity, every wayward chance to let our hearts be broken open. That is what revolutionary love is.

Chris Crass, Unitarian Universalist social justice activist and writer, told his story about growing up with parents who raised him with feminist, social justice inclinations and values. But his family also included his rightwing, racist grandfather. It was when he was still a kid, before he became the activist as a high school student, that he'd hear these things, these hateful ideas, spoken aloud in his family.

His maternal legacy, however, was the "no" his mother spoke. The "no" she said to that language and those racist ideas that were being said in Chris' presence. Crass heard that "no" as an invitation and as permission to stand up for what is right, to speak truth to power. His mother's "no" was the doorway for him to say "yes" - yes to confronting racism and misogyny and white supremacy - the work he carries on today. His mother's "no" let him say "yes" to practicing revolutionary love - led him to be the activist and teacher he is today.

Reverend Jacqui says when revolutionary love is at the center, we who are privileged, we who have long been in the center of everything - the center of history, the center of prosperity and privilege - we will take the risk and move from the center and create a circle of love and empowerment. Move and make room for those who have long been at the margins, those whose lives are shaped by fear or oppression, have them move to the center and be surrounded by our love.

That is what Revolutionary love looks like. Perhaps we aren't who we ought to be, but we aren't who we used to be... and if we keep at it, if we together build this revolutionary love, we *will* be who we are meant to be! We are dreaming big dreams together. We are in a great river that is moving toward justice. If we turn our faces in the same direction. And if we take the hands of our companions and if we take one step, and then another, the river will flow toward healing.

In her poem "*Praise Song for the Day*," written for Barack Obama's Presidential Inauguration in 2009, Elizabeth Alexander wrote:

...What if the mightiest word is love?  
Love beyond marital, filial, national,  
love that casts a widening pool of light,  
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

Today, and every day, may we say "yes" to that revolutionary love!

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**Reading - Mother's Peace Day** (compiled by Susan Veronica Rak)

Julia Ward Howe was born in New York City on May 27, 1819. She was a prominent Unitarian layperson and a well-respected poet. As an abolitionist, she strongly supported the Union in the Civil War. Most people may know her as the creator of *the Battle Hymn of the Republic*, her words celebrating the Union cause:

*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...  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.*

However, just a few years later, during the Franco-Prussian war, Julia felt "the cruel and unnecessary character of the contest. . . . a return to barbarism, the issue having been one which might easily have been settled without bloodshed." She began thinking about what might be possible for women to do on behalf of humanity. In her day, women were supposed to be confined to the home. They weren't supposed to be out making speeches or working for political change. Julia Ward Howe was inspired by a small group of international peace activists who denounced this war as a senseless conflict. And her reaction to the horrors and carnage of those two wars gave rise to a most remarkable movement - the creation of Mother's Day for Peace.

The "Mother's Day" she imagined was not to be a day for flowers and gifts, but a day calling on all mothers to act both as citizens and as life-giving nurturers, as caretakers of a new generation. As a feminist, suffragist and pacifist, Julia Ward Howe understood women were more than wives and mothers, that they had a responsibility to shape society beyond the nursery. Thus, 146 years ago she issued her "**Mother's Day Proclamation**" - a clarion call to celebrate Mother's Day not as a sentimental holiday but as a witness for peace.

*"Arise, then, women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, Say firmly:*

*"We will not have great questions decided 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.*

*...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...*

*...In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at someplace 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."*