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# Julia Ward Howe: Foremother of Ethical Culture

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## Opening Reading:

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...

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 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.

Julia Ward Howe

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## Platform Address:

I want this morning to tell something of the story of Julia Ward Howe, a poet, a social and religious reformer, a philanthropist, and how she is part of the generation that influenced the founding of Ethical Culture. I also want to commemorate two events important this week: today, Mother's Day, and later this week, the anniversary of the founding of the first Ethical Society.

I will begin, though, with a few personal reflections on this date. Mother's Day, and this time of year, always carries with it for me a kind of sadness, as well as celebration, in an odd and not very satisfying mixture. It is (as you will have seen in the newsletter) the week of my birthday — what you will not know, is that this time of year is also the anniversary of the deaths of two of my siblings.

In a tragedy which happened far too often in the past and happily very rarely today, my parents lost their first two children within ten days of each other to scarlet fever. In 1950 it was already no longer common, though a generation before it would have been sad but not so rare, to lose two children to disease, especially so near each other. So, although my mother tried hard all the rest of her life to keep my birthday a happy day, she could not avoid being incredibly sad at this time of year. I remember Mother's Day and my birthday, in my childhood, primarily as times when my mother cried all the time.

And for the past 21 Mother's Days, that holiday has carried sadness for me, too, as I have experienced each year the loss of my mother from my life. Dying far too young, at 60 she had just graduated from college — finally! — and embarked on a whole new professional career in which she was passionately involved — working with poor, mostly black teenagers, helping them transform their lives.

I loved my mother and admired her — she had her limitations and we had our struggles with each other, but on the whole, she was a great mother who helped me to develop into who I was, more than who she might want me to be. I was fortunate that in the four or five years before her illness, we became as much friends as mother-and-daughter. I've often wondered what my mother would have thought of the many decisions I've made since her death — whether I would have made some of them had she been there. I think she would be now, as she often was then,

supported and amazed at her daughter, similar to her but so different.

My mother worked, during World War II, in what she and the world considered important work. At the end of the war, she was offered the position as head of community organizing for the Philippines, as part of the effort to restore that country after the devastations of war, by helping the people develop and implement their own agendas for change and restoration. But, like many women who had done important work during the war, she decided that she wanted a family more than she wanted a career, and felt that she had to make an either/or choice. She chose a family. Even transcending the tragedy of losing two children in ten days to disease, she tried again, and raised my brother and I and a later foster brother. "You did good, Mom. And you did well!"

I miss her terribly. And it is in part because I miss her, and love her, and honor the struggles of her life to find her own place in a different world, that I've learned to honor all the women of our history. These women are often uncelebrated, unknown, faded into the background behind the famous men with whom they worked and lived. And so I will tell something of the story of Julia Ward Howe, a woman whose story is usually incompletely told, who is remembered mostly, if at all, for a small event in a very rich and active life.

This week, on May 15, is also the 122<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the founding of Ethical Culture. On that date, May 15, 1876, Felix Adler spoke in New York City, delivering at age 25 the founding address of the New York Society for Ethical Culture.

Felix Adler, with the many others who already had organized their support for this new venture, conceived of themselves, in part, as carrying on in a new manner and to a new generation, the evolution and development of religion and philosophy and education begun more than a generation before by the American movement known as Transcendentalism.

One of the shared ideas of Transcendentalism was the concept of self-culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson is perhaps the best known of the Transcendentalists, and certainly the best-known of the proponents of self-culture. Self-culture was the idea that development of the individual — by the individual — was a crucial task of life, and was a religious task. Breaking out of the Christianity of the past, self-culture did not rely on a rulebook like the Bible for development. Self-culture assumed that one had within oneself, already, all the tools and knowledge, and that one needed only to

learn to listen to one's self, to know what to do. The still, small voice within, learning to listen to the natural forces of the universe, was enough.

In naming this new religious movement Ethical Culture, Felix Adler apparently had in mind something that was rooted in the idea of self-culture, but that was critical of self-culture as well. Ethical culture, not self culture. Because already in 1876 it had become clear that a radical individualism was not enough. Felix Adler, and many of the founders of Ethical Culture, had experienced two great social events that convinced them of the necessity of social and ethical action, not just the development of one's self as if it could be isolated from the greater social needs and realities. And these social events were connected to each other.

One of those social events was the issue of slavery, and how to end slavery. The Transcendentalists had been convinced, as far as I've been able to tell, to a person, that slavery was immoral. Their conviction was based on the idea that while enslaved, one could not be free to develop one's full potential as a human being. The Transcendentalists were, however, divided on how to address the issue of slavery — but they were united in realizing that the solution was not going to be found in individual self-culture. Some Transcendentalists were more apolitical, others were central in the abolitionist movement — I will tell some other time the story of this division, embodied most clearly in the difference in attitudes between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson were two Transcendentalists, both ministers of great renown in their day. When the American Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act — and Millard Fillmore as President signed the Act — it made even those in Northern states which had banned slavery, responsible legally to return fugitive slaves to the states in the South that still maintained slavery. (I'd like to point out at this point that our religious cousins, the Unitarians, like to claim Parker and Higginson as Unitarians — but that John C. Calhoun and Millard Fillmore, on the other side of this issue, were also Unitarians. They were, as a religious group, deeply divided by the issue of slavery and how and whether to end the institution.)

The anger over the Fugitive Slave Act in the North pushed many who opposed slavery into the more radical abolitionist camp. Ultimately, this led to the abortive effort of John Brown to capture the arms stored at Harper's Ferry, to arm slaves in Virginia.

Brown, and his supporters, hoped that these slaves would rise in armed rebellion, and slavery would end. Events did not, however, unfold that way, and John Brown was defeated and killed.

There is new evidence that Higginson and Parker were among the so-called Secret Six, six men who John Brown convinced to bankroll his efforts which ended at Harper's Ferry. It's a story that is not well known, and not very knowable — those involved seem to have regretted their part in the abortive uprising, and it's not clear how honestly Brown portrayed his plans to these six men.

But Higginson and Parker were both heroes of Felix Adler and the founders of Ethical Culture. They were both activists, who took the concept of self-culture from Transcendentalism, and moved on to a commitment to social change — to an ethical or social culture, not just self culture. Parker died before the American Civil War began. But Higginson took his own commitment into the Civil War, leading a regiment of black troops, convinced that if black men fought alongside white men in the battles of war, they would be accepted as full citizens after the war. Higginson's story is also one which I hope to tell in more detail another time.

Julia Ward Howe was born in 1819, in New York City, into a strict Episcopalian Calvinist family. Her mother died when she was young, and Julia was raised by an aunt. When her father, a banker of comfortable but not immense wealth, died, her guardianship became the responsibility of a more liberal-minded uncle. She became more and more liberal in her own ideas, and at 21 years old, married 40-year-old Samuel Gridley Howe.

Samuel Gridley Howe was already making his mark on the world at that time. He had fought in the Greek War of Independence and had written of his experiences there. He had become the director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts. He was one of those radical Unitarians who had moved far from the Calvinism of New England, and Howe was part of the circle known as the Transcendentalists. He carried his religious convictions of the value of the development of every individual, into work with the blind, with the mentally ill, and with those in prison. He was also, out of those convictions, an opponent of slavery. Samuel and Julia Howe attended the church where Theodore Parker was minister — Parker who was much later a hero of Felix Adler — and knew, as did most of the members, that Parker often wrote his sermons with a handgun

on his desk, ready if necessary to defend the lives of the runaway slaves who were staying that night in his cellar on their way to Canada and freedom.

She was a liberal Christian, a Unitarian Christian — she retained until death her belief in a personal, loving God who ruled the affairs of humanity — and she believed in a Christ who came to teach a way of acting, a pattern of behavior, that humans should follow. A radical religiously who did not see such a belief as the only route to salvation, she associated freely with others who were agnostic or atheistic in their own beliefs — because she, like others of her generation, had come to see that religion was a matter of deed, not creed.

Samuel married Julia, apparently, in admiration of her ideas, her quick mind, her wit, her active commitment to causes he also shared. But Samuel believed that married women should not have a life outside the home, that they should support their husbands and not speak publicly or be active themselves in the causes of the day. As director at Perkins Institute for the Blind, Samuel Howe lived on campus in a small house. Julia and Samuel had their six children there (four survived to adulthood, all four becoming professionals well known in their fields). Julia, respecting her husband's attitude, lived in isolation in that home, with little contact with the wider community of Perkins Institute or Boston. She attended church, she wrote poetry, and it became increasingly hard for her to maintain her isolation. The marriage was increasingly stifling to her — her diary indicates that the marriage was violent, Samuel controlled and at times mismanaged the financial inheritance her father left her, and much later she discovered that he was unfaithful to her during this time. They considered divorce several times. She stayed, in part because she admired and loved him, and in part because he threatened to keep her from her children if she divorced him — the standard practice on divorce under the laws of the time.

Instead of divorce, she studied philosophy on her own, learned several languages — at that time quite a scandal for a woman — and devoted herself to her own self-education as well as the education and care of their children. But she also worked with her husband on a brief venture at publishing an abolitionist paper, and supported his causes, and even felt compelled despite his opposition to get more involved in public life.

When the War broke out, both became involved in the Sanitary Commission, an important and poorly

remembered institution of social service. More men died in the Civil War from disease caused by poor sanitary conditions in the prisoner of war camps and their own army camps than died in battles, and the Sanitary Commission was the chief institution of reform for that situation.

As a result of that voluntary commitment, in 1862 President Lincoln invited Samuel and Julia Howe to Washington. The Howes went over to the Virginia side of the Potomac to visit a camp of the Union Army. There, they heard the men singing the song which had been sung by both North and South, one in admiration of John Brown, one in celebration of his death: "John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave."

A clergyman in the party urged her, a published poet, to write a new song for the war effort. She described later:

"I replied that I had often wished to do so.... In spite of the excitement of the day I went to bed and slept as usual, but awoke the next morning in the gray of the early dawn, and to my astonishment found that the wished-for lines were arranging themselves in my brain. I lay quite still until the last verse had completed itself in my thoughts, then hastily arose, saying to myself, I shall lose this if I don't write it down immediately. I searched for an old sheet of paper and an old stub of a pen which I had had the night before, and began to scrawl the lines almost without looking, as I learned to do by often scratching down verses in the darkened room when my little children were sleeping. Having completed this, I lay down again and fell asleep, but not before feeling that something of importance had happened to me."

And the result was a poem, published first in February 1862 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and called the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. The poem was quickly put to the tune that had been used for "John Brown's Body" — the original tune was written by a Southerner for religious revivals — and became the best known Civil War song of the North. Julia Ward Howe's religious conviction shows in the way that Old and New Testament Biblical images are used to urge that people implement, in this life and this world, the principles that they adhere to. "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free." Turning from the idea that the war was revenge for the death of a martyr, Howe hoped that the song would keep the war focused on the principle of the ending of slavery.

And today, that's what Howe is most remembered for: as the author of the song, still loved by many Americans, still hated by many Southerners. Her early poems are forgotten — her other social commitments forgotten. She became a much-loved American institution after that song was published — but even in her own lifetime, all her other pursuits paled besides her accomplishment of one piece of poetry for which she was paid \$5 by the editor of *Atlantic Monthly*.

We should not forget the rest of her accomplishments and commitments, though. And they did not end with the writing of that one poem.

As Julia became more famous, and was asked to speak publicly more often, primarily because of the popularity of this one poem, her husband became less adamant about his insistence that she remain a private person, and while never supportive of her further efforts, did not actively interfere.

She, like many of the men and women of her time, realized that the struggle for human equality of the black slaves was paralleled in part by the struggle for women to achieve full legal rights as equal human beings. Her best work, by all accounts of the time, was in the movement for woman suffrage, the right for women to vote.

But she also had seen the worst of war, and came to realize that war was devastating. She worked with the widows and orphans of the soldiers on both sides of the war, and realized that the effects of a war go far beyond the killing of the soldiers in battle. The economic devastation of the Civil War — the resulting economic crises and restructuring of both North and South — was the second great social event to which I referred at the very beginning of my talk — the poverty of the cities was an important influence on Felix Adler and the other founders of Ethical Culture, and not just the war which they saw as the war to end the enslavement of human beings.

Julia Ward Howe and Thomas Wentworth Higginson were, with Felix Adler and many others, founders of the Free Religious Association in the 1870s. They conceived this organization as the new religious inheritors of the Transcendentalists, based on the freedom of belief from historical and contemporary restrictions and authority, but also based on a commitment to an ethical culture, a commitment to the relationships in which we live and not just isolated free individuals. Later, when this organization failed to build on its own strengths and expand itself beyond an annual conference into a true organization of

individual societies like the new Ethical Society in New York City, the young Felix Adler decided to found other Ethical Societies instead of relying on the Free Religious Association connections to build beyond his own single ethical society.

In 1870 — a few years before young Felix Adler and others launched the New York Society for Ethical Culture — Julia Ward Howe took on a new issue and a new cause. Distressed by her experience of the realities of war, determined that peace was one of the two most important causes of the world (the other being equality in its many forms) and seeing war arise again in the world in the Franco-Prussian War, she called in 1870 for women to rise up and oppose war in all its forms. She wanted women to come together across national lines, to recognize what we hold in common above what divides us, and commit to finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts. She issued the Declaration which you heard our young women recite this morning.

She failed in her attempt to get formal recognition of a Mother's Day for Peace. Her idea was influenced by Anna Jarvis, a young Appalachian homemaker who had attempted starting in 1858 to improve sanitation through what she called Mothers' Work Days. She organized women throughout the Civil War to work for better sanitary conditions for both sides, and in 1868 she began work to reconcile Union and Confederate neighbors.

Anna Jarvis' daughter, also named Anna Jarvis, would of course have known of her mother's work, and the work of Julia Ward Howe. Much later, when her mother died, this second Anna Jarvis started her own crusade to found a memorial day for women. The first such Mother's Day was celebrated in West Virginia in 1807 in the church where the elder Anna Jarvis had taught Sunday School. And from there the custom caught on — spreading eventually to 45 states. Finally the holiday was declared officially by states beginning in 1912, and in 1914 the President, Woodrow Wilson, declared the first national Mother's Day.

I don't think it's an accident that we don't hear much about the other roots of Mother's Day. Today it's an occasion to buy cards and flowers and gifts — not an occasion to remember women's role in history, to commit to making the world better, whether through directly saving lives through improved physical conditions or through working for peace and equality and better social conditions. But those are the true roots of Mother's Day — and Julia Ward Howe was one part of the history of this day.

Her story is a reminder that history remembers what it wants to remember, and not necessarily what really happened. It is a constant reality of working with the history of women that such work is an act of re-remembering — in the literal sense of re-remembering, putting the parts of a body, the members, back together. The whole story of Julia Ward Howe is, I think, even now not fully told. What I learned this week, in putting this together, is also new: the reality of the battles between Howe and her husband, in the 1850s, over how he spent her inheritance — her struggle to find herself and her voice in the shadow of a well-known husband, who married her for her spirit and then worked to break it. I also learned that Samuel Gridley Howe, who had little money of his own and relied on Julia's inheritance, was also one of the accused Secret Six — one of those whose money helped fund John Brown. How much of Julia Ward Howe's aversion to that song about John Brown's body was based on her anger that her husband had spent her money secretly and without her consent on a project that she didn't support? Or did she have a role in the decision, and stayed with her husband through their troubles in part because he covered up her bad decision? We don't know, and maybe never will. But it certainly may change how we think of that part of her life.

And yet — even so — Julia Ward Howe lived the last half of her life in the public eye primarily because of one poem written in a few hours one gray morning. In those years she used that fame to promote her very different later ventures, and at the same time she resented that she was already remembered only for that one accomplishment. If we remember much else, I hope that we remember and learn this from her life: not to focus on just one part of a person, but to remember that we are all whole human beings, rich in contradictions and potentials. What is most important to the writers of history are not necessarily the most important to those written about — and we can respect someone like Julia Ward Howe by remembering her in her richness and completeness.

All our foremothers and forefathers were more and less than history would have us think. And, I think the same is true of each of us. If we remember our mothers and fathers in their richness, maybe we'll find it easier to recognize and develop our own individuality and ethical connections.

I will close with words — slightly updated in language — that Felix Adler used to close his founding address with, 122 years ago this week:

"Ah, why should there be any more the old dividing line between human beings? why should the fires of prejudice flare up anew between us? why should we not maintain this common ground which we have found at last, and hedge it round, and protect it - the stronghold of freedom and of all the humanities for the long years to come? Not since the days of the Reformation has there been a crisis so great as this through which the present age is passing. The world is dark around us and the prospect seems deepening in gloom. and yet there is light ahead. On the volume of the past in starry characters it is written - the starry legend greets us shining through the misty vistas of the future - that the great and noble shall not perish from among the children of humanity, that the truth will triumph in the end, and that even the humblest of truth's servants may in this become the instrument of unending good. We are aiding in laying the foundations of a mighty building, whose completion shall not be seen in our day, no, nor in centuries upon centuries after us. But happy are we, indeed, if we can contribute even the least towards so high an end. The time calls for action. Up, then, and let us do our part faithfully and well. And oh, friends, our children's children will hold our memories dearer for the work which we begin this hour."