

Arise and Meet the Day

2020 May 10

In May 1870, not long after the Civil War, and with another war brewing in Congress, Julia Ward Howe, Unitarian, spoke to the women of Boston. “Arise!” she said. Together with others, with mothers and other hoop-skirted co-conspirators, she stepped out of the confines of convention and complicit domesticity and said to the people weary of war and wary of politics, profit and privilege, “Arise then...women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be of water or of tears!” And so they rose, thousands strong that day, mothers and others, and many men; they rose and marched and sang and lobbied and wept with rage and hope, and organized. The war came anyway, as wars often do, and then they rose again, they rose, we rise again and again and again – because that’s what we do.

May 12, 1870 was the first Mother’s Day in America, “Mothers Peace Day,” and it makes sense, because the work of mothering and parenting, the nurture of children (our own and everybody else’s) is just like all the work we ever do for justice and for peace – endless, thankless, with no real guarantee of measurable success, and yet because it is all about the ancestors and the descendants - the long story of which our lives, our families, our own kids are just a microscopic part – because we understand ourselves to be part of a much larger and evolving human story, we pour our life and strength and blood and breath into the day-to- day ways of being strong and brave and hopeful. The work of mothering, of parenting, of teaching, of hoping – that’s all the work of peace and justice, because it’s not just about specific love, but about life’s longing for itself. Our love and care and presence are investments in a future we won’t ever live to see, but we believe in it. Sometimes against all probability, we believe in it.

Lucille Clifton, African American poet and grandmother, looks at a photo of her grandchildren and speaks a silent prayer. Her piece is called “Photograph:”

*My grandsons
spinning in their joy*

*universe
keep them turning turning
black blurs against the window
of the world for they are beautiful
and there is trouble coming
round and round and round*

She is speaking to a particular black terror in America, a prayer for all the children, mainly boys, who may not grow up in joy and may not grow up at all. It is surely the prayer of the grandparents and parents of Ahmaud Arbery, the 25 year-old man who was murdered in Georgia while jogging, and the vase is only now coming to light. *Universe, keep them, hold them, guard them protect them, love them, for they are beautiful, and there is trouble coming round...* When you look that way at children whom you cherish, or at anyone or anything in this world that’s beautiful and fragile and vulnerable; when you look that way, with constant fear and boundless hope, with love so fierce you have to pray about it, whether you believe in God or not – well,

then you're looking on that thing, on that child, with mothering eyes, whether you're a mother or not, whether you're a parent or not. You are inhabiting what the Buddha meant when he said,

*Even as a mother watches over her child,
so with boundless mind should we cherish all living beings,*

Ibtisam Barakat, Palestinian American, gives thanks for the ones who came before her, the women stirring sugar into tea and lemon into lentil soup, strong women with stirrings of freedom shimmering inside them. Some spoke of it, some didn't, but growing up she felt their strength. It gave her ground to stand on, even though as a Palestinian there's not been in her lifetime any land or ground or state or patch of earth to claim as home and call her own, and there may not ever be. Still, there's something in that legacy of love passed on to her like a recipe or a quilt, that inheritance of fierce maternal tenderness and grounded-ness, that makes life beautiful, makes you feel that you belong in it, even if the whole world says you don't. We are here, all of us, to hold each other in spirit, and to hold our hope, in that fierce, mothering embrace and then to pass it on.

We are descendants, Unitarian Universalists, of Julia Ward Howe and others matriarchs. Our work for the love of this world, raising children, raising hell, is unceasing, and unglamorous, most of the time, and it's holy therefore, all this grubby hope, and we do it each day not for thanks nor for praise, nor even for tangible results. There are almost never guarantees, that the cause will be won, the war averted, that the child will grow up happy and healthy and perfectly safe. So much in this life is out of our hands – if we doubted this before, there is no doubt now – and we do it all anyway, nurturing, caring, paying attention. We believe, we have to believe, that all of this accumulates. Every day we cast our lot with those who, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute this world.

“Joy and woe are woven fine,” sings the hymn. The sacred and the ordinary are also woven fine, all the messy details of relationships and household chores. Sacred and ordinary all mixed up and intertwined, fear and hope, love and anger, and politics and soul work: where does one strand leave off and the other begin, if we're talking about care for our children or care for the earth or care for the poor or care for each other in a time of grave danger when leaders aren't leading, and say every day, *Your elders don't matter. Your loved ones don't matter. Your children don't matter. The most vulnerable are the most expendable. The earth doesn't matter and neither does science and neither do you*” – what can you do in such a time but arise, every day, with the help of friends and your community, bind the strands of your spirit back together, and say to yourself, say to your kids, say to your mother, or her memory, *We're better than this. We're brighter than this. We're more creative and compassionate and human and humane than this, and we deserve, because every one deserves, bread and roses, too. The necessities of life, and also joy. And also rest and forgiveness and beauty abundant.*

May 8, this past Friday, was the feast day of Julian of Norwich, a 14th century English mystic. I've always been intrigued by her but I never knew she had a “feast day” because she's not a saint exactly. She's been on the waiting list apparently, for several centuries, in both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Church. I always think of her at this time of year so I'm glad and surprised to make that connection now. Julian was born in 1343 in Norwich, England. She was

a hermit, an anchorite, who lived most of her adult life in a tiny shed attached to the village church, an honored position for which, in those days, a person had to apply, demonstrate their spiritual gravity, and then, with their books and quills and bible and, in her case, a cat, the little hut was sealed from the outside, and she dwelt all her life in that cell. It had a little window, through which people brought her food twice a day, and cloth to make clothing for herself and for the poor, and more paper or velum or whatever she wrote on, and candles and blankets and ink. She is the author of the earliest books written in English by a woman. Visitors came every day to her window, seeking her wisdom or her blessing, in turn bringing news of the world and news of their lives, and milk for the cat, and needles and thread.

Not much is known about her life beyond what she set down herself. When she was 30 years old, before entering the hermitage, she almost died of a long illness. On her almost death-bed, she experienced a series of visions, visitations from God, she said, and that's what she wrote about, and spoke about years later when people came to see her. She told them, famously, "All shall be well. All manner of things shall be well," even though things were not well, not at all.

In a span of two years, the Black Death had swept through her town and killed half the people. It returned at least twice in her lifetime, with a vengeance, killing more, and others died by violence, in uprisings or the repression of uprisings. All was not well. Scholars believe Julian may have lost her own family, possibly a husband when she was in her 20's, possibly children. They believe it because of the way she spoke of God later, in her writing, as a mothering presence, watchful, patient, fierce and wise, never forgetting the care of her children, or her love for them, even in separation – the broken heart of God. That's how she wrote of God's love for humanity, and in fact it's how she wrote about Jesus. She said outright in 1370, that the only way to apprehend the love of Christ was to perceive it as maternal, like the arms of a mother embracing you always, present in loss, even in sorrow, ever present despair. She spoke of God and Christ as "she."

You can enter this story wherever you will, but one miracle about Julian of Norwich is undeniable: they never burned her books, or her, for all her strange mystical revelations. Lots of people were burned in those days for thinking independently; not far from her window, heretics were martyred all the time – but Julian survived. People came from all over and she told them all be well, when clearly it wouldn't exactly, not in the ways they hoped and expected. She told them to look for beauty, for daffodils in snow, for kindness within and among them, to love one another with boundless imagination.

Someone wrote recently that Julian lived through the plague keeping physical distance, self-quarantined, and that in her solitude, broken daily by bouts of company through the little rectangle of her window, in her solitude, she found space to think through what she most deeply trusted and believed in.

And you...? What do you find you believe in now, as **your** isolation continues, and the world implodes, and people are lonely and dying, people we love and people we don't know, who mostly are poor, and mostly, in undeniable numbers now, are black and brown and native, and every veil and lie that hid the truth about privilege and power and the rusty machinery of capitalism is coming down, exposing things for what they are, and leaving us, shaken, chastened

and disrupted and scared; leaving us forever changed. Leaving us, in some ways – I hope - forever changed. What do you find you believe in now, and trust?

“All will be well again,” she said. What could that mean? What do we want that to mean? What will tell our children it means?

Fear and hope are woven fine in this life, grief and endless gratitude, the life of the spirit and our common life, our politics, all of it is woven fine, braided together in the integrity of our being. When Julia Ward Howe told the women on that first Mother’s Day, *Arise!* - she was speaking to them as activists though they didn’t know themselves as such: change agents, forces to be reckoned with, forces for good, and she was speaking to them as mothers and daughters, as weary domestics and servants and all of them, who deserved and had already more than earned not only bread but roses. “Arise,” she said, “Get up! Stand up! The day is calling you to struggle, and also to joy in the struggle.”

Alison Luterman writes,

*I think of the invisible work that stitches up the world, day and night,
the slow, unglamorous work of healing,
the way worms in the garden
tunnel ceaselessly so the earth can breathe
and bees ransack this world into being...*

*There are mothers
for everything,
and the sea is a mother too,
whispering and whispering to us
long after we have stopped listening.*

*I lean [for] a moment,
against the blue shoulder of the air.
The work of my heart is the work of the world's heart.
There is no other art.*

Everything now is holy, and tender and important.

Let’s arise and greet the day, arise and meet the moment, in honor of those who came before, in loving service to those who are coming next.