

Rev. Linda Simmons  
Mothers, Heroes and Saviors  
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Early advocates of Mother's Day in the United States originally envisioned it as a day of peace, to honor and support mothers who lost sons and husbands to the carnage of the Civil War.

1870 — nearly 40 years before it became an official U.S. holiday in 1914 — social justice advocate and Unitarian Julia Ward Howe, prominent American abolitionist, feminist, poet, and the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" issued her inspired Mother's Day Proclamation, which called upon mothers of all nationalities to band together to promote the "amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace."

She envisioned a day of solemn council where women from all over the world could meet to discuss the means to achieve world peace.

In her Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace, written in 1870, she wrote: *Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of tears!... 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! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.. Let...(us) take council with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace.*<sup>1</sup>

In 1872, Julia Ward Howe asked for the celebration of a "Mother's Day for Peace" to be held on June 2nd of every year, but she was unsuccessful.

Mother's Day finally became a national holiday in the early 1900's under the lead of Anna Jarvis, who had been inspired by her mother, also named Anna Jarvis, who had worked with Julia Ward Howe in earlier efforts for a Mother's Day. Older Jarvis gave birth to 12 children, but lost eight before they turned seven.

Her response to such grave loss was to combat the poor health and sanitation conditions that contributed to the high mortality rate of children in West Virginia. In the 1850s, she founded Mothers' Day Work Clubs to provide medicine for the poor, nursing care for the sick. During the Civil War, these social action brigades fed, clothed, and treated the wounds of both Union and Confederate soldiers with neutrality.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother%27s\\_Day\\_Proclamation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother%27s_Day_Proclamation)

Interestingly, it took her daughter Anna Jarvis 7 years of harassing presidents until Woodrow Wilson finally declared the first national Mother's Day in 1914. It was designated as a day to consider what it meant to contribute to the making and tending of peace in honor of those mothers whose sons had died in war.

Anna Jarvis was upset by what became the commercialization of Mother's Day with all the store bought cards which she called, "A poor excuse for the letter you are too lazy to write."<sup>2</sup>

Peace, a concept that has slipped through our fingers, our intellects and capacity time and time again. And here we have our 103<sup>rd</sup> Mother's Day. No more war, says Mother's Day, no more excuses to take the lives of our children from us all.

And here we are all still using the same tools that have proven themselves incapable of solving the same problems go round and round....And next year the 104<sup>th</sup> Mother's Day will bear down upon us again asking: What have you done to create more peace this year my sons and daughters?

Many of us ask, in these times, where are our heroes that can release us from these cycles of violence? In his book, No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality,<sup>3</sup> Jordan Flaherty troubles the notion that heroes are the solution. He suggests that the very concept of heroes and saviors, especially at the social justice level, is one that participates in keeping us from building and maintaining a lasting change that could facilitate peace.

Jordan Flaherty in No More Heroes writes, "The prototypical savior is a person who has been raised in privilege and taught implicitly or explicitly (or both) that they possess the answers and skills needed to rescue others, no matter the situation."<sup>4</sup> Flaherty tells us that this kind of privileged heroism can exacerbate systems of oppression rather than alleviate them when we give without understanding of the cultural context or consequences of our actions on the local landscape.

Flaherty tells a story of children in Bali who leave their homes and go to orphanages to literally "work as orphans" to please and elicit the help of tourists who like to give to orphanages. In this way, they earn enough money posing as orphans to pay for their education and to feed their families.

If they were to stay home and receive the love of their parents, they would not thrive economically. This cycle of loss and survival is one built up by a generosity that is cut off from the needs of the people it seeks to help.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Kate Wilkenson, "Mother's Day for Peace," May 12, 2013, [https://archive.org/details/UU\\_Sermon\\_-\\_Mother\\_s\\_Day\\_for\\_Peace](https://archive.org/details/UU_Sermon_-_Mother_s_Day_for_Peace)

<sup>3</sup> Jordan Flaherty, No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality (Oakland: AK Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> <https://thenewinquiry.com/dont-be-a-hero/>

<sup>5</sup> Flaherty, 47.

We need not more heroes who come into a situation to help with ideas pre-formed of what is needed but what Flaherty calls “shared liberation” or an ability for those of privilege to learn how to be allies, to take cues from the environment they are in, to wait for the invitation to act on other’s behalves and take direction about what that action should look like, to ourselves become broken open into our own freedom while participating in another’s.

Flaherty does not say that social action is not good of itself, just that it’s time to consider what systems of power and privilege we unwittingly replicate with our social action projects.

This was not easy reading for me who has been engaged in social justice most of my life. I remember a specific time that I was working with high school drop outs in a job funded by the Department of Labor whose mandate was to teach these youth GEDs and place them in employment. It was my job to ask them to dress a certain way and act a certain way and talk a certain way in order to get and keep jobs. They were rough kids. They loved and hated with equal ferocity.

They taught me how to access my own authenticity because when I didn’t, when I told them they had to learn math and reading because that was what was required to pass the GED and they could do it because they were as smart as anyone else, they threw books across the room and smoked cigarettes in the hallways.

When I looked at them and recognized that math and reading classes triggered times in their lives when they were told they were stupid, incapable and that they could never succeed...and that I knew they were more than that and if we worked every day a bit at a time, they could prove it, then we made progress together.

They used to say, “Hey Linda, don’t flip the script.” That meant, don’t change the way you see us and decide that you have to follow some set of rules that don’t make any sense to any of us.

I remember one time when we were to do a Christmas show for a local nursing home. We had rehearsed and rehearsed. They hae all these Christmas Carols they were going to sing and had written a play too.

We all worked hard. When the day came for the performance, they all broke down one way or another. They did not dress up as I had asked, they were late, they were angry and had not eaten breakfast and were chain smoking cigarettes as I pulled in to pick them up.

I did not want to listen that day to how one young women’s mother’s boyfriend punched holes in all the walls the night before and she couldn’t sleep, or how another young man hid in a shed all night because he was afraid of a local gang or how another young woman was afraid she was pregnant. I wanted the show to go on and be perfect and good and right. We had made a commitment and people were counting on us.

We car pooled to the nursing home in unusual silence. When we arrived, they tumbled out in their ripped jeans and jelly donut stained sweatshirts (not what we agreed they'd wear), and we set up and the first piece was to be Silent Night. We had rehearsed and rehearsed.

Instead of what we had done together, one young man grabbed his guitar, walked up to our makeshift stage and sang Silent Night as a rap. I only remember fragments but I'll never forget them:

In the silence of the night  
When there is no more to love  
When the world has left you out  
Don't go down to hell  
Don't give it up to night  
When love takes notes  
And checks you off the list  
Stay in the light  
Stay in the light.

"The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice," as Teju Cole has written in The Atlantic. "It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege... The deeper issue with the savior mindset isn't just misunderstanding privilege; it's knowing too little about power"<sup>6</sup>

At one point Flaherty defines privilege as 'not having to notice your own power or the systems that give you that power.'<sup>7</sup>

It struck me listening to that rendition of Silent Night that not only was I wanting to protect these kids from the pain of their own worlds and help them get GEDS and jobs and in this case, to perform in a way that I decided would be acceptable to others, I wanted to be their protector and guide. In those roles there was a pay off, a so called "big emotional experience" and power too.

As we now join hands with our immigrant population here on island to do justice work, it has struck me that we must at the same time continue our work as Anglos of unraveling privilege and the savior complex so that a shared liberation, a shared peace, is possible.

Searching for a ground I trust to guide me in this, I come back to mothers who model a love that has to get messy to be present, a love that has to stay engaged to work, a love that cannot hang out long and survive with how it wants another to look and feel and dress and eat and act in order to be loved.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://thenewinquiry.com/dont-be-a-hero/>

A mother's love is stripped to its bones. Mothers have to love us from within who we are, as part of all that we are.

They cannot stand outside of us as *the heroes* and make decisions about who we are and what we need without the input of our lives and still go on as our mothers. We won't let them. We know this as their children and as mothers.

The replacement for a hero that can release us from this cycle of violence is the relationship between peoples that establishes us as equals and that we give ourselves to in a way that changes how we all construct and manage the business of building a future together.

And so this Mother's Day, let us remember to love without taking notes, to love without the check list, to love without flipping the script, to love changed by the needs of those we love, and in doing so, learn enough quiet and peace and self awareness to allow our voice and our gifts to be one of many, hewn from within relationships that gave birth to them.

In this way, we all have the capacity to be mothers. Let us birth together a world worthy of us all so fulfilling Julia Ward Howe's imploring request for this day to be a call *to Arise, Arise women and men of this world and demand that no more will we be satisfied with less than a great human family that can live in peace.*

Amen.