



MOTHER'S DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. The History Section

On various dates throughout the world, many countries celebrate Mother's Day. Early Mother's Day tributes date back to Greek and Roman cultural celebrations where some women were considered Rhea, the mother of many deities. In the Christian faith, early festivals were marked by celebrations on the fourth Sunday in Lent to honor Jesus' mother, Mary. In England, in particular, communities paid tribute to mothers during a Sunday morning celebration called Mothering Sunday. In the United States, similar work was organized in the 1850s by Anna Jarvis, an Appalachian homemaker, who attempted to improve sanitation and the living conditions of poor people by calling for a Mother's Work Day movement, where women used their roles as nurturers to make life better for their children and families.

Following the British model of honoring mothers and also building on the work of Anna Jarvis, social activist Julia Ward Howe began encouraging a day of celebration for mothers during the post American Civil War era. In 1870, through her Mother's Day Proclamation, Julia Howe connected her feminist beliefs that women could be social activists to the general idea that mothers were persons of peace, and began to encourage mothers to call for abandoning war as a strategy for resolving conflict. She emphasized strength and health through peace and disarmament; the philosophical reasoning undergirding her belief was that people in the United States must work together to avoid situations that robbed mothers of their sons. Thus was born her Mother's Day for Peace proclamation. Although she failed to get the government to establish any formal recognition of women as mothers of peace in the late nineteenth century, the United States eventually established this historical moment when the federal government created the first Mother's Day celebration on May 10, 1908. Six years later, hers and others' enthusiasm about mothers resulted in the United States Congress passing a law on May 8, 1914 designating the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day. A day later, on May 9, 1914, President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation making Mother's Day a national holiday and a time especially when the American flag could be flown honoring those mothers whose sons had died in war.

Over the years, Mother's Day has become very commercial. Although children and communities continue to honor mothers' contributions by paying tribute to those women who mothered their children, the children of others, and their communities by taking care of people at large, businesses continue to reach for profits. Businesses continue to push gifts, cards, and dinners to help families celebrate mom. Because of protest against the commercialization of this holiday, some community and church leaders began to encourage families to get involved with addressing the social and political needs of their communities. They did this by helping them organize, for example, peace and health rallies to highlight the desire of mothers to have a long-life that is free of violence and where women engage in peaceful living in their homes and communities.¹

II. Songs that Speak to the Moment

The three songs below offer various portraits of motherhood and mothering in the black community.

Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long ways from home
A long ways from home
True believer
A long ways from home
A long ways from home

Sometimes I feel like I'm almos' gone
Sometimes I feel like I'm almos' gone
Sometimes I feel like I'm almos' gone
Way up in de heab'nly land
Way up in de heab'nly land
True believer
Way up in de heab'nly land
Way up in de heab'nly land

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long ways from home.²

I Remember Mama

I remember mama,
And the love that she gave
Kneeling by her bed side
I can still hear mama say,

“The people are depending on you, Shirley,

Don't you let them down”

I remember mama in a happy way
We went to school with holes in our shoes
We didn't have much but the lord saw us through
Mama kept the family together
I remember mama in a happy way
She packed our lunch in an old greasy bag
It might've seemed empty,
But it was more than others had
It had a lot of love way down deep inside and

I remember mama in a happy way
Now mama is sleeping in the bosom of Jesus Christ
Somehow I know she's smiling, she's smiling on us right now
One day I'll see her again, how happy I will be
And I remember mama in a happy way
My brothers and sisters, they're living far apart
Although my mama's gone, she's right here in our hearts
We're all gonna pull together and stay in the holy place

I remember mama in a happy way
I remember mama, I remember mama in a happy way.³

I Still Hear Mama Praying

Chorus:

I still hear mama praying,
I still hear mama praying;
and the prayers that she prayed,
they're still keeping me day by day;
oh I still hear mama praying for me.

Verse 1:

When mama bowed her head
And knelt down in fervent prayer
She knew how to call on the name of Jesus
For she knew that he'd meet her there
Oh, she thank him for health and for strength
Just to run this Christian race
Oh but she never, she never failed
To pray, pray for children
Saying Lord save them by your grace

Chorus

Verse 2:

Now the one that you call mama
She may be sleeping in the arms of our God
But the memories of the family devotion
Causes us to always trust in our Lord
Oh, she prayed for the Lord to bless and keep her children
Always let the love of God abide
Oh and the prayer that she prayed will cover
Cover us till we meet her, meet her on the other, other side

Vamp:
Pray for me,
pray for me.

Ending:

Oh, I still hear mama praying for me.⁴

III. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Texts: Historical Lesson

In the African American community, the social, political, and economic struggles of the black family meant that African American women had to play roles within the home and society that often challenged patriarchal ideas. They were the nurturers who provided care that ranged from cooking to cleaning, helping to establish family rules and serving as disciplinarians, to providing the moral and spiritual training for the children in the family. As mothers made these contributions, they also had to make others, including working away from their home in the kitchens, fields, factories, and stores of whites so they could help contribute economically to the family.⁵ It has been a popular position of some scholars and critics to present African American women as matriarchs, mothers who presumably wanted to control and dominate their household. This is not only a myth but a fabrication that grew out of circumstances largely created by white dominance and institutionalized systemic poverty that forced African American women to be mothers, breadwinners, providers, and protesters.⁶

IV. Audio Visuals Aids

Many documentaries show how black women have responded to their role as mothers, and the conditions under which they have created effective nurturing relationships that built confidence and hope in families and communities.⁷ The following documentary films illustrate this perspective:

- Black Mother, Black Daughter: This documentary film chronicles the struggles of blacks living in Canada who maintain a sense of pride and identity and documents the oral traditions passed down from a mother to a daughter.
- Happy Birthday, Mrs. Craig: This documentary film is a beautifully documented memorial of Lulu Sadler Craig. This story is told primarily through interviews, still

photos, and landscape, as Mrs. Craig speaks of slavery, marriage, children, education, and freedom as well as of descendants...soldiers, farmers, teachers, mothers and fathers.

- Daughters of the Dust; A film illustrating the struggles of a community to address the painful decision of leaving or staying on its historical grounds as a way of maintaining traditions, as the mother of the community desires.

V. Autobiographical or Biographical Stories/Personal Testimonies

African American women writers offer something very special through their voices. Their writings often show how their mothers were agents of change; and how, through their nurturing and care of family and community, black mothers established their own agency by mothering the African American village and by making all children women's collective responsibility. Personal testimonies testify to the mothering ideal:

- She loved her grandmother whom she called momma. "Momma, had a deep-brooding love that hung over everything she touched...Her grandmother instilled a strong value for religion while they lived with her."⁸
--Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
- I watched my mom. She didn't teach me by word. She taught me by actions. I learned giving and sharing and through that I learned what true ministry was.⁹
--Shirley Caesar, The Lady, the Melody and the Word
- Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to "jump at de sun." We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.¹⁰
--Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Track on the Road
- As a young child, I wanted to be just like the black mothers. My strongest and closest example was right in my own home...my mother. My mother became my role model and someone I held in high regard in how she was able to juggle all of her many tasks and still have a smile on her face at the end of the day.¹¹
--Stephanie L. Ogle, "Celebrating Black Mom's Everywhere This Mother's Day."
- I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have, ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty."¹²
--Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers Gardens

VI. Poetry

Poetry written by black women gives voice to their story and illustrates how words have empowered black women as social actors and mothers of the African American community.

Following are excerpts from poems that make this point.

The Mothering Blackness

She came home running
back to the mothering blackness
deep in the smothering blackness ...
She came home running...¹³
--Maya Angelou

In Search of Our Mothers Gardens

They were women then
My mama's generation
Husky of voice - Stout of Step...

With fists as well as Hands
How they battered down doors
And ironed Starched white Shirts
How they led Armies Headragged Generals Across mined fields Booby trapped.¹⁴
--Alice Walker

For additional poetry see the poem by Sister Raedorah that opens the lectionary commentary for this Sunday.

VII. Making It a Memorable Moment

Memorable celebrations situate African American mothers in the larger global culture. Although African American moms do some things differently, their work is significant to families and communities, and their experiences connect to their African and American traditions. Memorable examples of celebrations honoring mothers exist on websites, at museum exhibitions, on television and internet programs. Mothers' struggles and achievements are also historicized in special-made bulletins, cards, and worship guides in celebration of African American women on Mother's Day. Some notable websites are:

- California African American Museum presents: "Opera in the Galleries—Tea on the Side," a program utilizing opera to tell the stories of some African American mothers. See, www.caamuseum.org accessed 15 February 2009
- "Lifetime Networks Announces Mother's Day Poll and Weekend of Special Programming On-Air Online." [RedOrbit](http://www.redorbit.com/news/entertainment/1375106/lifetime_networks_announces_mothers_day_poll_and_weekend_of_special/). 7 May 2008. Online location: http://www.redorbit.com/news/entertainment/1375106/lifetime_networks_announces_mothers_day_poll_and_weekend_of_special/ accessed 15 February 2009
- African American Mother's Day Bulletins are provided by Cokesbury for worship services. Online location: www.cokesbury.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=446811 accessed 15 February 2009

- It's a Black Thang also sells special Mother's Day cards. Online location: <http://www.itsablackthang.com/AfricanAmerican-Mothers-Day-cards.htm> accessed 15 February 2009
- Hopson, Cynthia A. Bond. Worship: 21st Century Africana Liturgy Resources: Worship Resources for Mother's Day. 13 May 2007. Online location: General Board of Discipleship http://www.gbod.org/worship/worship/articles.asp?act=reader&item_id=33416&loc_id=733,32,50 accessed 15 February 2009

VIII. Books About Mother's Day

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Notes

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2. Johnson, J.W. and J.R. Johnson. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." American Negro Spirituals. 1926. This is a revised version of the original song.

3. Caesar, Shirley. "I Remember Mama." I Remember Mama. CD. New York, NY: Sony Records, 1992.
4. "I Still Hear Mama Praying." By Charles B.T. Baldwin
5. Hurston, Zora Neale. Their Eyes Were Watching God. 1942. New York, NY: Perennial Library, 1990.
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