



## MOTHER'S DAY AND PENTECOST

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, May 11, 2008**

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#### **I. Historical Background and Documents**

##### **(A) Remembering...**

These days on Mother's Day, I wear a white flower  
It reminds me of my childhood when we wore red flowers  
I remember the first time my mother wore a white flower  
I was seven...

The dead are not under the earth,  
the dead are not dead  
the dead will be with you as long as you remember...

It is difficult to wrap my mind around my mother  
An extraordinary life force—

Deeply connected to something below/running thru/ above her  
A love/fire/power chain with no beginning or ending  
Facilitating her stretchings beyond what we understand as human limits.  
For her,  
Limits were what people thought they could or could not do.  
She stood with her life in the way of limitations  
Demanding the universe  
to open a little for her children...

My mother, who never worked outside of the home said one Christmas morning  
as my father went off to attend a morning service  
at one of his churches—  
“Christmas is the celebration of the gift of children!”  
I can still hear her defining voice  
I still hold as formative glue the wonder it brought into me as a child  
And these days I still keep it as nurture in my mouth  
and move it around  
To try and see if it opens the heavens a bit...

### **(B) June Jordan Remembers**

I talked to the late poet June Jordan about my mother, and her ‘way out of no way’ living,  
and me never knowing when she got up or when she went to bed, and her being the one  
we all turned to for everything, and me wondering who she had to turn to. June sent me  
these words on thin blue paper, and I made them into a song...

#### **Oughta Be A Woman**

Washing the floors to send you to college  
Staying at home so you can feel safe  
What do you think is the soul of her knowledge  
What you think makes her feel safe

Hugging herself in an old kitchen chair  
She listens to your hurt and your rage  
What do you think she knows of despair  
What is the aching of age

The fathers, the children, the brothers  
Turn to her and everybody White  
What about her turning around alone in the everyday light.

There oughta be a woman can break down  
Down sit down breakdown sit down  
Like everyone else call it quits on Monday,  
Blues on Tuesday sleep until Sunday  
Down sitdown, breakdown sitdown

A way out of no way is flesh out of flesh  
Courage that cries out at night  
A way out of no way is flesh out of flesh  
Bravery kept out of sight  
A way out of no way is too much to ask  
Too much of a task for any one woman.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Other Songs for this Calendar Moment**

### **(A) Mothering Into Community**

Mothering is, of course, not a beginning—but a continuum. To mother is to provide a fertile passage from life to life, not just from one place to another, but moving from one form to another, and being provided along that journey with the nurturance and protection to make it probable that a birthing will happen, and a new life will come into being... community... Community was birthed in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost. Those early Christians who mothered the church from birth through childhood, and nurtured it through its youth and then sent in out into the world under Spirit protection, taught us a lot about birthing.

The text of an African American spiritual finds the child acknowledging the gifts received from the mother and in the same breath, taking responsibility for what one has or has not done with the grounding teachings and nurturing support...

#### **Nobody's Fault But Mine**

Nobody's fault but mine  
Nobody's fault but mine  
If I die and my soul gets lost  
Nobody fault but mine

You know my mother she taught me how to read...  
You know my mother she taught me how to pray...

### **(B) Being Without A Mother**

It may be that the separation from Mother Africa through the Middle Passage and slavery, and the crippling impact of the auction block are cultural sources for the outpourings of being 'without a mother' expressed in spirituals, and wandering verse texts within the African American spiritual tradition. One of the most well known is ...

#### **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 way from home  
A long way from home

Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone...  
Way up in the heavenly land...

The great hymn singer and songwriter, Revered C.J. Johnson, wrote a song about growing up without his mother ...

### **T'aint But Me One**

Oh my mother done gone on, t'aint but me one  
Oh my mother done gone on, t'aint but me one  
Oh my mother done gone on, t'aint but me one  
Oh ----- my Lord, t'aint but me one

### **III. Historical Notes**

The history of Mother's Day is centuries old and goes back to the times of the ancient Egyptians, and the all embracing mother the goddess Isis; and the Greeks, who held festivities to honor Rhea, the mother of the gods. The ancient Romans celebrated Matronalia to honor Juno the goddess of childbirth, and women in general. A later incarnation of a holiday to honor Motherhood came from Europe. It fell on the fourth Sunday, Lent (the forty days of fasting preceding Easter Sunday). Early Christians initially used the day to honor the church in which they were baptized, which they knew as their "Mother Church." This place of worship would be decorated with jewels, flowers and other offerings. The early Christians celebrated the Mother's festival on the fourth Sunday of Lent to honor Mary, the mother of Christ. In the 1600's a clerical decree in England broadened the celebration to include real Mothers, earning the name Mothering Day. Mothering Day became an especially compassionate holiday for the working classes of England. During this Lenten Sunday, servants and trade workers were allowed to travel back to their towns of origin to visit their families. Mothering Day also provided a one-day reprieve from the fasting and penance of Lent, so that families across England could enjoy a sumptuous family feast—Mother was the guest of honor. Mothers were presented with cakes and flowers, as well as a visit from their beloved and distant children. The English colonists settled in America discontinued the tradition of Mothering Sunday.<sup>2</sup>

The first North American Mother's Day was conceptualized with Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day Proclamation in 1870. Despite having penned The Battle Hymn of the Republic in tribute to the war effort to save the Union 12 years earlier, Howe had become so distraught by the death and carnage of that war that she called on mothers to come together and protest what she saw as the futility of their sons killing the sons of other mothers. With the following, she called for an international Mother's Day, celebrating peace and motherhood.

### **Mother's Day Proclamation**

Julia Ward Howe

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...  
Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,  
But of God -

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.

Howe's efforts were influenced by the work of Anna Maria Reeves Jarvis, a young Appalachian homemaker, who in 1858 organized Mothers' Work Days where women donated a day to provide aid to soldiers during the Civil War. In 1907, Jarvis's daughter, by the same name, Anna M. Jarvis, a Philadelphia schoolteacher, began a movement to establish a national Mother's Day in honor of her mother, Anna Maria Reeves Jarvis. She solicited the help of hundreds of legislators and prominent businessmen to create a special day to honor mothers. The first Mother's Day observance was a church service honoring Anna's mother. In 1914, then President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the second Sunday in May as a national holiday in honor of mothers. However, after her long efforts to have the holiday recognized Jarvis became distressed and critical of it due to its over commercialization.<sup>3</sup> The very commercialized American tradition of Mother's Day has expanded to many other countries and cultures.<sup>4</sup>

### Notes

1. Jordan, June, and Bernice Johnson Reagon. "Oughta Be A Woman." Sweet Honey in the Rock. Selections 1976-1988. Chicago, IL: Flying Fish, 1997. Songtalk Publishing, used with permission.
2. "Mother's Day History." Mother's Day Central.com. Online location: <http://www.mothersdaycentral.com/about-mothersday/history/> accessed 30 January 2008
3. Lewis, Johnson. "Women's History." About.com Online location: [http://womenshistory.about.com/od/mothersday/a/anna\\_jarvis.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/mothersday/a/anna_jarvis.htm) accessed 30 January 2008
4. Ibid.