



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism:

Julia Ward Howe

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This morning is the third in an annual series on “**Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism.**” Two years ago, we focused on **Margaret Fuller** (1810 - 1850), who along with Emerson and Thoreau is one of our three most important Transcendentalist forebears. Her 1845 pamphlet *Women in the Nineteenth Century* was “**the first significant work to take the liberal side in the question of Women’s Rights since the day of Mary Wollstonecraft,**” who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* fifty years earlier. Fuller was also “America’s first female foreign correspondent.” Tragically, she died in a shipwreck on her trip home from Europe. She was only forty years old.

Last year, we considered “**The Peabody Sisters**”: **Mary Peabody**, an important educator who married the politician and educational reformer Horace Mann; **Sophia Peabody**, a talented painter who married Nathaniel Hawthorne, the novelist whose best-known work is *The Scarlet Letter*; and **Elizabeth Peabody**, the author or translator of a half-dozen books, who also became the publisher of “Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller — under her own imprint.” She was also the celebrated founder of kindergartens in America.

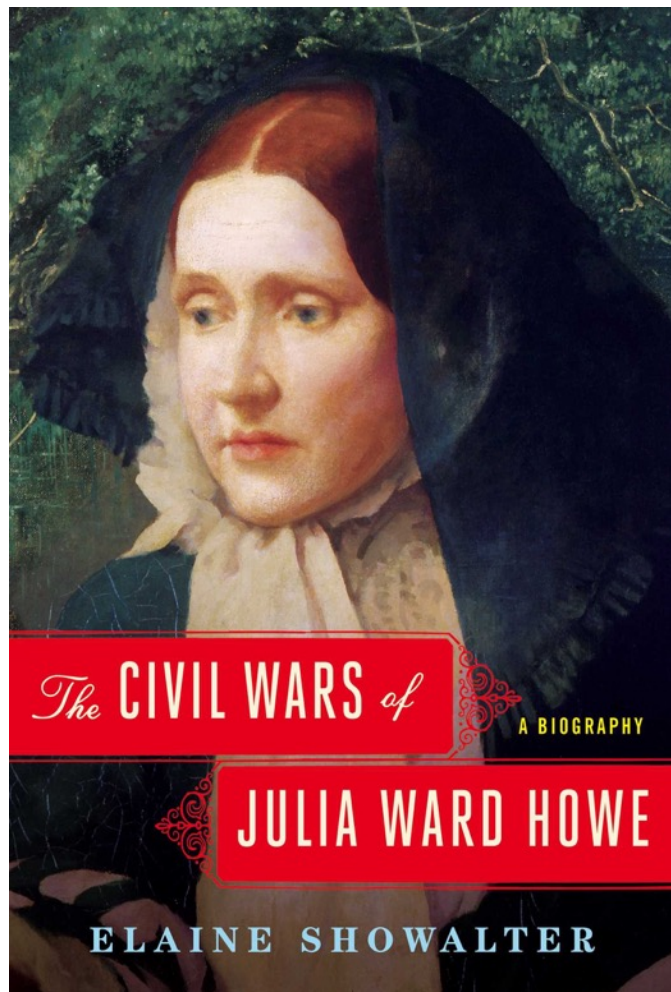
In future years, I look forward to telling you about others of our founding mothers, such as **Judith Sargent Murray** (an early American advocate for women's rights, who

was married to John Murray, the founder of the Universalist half of our movement), **Olympia Brown** (another Universalist who in 1863 became the first woman to be ordained with full denominational recognition), and **Sophia Lyon Fahs** (who revolutionized twentieth-century UU Religious Education). I planned to speak this year about **Mary Moody Emerson** (Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt whom he called his "earliest and best teacher"), but when I saw that the influential feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter had published a new biography of Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910), she jumped to the top of my list.

In these history-based sermons, my intent is not to overwhelm you with names and dates. Rather, my hope is that your takeaway will be that as Unitarian Universalists, **“we stand on the shoulders of giants,” many of whom were pathbreaking women.** It’s important to retell these stories from our history that we might continue to inscribe them into our sense of self, allowing them to inspire us to live more boldly, freely, and compassionately in our time.

Turning to this year’s focus on Julia Ward Howe, allow me to begin with a brief overview of her life before returning to fill in some of the details. In an interesting balance of competing priorities throughout her life,

Julia Ward Howe had six children, learned six languages, and



published six books.... Born [in 1819], three days after Queen Victoria, she was sometimes called the Queen of America.... When she married Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, Julia Ward was an aspiring poet, a beautiful, accomplished, studious heiress known in New York social circles as “the Diva.” Howe was....a world-famous doctor who had developed a method for educating blind children.... **Florence Nightingale was the godmother of one of their daughters; Dickens, their guide in London.** They were devoted and imaginative parents.... [But] their marriage was turbulent and unstable—a prolonged battle over sex, money, independence, politics, and power.... **Writing the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” was the turning point in her life....** After her husband’s death in 1876, Julia was free to forge a new identity. For the second half of her life, she was a leader of the fight for women’s suffrage. (xi-xiv)

She died in 1910 at the age of 91, having lived a remarkable, though often troubled, life.

To begin filling in some of the details, in her early childhood Julia was **like a “princess in a fairy tale”** (1). And while being a princess has its advantages, as any Disney movies will remind you, there are downsides: strict expectations around behavior and dress, severe limits on your freedom, and pressure to find happiness through marrying an alleged “Prince Charming.” As Julia wrote in her memoir, “my dear father, with all his noble generosity and overweening affection, sometimes appeared to me as my jailer” (1).

Tragically, her mother, Julia Cutler Ward, after whom she was named, died of a postpartum infection at age twenty-seven, following the birth of her seventh child. At the time, Julia was only five years old, and **her mother’s death caused a major shift in her childhood.** Their Manhattan house was in one of New York City’s most desirable neighborhoods and they were at the center of high society. But as Julia’s mother had grown ill, she returned to the theologically conservative Calvinism of her own childhood.

Likewise, **Julia's father, in his grief, "became a convert to his wife's Calvinist beliefs and a model of evangelical piety and sobriety."** (5). They moved to a new house, and the parties ended (6). To share just one of the ways these events impacted Julia, her father, who never remarried, began to make Julia take his wife's former place at meals. While he ate, he would hold Julia's hand with his left hand, never noticing that he was preventing her from eating since she too was right-handed (13). Suffice it to say, Freud would have had a field day with Julia's childhood and choice of husband.

When Julia was twenty, her father died at age fifty-five. Influenced by his example following her mother's death, Julia entered into a two-year period of extreme Calvinistic piety. Finally, **a friend of Margaret Fuller's intervened and persuaded Julia to convert to Unitarianism** and begin looking to her future (18). So,

At twenty-two, Julia was...beginning to make a modest intellectual reputation [publishing reviews of literary works]. As the Diva, her operatic singing voice, musical abilities, beauty, and personality made her popular and admired. And she was a great heiress. Samuel Ward's estate, divided among the six children, has been estimated at \$6 million. (19)

But less than four years after her father's death, Julia married Samuel Gridley Howe, a father-figure eighteen years her senior (20-21). Dr. Howe was known by the nickname "Chev," a shorthand version of his title "Chevalier of the Order of St. Savior from the King of Greece" for being one of the U.S. citizens who aided in the Greek War of Independence.

Both Chev and Julia were formed in a nineteenth-century cultural context in which **a woman, especially from a privileged family, was expected to find her sole fulfillment as a wife and a mother** (54). To share just one example of how this influenced their brief courtship, she wrote in a letter to her sisters, "Yesterday I sat with the Chev and said to him...I shall try to please you in everything. 'What?' said he, "even to the paring of a nail?" My dear children, you know the general state of my unfortunate

nails. Of course I ran instantly upstairs and cut them very short, at which he was most pleased” (51). But just as Julia unrealistically tried to be the perfect future wife at the beginning of their relationship, Chev also was initially accommodating in ways that he would be unwilling to maintain, such as accepting her unusual request to be known **not as Mrs. Samuel Gridley Howe, but as Mrs. Julia Ward Howe** (54). Both parties ignored the warning signs of conflict to come.

Despite her reservations about motherhood, their wedding was in late April, and she was pregnant by August (55, 60). Julia had serious battles with depression around each of her pregnancies, likely related at least in part to the circumstances of her own mother’s death. However, as she became increasingly unhappy in her marriage, **Julia began to channel her discontent into a fascinating novel about an intersex child**, “born with male and female sexual organs but raised as a boy by his parents” (88). The protagonist, **“Laurence is the poet and adventurer she might have been if she had been a boy”** (92). The unfinished manuscript lay undiscovered in 10 boxes of her unsorted writings until 1977 and was finally published in 2004.

But she didn’t keep all of her work secret. In the same year that Chev had a book rejected for publication, Julia’s book of poetry titled *Passion-Flowers* was not only published, but also sold enough to merit a second and a third edition (112, 115, 127). Needless to say, **the contrast of Julia’s literary success with Chev’s literary failure did not help their relationship**.

But the next decade of **the 1860s was the biggest turning point in Julia’s life** (163). Deeply moved by visiting Civil War camps and hospitals, Julia awoke in the middle of the night and wrote new lyrics to the tune of “John Brown's Body”—verses that became the famous **“Battle Hymn of the Republic”** (164):

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:

His truth is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

Keep in mind that Chev was one of the Secret Six, who helped fund John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Historians have written that, "without Julia Ward Howe, John Brown may not have become fused with American myth.... She caught the essence of John Brown, a devout Calvinist who considered himself predestined to stamp out slavery. She had **coupled his God-inspired antislavery to the North's mission and had thus helped define America**" (167). Remember that when the Civil War began, it was far from clear in the North if the fight was *only* to preserve the union *or* if it was also to end slavery. Julia's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was written in November 1861, more than a year *before* Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Julia's lyrics helped catalyze popular support for using the Civil War as an opportunity to end slavery once and for all.

Building on the popularity of the "Battle Hymn," Julia became increasingly active in public life. In the coming years, she was **elected president of the New English Woman Suffrage Association** (187), and she delivered her **Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace** (192):

We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. **Our husbands shall 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 taught them of charity, mercy and patience....** In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at some place 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.

She did not become fully free, however, until 1876, following Chev's death from a stroke (203). After years of marital strife, they reconciled on his deathbed, but it was too late to change his will. And although Chev knew that he had squandered much of Julia's inheritance through his poor investment choices, **he punishingly left her nothing in his will from his estate** (204). But after so many years of abuse from him she responded to this news matter-of-factly (205). Undeterred, she embarked on a two-year trip to Europe with her youngest daughter, which left her \$3,500 in debt. But Julia Ward Howe was just getting started on her new life and would not be held back any longer (208).

"The two decades of **her sixties and seventies were her golden years**" (209). With the help of her eldest brother, she moved into a prominent new house on Beacon Street in Boston (210) and **began to entertain in the extravagant manner of her earliest childhood memories prior to her mother's death**. Famous guests at her parties included the Irish writer Oscar Wilde (211). And although she was born in 1819, she lived through the first full decade of the twentieth century. "**Modern technology delighted her,**" including long-distance telephones, phonographs, fast cars, motorcycles, and the elevator that was installed in her house (235).

There is much more to say about the triumphs and travails of Julia Ward Howe, but for now, I will leave the closing words to Elaine Showalter from her excellent new biography, [The Civil Wars of Julia Ward Howe](#):

She began her life as a damsel imprisoned in an enchanted castle and ended it as an international icon....

As a young wife, she had painfully come to the realization that her husband could not be the partner she had dreamed of, no matter how many times she sacrificed her wishes to his command.

As a mother, she slowly revised her concept of maternity and questioned its centrality to a woman's life.

During the Civil War, Julia understood that she was also fighting a

domestic and personal civil war.... She never achieved the level of feminine self-denial and scorn of material things that society still demands from its female saints. But as she wrote at the end, "I do not desire ecstatic, disembodied sainthood... **I would be human, and American, and a woman.** She won her civil wars, and she won her place in American history. (243)