

05-16-08 Mother's Day

If the proverbial mother had it her way, Mother's Day would simply be a clean and safe day. For you see, first things first with a mother. First we get clean and safe and then we can talk about happiness and joy and love and silliness. Now, mind you, clean and safe might seem to be simple accomplishments but even in ordinary times, it takes materials such as clean cloth, clean water, effort and also oversight and diligence to achieve those goals. Can you imagine what it takes in the midst of poverty, overcrowding or war? Speaking of war, recall that mothers are always, in addition to working toward cleanliness and orderliness, looking for ways for everyone to get along. Getting along might mean living in peace, or, as every mother has pleaded at some point in time, "Can we just have some peace and quiet?"

While I am not a big fan of forced feelings a.k.a. holidays, I am thankful for a few, including Memorial Day and Mother's Day. I think of my mother often and appreciate her more and more as I age. I recently guessed correctly that a friend was upset when I saw her busily cleaning and organizing. I told her, with a chuckle, that my mother always tried to clean away her troubles. Of course, it did not dissolve the problem, only grime, but it did diffuse emotions such as anger and anxiety.

While enjoying the memories of my own mother who has been gone for so long now, I was surprised to discover that my own recollections were quite close to the origin of the holiday and even more surprised to find out that it all began with a public health campaign.

Anna Reeves Jarvis lived in the small town of Webster, West Virginia and it was her mission to improve the living conditions by improving sanitation and the inspection of milk and food. To achieve her goal, she needed to raise money and awareness, so she formed the Mother's Day Work Clubs. Money went towards buying medicine and providing assistance to mothers with Tuberculosis. She even expanded upon this already amazing achievement by improving the sanitary conditions for both sides during the Civil War. She is credited with uniting families and saving thousands of lives through her teachings. Her daughter not only carried on her mother's work but also dedicated her life to commemorating her and her efforts with an official "Mother's Day". It was not until 1914 that President Woodrow signed the resolution that officially established Mother's Day in the United States. It was never meant to be a day of pretense or commercialization. It was meant to be a day for being truly thankful for life itself, those who give it and those who preserve it by promoting healthy practices; it was meant to give thanks mothers.

Anna Jarvis influenced another woman interested in establishing an official Mother's Day. Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic, also worked toward peace and equality. She, like Anna Jarvis, tried to unite families torn apart by the Civil War and was so appalled by the Franco-Prussian War, that she called to women to unite and oppose all war. In 1870 she issued the Mother's Day Proclamation. It begins with:

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 in another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.”

Those lines remind me of the book, “The Creation of Patriarchy” by Gerda Lerner, where she theorizes that the stealing of and raping of women kept peace and created stability for a group because once the women became pregnant and gave birth, they would then be loyal to their new child and would not risk losing their child by running away or fighting with the new people.

We, as a species, still struggle to coexist without bloodshed, without tyranny, without oppression. We have at least made advances in the living conditions while we struggle. We live in a safer, cleaner world thanks to mothers, the very first sanitarians.

Ikiru!!!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She is the mother of six children, loves peace but struggles with housework, which is improving now that promoting health is part of her life journey. She welcomes your comments and suggestions. (Don't you love that line about irrelevant agencies?) She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us