

Barry Sanders*What We Hold in Common in this Uncommon Era*

“Great spirits now on earth are
sojourning. These, these will give the
world another heart/And other pulses:
hear ye not the hum /Of mighty
workings?”

--Keats, to a friend, 1816

Last Sunday, we celebrated something in America called Mothers Day. Restaurants serve more meals on that occasion than at New Year’s Eve; florists sell more roses than at Valentine’s Day. Sweet shops typically run out of chocolates. Though many people think of that holiday as ridiculously commercial, it came about in quite the opposite way, through the agitation of a single person of heroic persistence, a woman named Julia Ward Howe. She has fairly well faded from history, but at one time the mere mention of her name would make Howe’s toughest opponents stammer and spit. She fought passionately her whole life for the freedom of slaves, for the recognition of the poor, and for the rights of women. She saw the bloody Civil War up close, and it shocked her to realize that the newest republic in the world could wind up short-lived—in continuous turmoil if not utter and absolute destruction.

She shaped her entire life in the pursuit of peace. After an evening spent comforting a cadre of dying soldiers in a Civil War camp, in 1861, she returned to her own tent and, as she reports, in one sitting wrote the anti-war anthem, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” In the song, God extends his mighty hand and crushes hate until it’s gone for good. While few people know anything about Julia Ward Howe, almost every American can hum “The Battle Hymn” and, even if they can’t quite

catch its meaning, know by heart the song’s powerful, almost intoxicating, opening image: “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.” We face a reckoning, Howe insists, for this transgressive act of brother killing brother on and off the field of battle: We face a reckoning with the Maker. There must be an end. There will be an end.

In spite of 700,000 or more men killed in the war, and another three hundred thousand wounded, Howe believed that all human beings hold in common a desire for peace. Her own experience told her that such a peace, however, would never come from men. For her, the radical transformation of the world could only be generated by mothers. The question, Howe wrote, “forced itself on me, ‘Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters to prevent the waste of human life, which they alone bear and know the cost?’ I had never thought of this before. The august dignity of motherhood and its terrible responsibility now appeared to me in a new aspect.”

Perhaps influenced by ancient Greek celebrations for Cybele, a great mother of the gods, and Rhea, the wife of Cronus, Howe conceived of an international day for the celebration of motherhood. To set the idea in motion, she wrote a proclamation, in 1870, in her favorite literary form, the poem: “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 decided by irrelevant agencies./Our husbands shall not come to us reeking of 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 women of one country will be too tender to those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs./ From the bosom 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 out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession.'" She had her statement translated into French, Spanish, Italian, German and Swedish, and then distributed thousands of copies around the world.

In 1872, she traveled to London to organize what she hoped would be the first of many conferences for peace. Group after group, however, shut her out because none of them wanted to work with a female leader. So she returned to America to begin promoting her yearly festival, and held her first one, significantly, on the Commons, in Boston, on June 2nd, 1872. She proclaimed it Mothers Day for Disarmament and Peace. For many years after, thousands upon thousands of women, along with an increasing number of men, gathered in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Edinburgh, London, Geneva and even Istanbul, to celebrate Howe's founding vision of Mothers Day.

Howe thought big. She wanted nothing less than an international congress of women that would make the issue of world peace its only priority—an international witness for that radical political commons called peace. Women across America carried with them copies of Julia Ward Howe's impassioned plea to rid the world of war. Declaiming it wherever they could find an audience, they gave voice to Howe's political ambitions. In the deepest meaning of conspiracy, they shared one breath. They breathed together:

As men have forsaken the plow 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 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 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.

Howe's festival of peace morphed over the years into a more placid, more general holiday, a sunny day that salutes mothers for making it through yet another year. Howe would have seen the change, I am convinced, as just another act of aggression. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson declared the second Sunday in May as the holiday Americans now know. Although he made his announcement just several months before the start of World War I, he mentioned nothing at all of the holiday's roots buried deep in a movement dedicated to ridding the world of wars of any kind.

While I have always had my doubts about Wilson, I believe in Howe. Like her, I believe that we all desperately crave peace, even though it seems strangely naive these days to utter such a sentiment. Still, what we hold in common does not, I firmly believe, change. At times, because of a rapid-fire life of getting and spending, our priorities shift, and what's common—including common sense itself—

gets occluded or distorted or, worse yet, deferred and slowly forgotten.

I focus on one such moment. I am indebted here to Raymond Williams and his bracing little book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. He points out that the root word for *common*, the Latin *communis*, derives from two separate sources: *com-*, “together” and *munis-*, “under obligation”; and *com-*, “together” and *unis-*, “one.” In practice, the word refers sometimes to a concept or idea common to humankind in general or to a specific group. The idea of the common can thus create community, but it can also cause serious divisions within the larger community. Because of its dual nature, the word has always carried a political charge.

This is true from its earliest use, where *common* celebrated a serious political division between the noble, knightly or gentle ranks, as opposed to the lower orders. So, for instance, while the sixteenth-century phrase, *the commons*, reveals what’s blessedly undistinguished and ordinary—what’s shared—it does so by granting power to those lower ranks or orders. The upper crust, as we know, does not cede power without a struggle. And so, by early the nineteenth century, *common* took on a derogatory meaning, as something “low or vulgar.”

I spend some few minutes with etymology and definitions here because it sets into focus my own particular framing of this conference. For as I think about our gathering, I find this same potential for division in the rubric, “What We Hold In Common,” with an emphasis, for me, on *bold*: to clutch, keep safe, maintain near at hand. Every one of us, I suspect, is desperately trying to hold on to some one idea or concept that we would like to see integrated, some time soon, into the society at large. In my own case, I move onto the commons by suggesting that we all hold an indebtedness to, and a dependency on, mothers and motherhood. I further argue

that this quality that we all once recognized as so defiantly universal has been knocked aside by that negative meaning of common.

I ask you to keep Julia Ward Howe in mind and her nineteenth-century singing and trumpeting and trampling for her beloved commonweal. I wish to use her century as my decisive break, when community started turning common, that is, cheap and vulgar. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, through the intrusion of technology, in the West at least, the idea of the common began to fracture in that most fundamental area to which Howe calls our attention—the spirit of mother. The relationship between mother and child got demeaned, brushed aside, replaced, and we have paid a high price for that loss.

Mother is the ultimate host. All other forms of graciousness, of unconditional reception, derive their model from the idea of motherhood. Witness this week. Our own hosts have wrapped us generously in a most powerful Greek innovation—what Homer refers to as *philoxenia*—or simply, *hospitality*. In Homer, alone, I count eighteen instances of hospitality. In that spirit, I start my story with a figure from the ancient world, a prominent second-century Greek physician named Galenus, who practiced in Rome. I focus on only one of Galen’s many medical interests, the human *pulse*, a word that does not appear in English before the early twelfth century and then as *pous*, Middle French for “push.” If we hope to understand the historic idea of the pulse, we must abandon our modern notions of it. For example, in the Middle Ages people were not limited just to feeling their own *pous*, but, quite extraordinarily, to tasting and smelling it, as well. I quote from the French poet *Wace*, from his *Chronicles of Britain*, where the word first occurs: “He tasted his pous, he saw his uryñ, He said he knew his medicine.” *Wace* provides a description of an aesthetic self-

diagnosis, one that involves a fairly sophisticated play of the senses.

Galen counted some twenty-seven different pulses in the body, each one beating out its own particular tune, each one varying in qualities like size, quickness, frequency, regularity, and rhythm. Galen delighted in discovering pulses that, in their quirky behavior, resembled, as he delights in pointing out, worms, ants, waves, and gazelles. He can also describe a particular pulse, he says, as saw-edged, hectic, undulating, twisted, chord-like, beat-decreasing, beat-increasing, and on and on.

For close to 1500 years, the body's seemingly anarchic rhythm continued unabated. In the eighteenth century, however, as the Enlightenment demanded order and uniformity from the disorder known as culture, the pulse, like so much else, came under the unifying principle of mathematics. Here, we enter dangerous ground. For to regulate the pulse is also to regulate the pulse-giver, herself, mother.

Galen described the pulse's many variations as a way of understanding it, perhaps even of containing it. For he knew the basic nature of the pulse as inherently wild and manic, an unruliness which revealed itself even in its etymology. At its base we find the vigorous Latin *pellere*, "to push," hence "to chase," or "to chase away." That action increases in the Greek *pallo*, "I shake" and *polemixo*, "I agitate violently," and in its close kin *polemos*, "polemics" and, by extension, "to make war." Such an unpredictable, irascible creature just begs to be conquered and tamed.

An early eighteenth-century English physician named Sir John Floyer led the charge. In a treatise entitled *The Physician's Pulse Watch*, Floyer introduced, as a key indicator of health, the idea of a quantifiable, regular pulse. That small, unassuming work, published in 1707, helped to transform the entire medical

profession. Floyer exerted great authority. When he spoke, people listened. They obeyed. It was Floyer, for instance, who advised the mother of the great Samuel Johnson that, if she ever hoped to cure her son of his severe case of the King's Evil, she must take him, without delay, to be touched by Queen Anne. The King's Evil was a quite serious disease—nothing to fool around with—what physicians would later call scrofula. Johnson's mother heeded the advice and took her young charge, on March 30, 1714, to the Queen. Johnson was the last person, it turned out, that the Queen cured, as she died later that same year, bringing to a close the practice of healing through the royal touch. But if royal intimacy had ended, so had other, more mundane forms of touching. For this, we can hold Floyer greatly responsible.

Floyer had absolutely no truck with Galen's riot of pitches and punctuations. Where Galen heard a richness of rhythms all over the body, Floyer heard only common meter, a continuous string of iambic feet emanating from one point only, the wrist. (The phrase "common meter" first appears in English poetry in 1718.) Where Galen heard tap dancing, Floyer found the steady regularity of the waltz. Floyer established a universal measure, a mean for the human heart, at rest, of 70 to 75 beats per minute. A lower number, even of one or two beats, indicated lassitude, a higher number gave evidence of a state of hyperactivity. Either was cause for alarm. The heart was headed for machine status, as regular and stable as a locomotive.

But Floyer represented only the beginning of the new medical regime. In 1816, a French physician named Rene Laennec forever changed the practice—the *pratique*—of medicine. Unable to hear the heartbeat of a particularly heavy patient, Laennec fashioned a crude listening device out of a paper tube to amplify the patient's beat. For the first time, an instrument—perfected three years later, in

1819, and marketed as a stethoscope, a “chest looker”—came between the physician and the patient. For the first time, an instrument “tells” the physician that his patient is pulsing “normally”—within that fairly narrow range that Floyer had decreed, between 70 to 75 beats per minute.

At one time, the physician would press his ear deep into the patient’s back or chest, for the doctor needed to know what the patient “sounded” like; indeed, he needed to sense whether the patient was *sound* or not. Mothers easily performed that same simple and intimate task. Doctors listened for congestion, for light airy echoes of the heart called wisps. Galen, of course, heard a cacophony of rhythms. A Galenic doctor does not aim for numeric accuracy, but rather, using his nose and eyes and ears, slowly constructs a story, a narrative, that makes sense of the patient’s interiority. Only then might he think about prescribing some remedy. We generally think of that kind of procedure as fuzzy and impressionistic thinking at best—certainly not as science. But that’s how medicine proceeded.

If you want to return to health, you better participate. To paraphrase Walt Whitman, good doctors required good patients. While the doctor needed to prod and probe and listen up, the patient needed to talk up, to tell the story of what brought him or her there—where he was when he got struck down, what the weather was like, who was with him, what time of day, and so on. Even as late as the early nineteenth century, we have records of physicians, in small German villages, say, examining female patients by listening to their stories, reflecting, and asking the wildest of questions—like, “Do you hear the wolf still howling in your womb?”—listening again, and asking a new round of questions, like “What have you been dreaming?” In this way, patient and doctor slowly developed a story together. The procedure took time. The word *patient*, we must remember, carries

two meanings: suffering and composure. Laennec’s tube altered the relationship. It not only amplified the heart, but narrowed it as well. Bio-logy (*bio-logos*, or “life-story”) gave way to science (*scientia*, or “knowledge”). Patients gradually surrendered their voices.

Up to the nineteenth century, physicians worked in consort with that wise person, who traditionally knew the patient best—the mother. The mother drew out the early details of her child’s story. Where does it hurt? She might ask, as she laid a hand on the forehead, or threw her arms around the child in a tight embrace, or planted a kiss to make it all better. It was the mother who first delivered the news to the doctor. After the nineteenth century, the physician took over the job, assumed the role of mother. The child’s answer to the mother’s question, “Tell me how you feel?” went from a sometimes fairly lengthy, time-consuming and rambling story, before the advent of instruments, to a simple, I feel sick, or I don’t feel well, or it hurts here. What did the story ultimately matter after Laennec? The instrument would tell the doctor whatever information he needed to have. The instrument would, so to speak, deliver the facts. It would help in quantifying illness. The stethoscope did not merely interrupt the narrative between doctor and patient, it helped break the intimate and decisive storytelling connection between mother and child. This in service of the modern doctor who got what he wanted, an efficient and instrumental relationship with the patient.

Today, a doctor—a specialist—definitely does not want a story. Rather, the doctor—and I think the verb here tells it all—the doctor *takes* a history of the patient. The stories those patients once told migrated out of the physician’s office, in roughly that same period, to become a fixture in the office of a new doctor, the psychiatrist. Doctor Freud used those pent-up stories for a new treatment that came to be known as the Talking Cure. (To

work in any efficacious way, naturally, the good talker had to search out its partner, the acute listener.) These stories were a luxury, told by adult patients who had the spare time and money to rattle on, for forty-nine minutes, in the sanctum of the psychiatrist's office. Indeed, Freud's clients turned out to be wealthy, and mostly women.

The modern, regulated, systole and diastole pulse, that tiny beacon of life flashing on and off 72 times a minute, gets rigidified in Western medicine, as we have seen, on a particular afternoon in Doctor Laennec's office in the autumn of 1816. (An English inventor produced the first metronome that same year, in 1816.) Only some thirty short years later, in 1847, the word *impulsive* enters the vocabulary as a new and negative word. The impulsive person acts, not out of cautious or deliberate reflection, but on the immediacy of the emotions—from the wrist and not the head. The impulsive person's heart is just too “amped”; it pumps overtime. But the idea of impulsiveness may reveal something more, a vestige, really, of Galen's uncontrollable, manic, even war-like little beast within each of us, just struggling to assert itself.

Support for such a theory may come from popular culture. Anthony Storr, in his book *Music and the Mind* makes the point that “the demand for accessible musical entertainment grew during the latter half of the nineteenth century . . .” I find buried in that sentence a statement about pulse in the following way. When our own internal music narrowed and even died out, people filled that void in other ways. They forged a new musical connection, this time with an externalized, man-made pulse. In other words, when the medical profession broke the nexus between child and mother—a musical break; a pneumatic break—people, young people especially, needed more than ever to recapture that full range of rocking, pulsating rhythms they recognized as their mother's. Mother is, of course, the creature who bestows on us our

own pulse. We can have no more basic connection with another human being.

The entry for *mother* takes up three full pages in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*father* occupies one). The Indo-European root for *mother* is *mat*, an extension of *ma*, “breast” (as in *mama*)—or “breast feeder.” And from that tiny root *mater*, an encapsulated history of life emerges. We get Demeter (literally, Mother of the gods), metro-polis (Athens), matriculate, and matrimony. All that is missing is death. But, then, mother is the life-giver. We must find death elsewhere.

Along with the common definition of *mother*, the word takes on scores of connotative meanings, as is said of a city, one's university, of nature, the earth, of the head of a female religious community, of church (*Mater Ecclesia*), of the womb, of wit, of water (“mother liquor”), of the names of certain parts of the brain, of certain aspects of astrology and geomancy. Recall Saddam Hussein's prescient phrase, warning George W. Bush that, by invading Iraq, the US would experience “the mother of all wars.” In the most basic matter of civilization—language itself—one speaks “a mother tongue.” And in that other world of binary language, what enables me to pound this essay out, my geek friends tell me, is a complex of processors located in the inner sanctum of my computer known affectionately as the mother board.

To turn to the more sublime, we come across the hardness of mother of pearl, the softness of mother of thyme, the absolute truth of mother naked, and the absolute nurture of mother womb. Think of the difference in calling a country a fatherland as opposed to a motherland. Since the seventeenth-century, the British have celebrated, in the middle of Lent, a holiday called Mothering Sunday. On that day, the spirit of motherhood seeps into the entire community. Children traditionally visit their parents, and everyone exchanges

presents. Julia Ward Howe mentions the holiday in her diaries.

We share our first moments with mother, at the breast, in the pulse and rhythm of sucking, and in the ingesting of liquidity. We might also call breast-time the rocking, talking, singing and nonsense-making time with mother—what I once called orality and have since expanded into *baccality*, that is, “mouthing time.” We all carry a deep-seated, ancient—and Greek, I may add—longing for a reunion with the mother of all mothers, the mythological mother, the in-spiriting mother. To sing the stories of their people, the ancient Greeks invoked the mother of the muses, Mnemosyne. Greeks imagined her as a babbling, murmuring brook, who gives the community its breath, its voice—its music. I think of her as the pulse of the tribe. “Sing to me of the man, Muse,” the *Odyssey* begins, “launch out his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus, start from where you will, sing for our time too.” The lesson is an easy one: Mother enables us to breathe. She provides our rhythm. Poetry keeps us breathing with its varied but steady meters. No etymological connection exists between *mater* and *meter*, but of course people forged one for themselves.

Here is what we hold in common—mater, mother, mothering, matrix, matter, meter. When we become disconnected not just from the person but from the concept, the *idea* of motherhood, we have removed ourselves from something terrifyingly basic. We come up against our first unsettling bout of arrhythmia, of de-cadence. What we seem to hold in common these days startles and depresses: common talk turns on hunger, poverty, disease, torture, collateral damage, destruction, and death. We have to remind ourselves who we are, what century we live in.

In a most profound way, I think we all miss what mother represents, what she offers. In the States, our time now is a time, most people would agree, of testosterone, of power

and competition, of an imperious determination to dominate peoples around the world. During the presidential campaign of 1999, the press crowed about George W. Bush’s manly, macho appeal—something about his saunter or swagger—a characterization that helped in some part to carry him into office.

The stories we began to hear after September 11 were fueled by wrath and revenge and a great deal of fear. When fear is the driver, only the courageous few manage to tell stories of community and love. Out of fear comes huddling up, closing off, shutting down, protecting against some enemy, who we imagine plotting against us every hour and every minute and every second of every day. Such stories know no joy, no respite, no leisure, and certainly no communitarian spirit. We hear instead tales of dominance and not nurture, hate and not love, revenge and not forgiveness, enclosure and not expansiveness. But we may be hopefully coming to the end of that yarn. There are signs, from various parts of the globe, that people are coming back to their senses, to the compelling power of the heart and the imagination. The weavers have returned. They have strung their looms. They come prepared to use new yarns, to spin new patterns. Let me mention a few commonalties, for they press on our opening motif, the spirit that only motherhood can provide.

As I said, mother allows us to breathe. *Infantum* in Latin means “without sound.” *Persona*, “person,” means to “sound through.” We are defined by our voice. We are made human with our breath. Again, I congratulate the Greeks for yet another invention, this time the creation of vowels, around the eighth century BC, which they introduced into what they received from Phoenician traders as a consonantal writing system. That invention made it possible for people to read silently—that is, to read *in* the rhythm of the sentences, *against* their own rhythm of breathing.

We discover in meditation that it takes very little air to actually breathe. How much breath does it take to blow something as simple as a whistle? I ask this, not as a question about early music making, but one about the power of voice. For the first time in its history, *Time Magazine*, in 2002, chose three people for its annual Person of the Year issue—three women. All three of them blew the whistle, as they say, on acts of corruption and deceit where they worked: Sherron Watkins, an Enron vice president, wrote to chairman Kenneth Lay warning him of bogus accounting practices; Coleen Rowly, an FBI staff attorney, wrote director Robert Mueller complaining that FBI officials totally thwarted her pleas to have Zacarias Moussaoui investigated; and Cynthia Cooper, an accountant at WorldCom, informed her board that she had found a cover up of 3.8 billion dollars in losses through phony bookkeeping practices.

Some recent university studies conclude that women are much more likely than men to call a halt to wrong doing when they find it. The reasons why women leap on the truth may be endless, but Americans, itching for a radical change, know the truth in their gut. In my own country, a mother, Cindy Sheehan, helped to coalesce a diffuse, inchoate anti-war sentiment, after her son was killed in Iraq, into something resembling a national movement, or at least a coalition. She joined with a women's political and spiritual conglomerate, Code Pink. In the 1960s, the Women's Strike for Peace accomplished the same thing and, according to some historians, delivered the deathblow to the House Un-American Activities Committee. For me, three women in particular helped define the key issues in the sixties. Their books appeared one year after the other: Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, in 1961; Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, in 1962; and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963. (I add here that Robert Moses, New York city's planning czar in the

sixties, dismissed Jane Jacobs and those like her in the worst way he could imagine, as "nobody but a bunch of mothers.")

Women are making themselves heard and felt in politics everywhere. In America, those bold enough have even begun to whisper about something wholly subversive. It's still a whisper and not a whistle, but if one remains very still, one can hear the words, *what about a woman for president*. It is radical but at least not revolutionary that a major network launched a new series, *Commander in Chief*, featuring a woman as President of the United States. The billboards advertising the program startled a few, and pleased many.

On September 5, 2000, for the very first time, women heads of state and government met at the United Nations. At that moment, nine countries had a woman leader: Bangladesh, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, New Zealand, Panama, Saint Lucia, San Marino, and Sri Lanka. The head of the Human Rights Commission for the United Nations is a woman; she is the former president of Ireland. The current president of Ireland is also a woman. The president of Chile is a woman, Michelle Bachelet Jeria, as is the head of Jordan, Queen Noor. In a recent election, Angela Merkel became the Federal Chancellor of Germany, and in Liberia, the new Executive President is now Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. (President Sirleaf has recently asked a New Jersey school teacher, who was born in Liberia, to become the first police chief of that country.) Taya Kaarina Holover serves as the president of Finland; Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo the president of the Philippines; Mame Madior Boye the Prime Minister of Senegal; and Valeria Ciavattia the Co-Captain Regent of San Marino. Beyond politics, in my own country's most sacred pastime, baseball, the National Baseball Hall of Fame, in February 2006, inducted not only its first woman but an African-American woman at that, Miss Effa Manley, who pitched for the Negro leagues.

We all have a stethoscope pointed at our hearts. Of one kind or another, some instrument is pointed at our vital parts. Some instrument has interrupted, or worse yet, stolen our stories from us. How can we sing a different story line from the tired tall tales that come from this particular administration or that particular corporation? I say that what we hold in common is some version of the inspiriting, pulsating Mnemosyne, the mother of the muses, and that now, more than ever, we need to invoke her power, for we need to sing into existence a brand new community.

I want to underscore the critical importance of this reinvigoration of the spirit of motherhood, which I can do best, I believe, by quoting from one of the most insightful child psychiatrists I have ever encountered, D.W. Winnicott. He apologizes, right off, for writing as a man about the subject of mothers. He admits, he says, that he can “never really know what it is like to see wrapped up over there in the cot a bit of my own self.” Nonetheless, he has a central theme, a smart and crucial central theme. Of course, every human being alive is in infinite debt to a woman, a mother. Few men, he insists, are willing to recognize that profound debt. Ignoring that fact leads to the kind of devastation that Julia Ward Howe witnessed on the battlefield. In Winnicott’s scheme, civilization can enjoy no end to war until men recognize their indebtedness to their mothers. I must quote Winnicott himself:

At a time in earliest infancy we were absolutely dependent . . . The result of such recognition of the maternal role when it comes will not be gratitude or even praise. The result will be a lessening in ourselves of fear . . . If there is no true recognition of the mother’s part, then there must remain a vague fear of dependence. This fear will sometimes take the form of a fear of woman in general or fear of a particular woman, and at other times will take on less easily recognized forms, always including the fear of domination.

Unfortunately the fear of domination does not lead groups of people to avoid being dominated; on the contrary it draws them towards a specific or chosen domination. Indeed, were the psychology of the dictator studied one would expect to find that, among other things, in his own personal struggle he is trying to control the woman whose domination he unconsciously still fears, trying to control her by accommodating her, acting for her, and in turn demanding total subjection and ‘love’.

Dictators speak. They begin in the Middle Ages, and continue shooting off their mouths for the next four hundred years. That’s what *dictare* means. Chaucer is my own delightful dictator of choice, composing his poetry out loud in front of scribes, who write it all down. By the late nineteenth century, Julia Ward Howe’s time, however, the definition of dictator changes. Dictators begin to speak with a new tone, with the authority of the absolute. They deny conversation, robbing the average citizen of his or her own voice. While they try to make conspiracy impossible, they make it inevitable. Julia Ward Howe knew this truth. That’s why she wanted to preempt the second Sunday in May, not just for her own country, but for the world. She knew how to make the pulse quicken. But, quite obviously, her scheme has not worked well. At least, not yet.

If *mother* has an antonym, *dictator* may come close—the giver of breath versus the robber of voice. Dictators depend for their livelihood on dependency. Poor dears, don’t they know that mothers know best, that dependency must come naturally? We might not expect it, but the two female justices on the Supreme Court, Sandra Day O’Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg—both of them mothers—have been speaking out on this particular issue, very nearly crossing the line and taking a political stand in public. Justice Ginsburg said recently in South Africa that only the courts stand as a safeguard “against

oppressive government and stirred-up majorities.” She reminded her audience how crucial it was for a judiciary to act judiciously. The following day, at a gathering at Georgetown University, America’s first female justice, Sandra Day O’Connor, raised up on her toes and spoke with shocking clarity about contemporary America. She declared that a judiciary afraid to stand up to elected officials can lead in one direction only, to dictatorship. She had retired from the court several months before; she was speaking to the hard-edged men who replaced her. She was speaking to us. She was speaking. Some people stopped to listen.

We might do well, in May 2006, to honor, once again, the original intent of Mothers Day, reclaiming it as an international day of disarmament and peace. Let us, above all else, acknowledge our common dependency on, and our indebtedness to, mother.

Recognition of mother will not suddenly make things all right. I know that. But it might help. It came clear to me in reading a recent homage to the folksinger, Pete Seeger, in *The New Yorker*. (Seeger’s practice of the politics of bravery his entire 88 years reminds me of Julia Ward Howe.) Pete Seeger says about his father, also a musician, a composer, that “he thought the great symphonies would save the human race.” Every person has something he or she thinks will save humanity. Maybe the world will hold together as long as people hold on to that belief.

I offer my own suggestion for saving the world, a small start, a try for something new—an infusion of a radically different spirit by returning to what we all hold in common. Can the commons pull off the uncommon? Who knows? It’s certainly thrilling to imagine that *only* the common can pull off something so extraordinary.

As Julia Ward Howe told the world over one hundred years ago, so *much* depends on

mother. As D. W. Winnicott recently reminds us, so much *depends* on mother.

The rest, I guess, depends on us.

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