



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## Mother of the World

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Assistant Minister  
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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 [information@uuneighborhood.org](mailto:information@uuneighborhood.org)

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Julia Ward Howe (May 27, 1819-October 17, 1910), little known today except as author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," was famous in her lifetime as poet, essayist, lecturer, reformer and biographer. She worked to end slavery, helped to initiate the women's movement in many states, and organized for international peace—all at a time, she noted, "when to do so was a thankless office, involving public ridicule and private avoidance."

When I was pregnant with my first child, and we found out it was a boy, I told my husband Kit what I wanted to name him. I had come up with the name long before we were married, or even engaged. If we ever have a son, I thought, I want to name him Pender. It was the name of the British Columbian Island, between Victoria and Vancouver, where Kit's mother's adoptive mother lived since the mid 20th century. The same island where Kit's parents, decades ago, first met and fell in love. The same island where, shortly after meeting Kit, I had one of the most amazing wildlife sightings of my life, within two hours of setting foot on the island: a pod of giant orca whales passed ten feet below me on the point near my in-laws' property, where, four years later, we got married. Kit's mother, who I'd only just met, pointed out one of the orca whale's fins, a fin with a distinctly jagged edge, and told me, "I've been following that whale for over 50 years."

After all that, wouldn't you name your son Pender? Thankfully, Kit loved the idea and we never had to discuss the naming of our firstborn again, it was settled. Now, it's been a different story with Pumpkin, our pregnant name for my 2nd child. We know it's a girl, and months ago I made a list of names I like. Kit's response to one of them was, "Hannah, you're a Unitarian minister, you can't name your daughter Trinity." But it was a half-hearted list anyway, because once again, I already had a name in mind from years ago, though I can't quite remember where I first encountered it - maybe while I was in Seminary, studying female deities. For many years, I thought, if I ever have a girl, I want to name her Isis.

Isis is the name of the ancient Egyptian goddess, the oldest, most beloved goddess of the world, so, the first female deity of the world with such power and acclaim. "Honey," I said, "Isis will be the perfect name, the year our daughter is born is the same year of Egypt's liberation!" Later I will tell you a little more about her, but for now one of them was that, not surprisingly, as premiere female deity, she represented all things motherhood - she was the giver of all life, and hence, the Mother of the World.

Three years ago for my husband's birthday I bought him a part fantasy, part historical-fiction novel about Cleopatra called *Hand of Isis*, by Jo Graham, thinking, perhaps this will plant the seed in his mind. If you're interested in Cleopatra, and her time of reign, it's a fabulous book. Cleopatra was considered by her people to actually be Isis - back then Egypt's rulers manifested their gods. Kit liked the book, and his Mother loved it, when she came to visit, she read it. When I got pregnant, and suspected it was a girl, I read it. It made me want to learn more about Cleopatra, and conveniently, one of the New York Times' Best Ten Books last year was the Cleopatra biography by Stacy Schiff. It's not nearly as fun to read as the historical fiction, but it did make me realize, "Honey, we should name our daughter Cleo, so she could be . . . Cleo Petrie!"

Because . . . sadly, my husband has only wrinkled his nose at the name, Isis. More on that later. I tell you all this stuff because I've always felt that names are important. I've bought into some of the pop psychology studies that say the name of a child affects her personality, affects her whole trajectory in life. I want to give my daughter a name that sets her on her way and communicates to her, you have strength, the power of a goddess - you can do whatever you want!

Names are important in the same way that words are important - their status in language reflects their status in reality. In thinking about feminism today through the lens of motherhood, I've reflected that motherhood has become something of a target in recent times, and that even the word *mother*, in some parts of the world, has been demoted to a swear word.

I'm thinking of our neighbor, Mexico, where positive or negative slang spoken by men can hinge on how you use the word *madre*. There's a book about it published last November called *Madre: Perilous Journeys with a Spanish Noun*, by linguistic anthropologist Liza Bakewell. For example, *De poca madre* (of little mother) means, it's great. "It goes like this," Bakewell writes, "unique, singular, happened all by itself, with little if any maternal supervision. Therefore, 'great.' " Hmmm - the less mother the better, I see. And in other *madre* idioms, the translation equates disaster and can't be uttered from the pulpit. This is a country that worships the mother deity Guadalupe similar to how Isis was worshipped in Egypt, and where most men worship their own mothers, so it's complicated. It's also a narco state, wracked with the violence of a drug war that has claimed 35,000 lives. I've heard it claimed that the drug violence is in response to Mexican women's feminist progress, such as their entry into the workforce. Maybe that sounds far-fetched, but the macho lingo serves the claim.

In our country, the most recent example of motherhood being something of a target was the overblown response to Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. I haven't read the book, I don't plan to, but my understanding is that it's a memoir, not a parenting manual, and that, right or wrong, Chua comes to terms with how her own mother shaped her. It's about one example of how mothers affect their daughters' mothering.

The point I'm trying to get to is that, in the context of today's feminism, motherhood has a confused status. And what is this feminism of today I speak of, what is that? Indeed. Feminism itself has a confused status!

Here's my take on feminism today. First, the bad news: it's lost relevance for a number of reasons. In the Western world, feminism is half taken for granted, half at a stand-still as it slowly struggles to redefine itself in the 21st century. Speaking for my own generation, I know I don't fully comprehend the vast gains women have made since I was born in 1973. I'm also aware of the stat that women my age are currently bread-winning at a higher rate than their male counterparts; an interesting new normal has quietly come to be. And yet, there are many unresolved matters of gender inequality that persist - the male domination of the highest positions of power in society is just one example.

And it doesn't help that feminism, in the last two or three decades has been, paradoxically, ghettoized to academia. In other words, discourse of the ivory tower has little impact on the ground, where the masses live their lives. Paradoxically, there was effort to prevent this from happening, by empowering the voices of women of color and different ethnicities to share their own experiences of womanhood - so, a lot of African-American, Latina, and Asian women wrote their own feminism books to be read by . . . women pursuing advanced academic degrees.

This is all to say . . . so what? Feminism has become something of a dirty word, relegated to the liberal pantheon of elitist terms. So the bad news is that's a strong headwind for a redefining feminism to assert itself against.

But the good news is, however slowly and unsteadily, feminism is redefining itself. It's about the freedom to determine our own destiny, however traditional, progressive, or even fluffy that destination may be. Let me illustrate this point. I first heard about Tina Fey's book when she was interviewed on the radio program, *Fresh Air* with Terri Gross. Tina Fey made this very point I'm trying to make now, that feminism is breaking new ground, challenging its old definitions. She recalls a story-line from her show *30 Rock* where her character is confronting another character who is boy-crazy with a bubble-gum voice that, in essence, "you don't have to act like such a bimbo, liberate yourself!" But the bimbo character is like, 'but this is not only who I am, it's who I want to be, and I'm happy about it. Deal with it.' And it dawns on the Tina Fey character, as it may very well be dawning on a lot of traditionally staunch feminists that part of feminism today is about honoring women's choices, regardless of what we think of those choices. Choosing to be a happy-go-lucky slut is as feminist a choice as refusing to shave your legs. Along the same lines, choosing to be a stay-at-home mom is as feminist as climbing a career ladder. As long as a woman is making the best choice for herself, she is empowered.

This applies to men, too. Feminism today says that anyone should be able to make the best choice for themselves, free of oppressive gender roles. I don't know who the author of this feminist poster is, but some of its statements sum this up well: "For every girl who is tired of acting weak when she is strong, there is a boy tired of appearing strong when he feels vulnerable . . . for every boy for whom competition is the only way to prove his masculinity, there is a girl who is called unfeminine when she competes . . . for every girl who takes a step toward her liberation, there is a boy who finds the way to freedom a little easier."

This is about freedom at its best, transcendent of judgment, but best of all, limitless in its manifestations. And now I get to return to telling you about Isis, because one of her best qualities that made her so beloved by men and women alike, was how freely she could embrace the complex spectrum of human experience and emotion. The following description found in an academic book about Isis in the Ancient World hearkens to this freedom and variety:

"Clearly the figure of Isis showed strong contrasts. Of her it could be stated not only that she loved war but also that she loathed hostility. She could be either tender-hearted and loving or stern and angry. Just as in her family conduct she could maintain strict chastity so outside the home she might (like the Mother of the Gods) indulge in what from the Christian point of view is gross obscenity. She would burst into sobs at the death of her husband, but would not hide her maternal happiness as she suckled her babe at her breast."

A feminism newly defining itself is also playing a role in this era of middle-east liberation from oppressive regimes. It is very appropriate that it began in Egypt, that Egypt should be referred to as the bell-weather state for how other nations undergoing the same process, like Libya, Yemen, and Syria, may follow. Because Egypt was one of the first civilizations in recorded history to honor strong roles for women in society, I see this as a hopeful sign that we may be returning to some badly needed ancient wisdom in today's world. In the book about Cleopatra, Schiff says, "It is difficult to determine which came first, whether Isis accounted for the supremacy of women in Egypt, or whether the [queens in power] reinforced her eminence. Certainly she introduced an equality of the sexes."

The Egypt of Cleopatra's time couldn't be more different from the Egypt that is struggling so hard to redefine itself today. Part of this redefining process is confronting the wreckage of women's cultural status in Egypt, where harassment and rape are prevalent. Not only does feminism honor the most enduring democratic principles of freedom and self-determination, it will always champion non-violence and human rights, and freedom from oppression. The clash of these ideals with just how far Egypt has to go was encapsulated by the violent gang-rape of white journalist Lara Logan by Egyptian men, as she was covering the story of Egypt's revolution. She nearly died as a result of the brutal attack, and yet, with fortitude and grace, Lara Logan told her entire story on 60 Minutes last Sunday. It was a feminist act, to draw attention to just how badly women can be treated in today's world – by doing so she bridged women of the west with women of the east in an unbelievably brave act of solidarity.

It's true that today's feminism lacks a united front, that its power appears in these unpredictable bursts and gasps. It's true that today's world gives us plenty of reasons to be pessimistic about its prognosis. But I'm okay with clinging to one of my most cherished neo-feminist ideals, which is simply to remain positive, to focus on the positive. Six or seven years ago my friend got me a gift subscription to the feminist magazine *Bust* – the new *Ms.* of our times. I poo-pooed it – I thought it subscribed too much to the ideological anger of the old feminism that I rejected. But one interview in the magazine with Icelandic artist Bjork allowed this stale ideal to be challenged. In effect she said, there's too much anger in feminism - we need to focus on the positive, on being constructive.

She's right – anger has its time and place, but it's not an effective tool for bringing about the bigger changes we want to see in the world, changes that only occur when people can really listen to each other. Rather than focus on the negative, on the anger and violence, I choose to focus on the positive, on the hopeful signs and happenings of our times.

You know, there was some kind of big news this past week, but . . . it's not nearly as positive as some of the other tidbits of news I heard. For example, I heard that a Mexican poet organized a three-day peace march from Cuernavaca to Mexico City. Hundreds of people arrive today, right now, in a public square, demanding that enough is enough with the violence of this drug war. And I heard that in the midst of the chaos and slaughter of protestors in Syria, there was a peace march, of mostly women and children, waving olive branches.

And personally, I'm focused on all the excitement and love I feel for this little girl I'm about to bring into one crazy but beautiful world – a world struggling to redefine itself. I've redefined how this little girl will be named, but it wasn't a struggle. When I told my husband Kit my reasons for wanting to name her Isis, because I wanted her to know she has strength and can do whatever she wants, he said, "but honey, it's not the name that communicates that, *we* teach her that – as her parents." And it gave me peace – feminist peace – to realize that my husband was right. So instead, we're going to name her . . . well, you'll find out. It's a name that honors the women on my side of the family. And it feels like the right choice.