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OPINIONS & VIEWPOINTS



HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

current events through a historical lens

Dr. James Finck, USAO History Professor

Mother's Day: An Appeal to Motherhood

By James Finck, Ph. D.

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." This is the opening line of the most famous song to come out the American Civil War, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Its author, Julia Ward Howe, is best known for her work as a poet and abolitionist. However, she is also partially responsible for Mother's Day, even though for her the purpose of the day had a much different meaning.

Born in 1819, Howe came from a wealthy New York family and, as such, she traveled in the same circle as famous authors such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Soon she became known for her own poetry which was often social commentary. During this time Howe became interested in the abolitionist's movement and women's rights. However, while she believed slavery was wrong, she did not believe in Black equality and so did not always get along with more prominent abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison.

During the Civil War in 1862 she visited Washington D.C. and met President Lincoln. It was on this trip that she wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." There are many stories as to her inspiration, but my favorite, so let's pretend it's true, is that after visiting a hospital during the day and seeing the ghastly horrors of war, she woke up that from a dream and wrote down the lyrics to this song which includes lines like, "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, While God is marching on." The words were put to the music from an earlier released abolitionist song "John Brown's Body," and it was adopted as the unofficial anthem of the Union Army. (Side note: the version I use in class is The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square's 1960 Grammy Award-winning version. Trust me, it's moving.)

After the war, Howe could now focus her attention on her other passion: women's rights. While influential, she broke with more prominent feminists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and formed the American Woman's Suffrage Association with Lucy Stone. The organization welcomed men to join, and supported the Fifteenth Amendment which gave Black men the right to vote before women.

In the 1870s, with the start of the Franco-Prussian War, Howe began to turn much of her attention to pacifism. Having seen the effects of war at home, she did not want to see more women suffer. As fathers, husbands and sons left home to die on distant battlefields, Howe believed women bore a brunt of the war. She believed women could and should be influential in stopping the madness of war. It was at this time that Howe wrote her second most famous poem, "Appeal to womanhood throughout the world" or sometimes known as the "Mother's Day Proclamation."

"Arise, then... women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: 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 been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We,

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 bosom of the 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 vindicate 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 council.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take council with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after his own kind the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

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."

Howe called for a Mother's Day of Peace to be celebrated on June 2nd of every year, but her vision of Mother's Day is much different than what we have today. In fact, the modern Mother's Day is not what the other major founders envisioned either.

Howe's Mother's Day of Peace lasted only a few years, but at the same time another reformer, Ann Reeves Jarvis from West Virginia, had been promoting her idea of Mother's Day. For years she had been working to fix the high infant mortality rate in Appalachia and wanted a day to educate women on proper sanitation. After the war she also saw her Mother's Day as a day of peace to unite women from both sides of the war.

In the end it was Jarvis' daughter Anna M. Jarvis who pushed Mother's Day as a national holiday. After her mother's death in 1905 she saw Mother's Day as less a service day and one more for celebrating mothers. Her first Mother's Day was held on May 10, 1907, in West Virginia. The tradition held and Mother's Day became the second Sunday in May and made into law by Woodrow Wilson in 1914. The original founders may not have hoped for what Mother's Day is today. Even Anna Jarvis came out against it as it became commercialized. In fact, Mother's Day has become the second largest spending holiday after only Christmas. Yet, it is still an important day that honors a very special women in our lives, our moms. I for one am grateful to have such a day. My mom probably deserves more than just one day for putting up with my three siblings and me. I love you, Mom. Thanks for everything. And to all the moms out there who have sacrificed so much to take care of us all, thank you and happy Mother's Day.

James Finck, Ph.D. is a professor of history at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma and writes for the Southwest Ledger. You can follow Historically Speaking on Facebook or at Historicallyspeaking.blog.

A Word, Please

By June Casagrande

In all your years of hanging around with English speakers, you probably never heard someone say, "Come by the office and talk to myself" or "Would someone please tell myself what's going on?"

But throw in another person and suddenly people will use "myself" to do jobs they wouldn't let it do alone: "Come by the office and talk to Bill or myself," "Please tell Irma and myself what's going on."

It's strange.

"Myself" is a reflexive pronoun, part of a small word club that comprises only "yourself," "herself," "ourselves" and others ending in "self." Technically, these reflexive pronouns have one job: They're objects that refer back to the subject of the sentence.

"I sent myself an email." Here, the subject of the sentence is the speaker, "I," and that person is sending the email to that same person. In "Send yourself an email," the implied subject of the imperative verb is "you." The reflexive pronoun "yourself" refers back to that person.

The same is true no matter the subject: He sent himself an email. They sent themselves an email.

Notice how unnatural it would be to use a reflexive pronoun to refer to anyone but the subject, like if you sent an email to a friend, you wouldn't say "I sent himself an email." You would say you sent it to "him" because the recipient and the sender, in this case, are not the same person. "You sent themselves an email," "We sent herself an email," are clearly wrong because they require simple object pronouns, not reflexive pronouns.

The opposite is also true: "I saw me in the mirror," "He got him fired," "You bought you a new sweater." Regular object pronouns just don't work when you need to refer back to the subject.

So that's the job — the only official job — of reflexive pronouns. Yet that's not the only way they're used, as we saw in examples like "Talk to Bill or myself" above. And that's the unusual, frustrating thing about grammar: It makes its own rules — and keeps remaking them all the time. That's why reflexive pronouns like "myself" have more than one function.

As Merriam-Webster's dictionary explains, the reflexive pronoun "myself" is often used where "I" might be expected," for example, "others and myself continued to press for legislation."

The lexicographers at Merriam-Webster also point out that people will often reach for "myself" when they need a pronoun to immediately follow "as," "than" or "like." The classic example, "people such as myself," seems like a pretty good choice compared to the awkward sounding "people such as I" and "people such as me."

"Myself" is sometimes used as an intensifier, as in, "I, myself, never cared for that TV show." In that use, it's similar to constructions you'll find in some other languages, like the French "moi, je," meaning, "me, I."

And of course, as Merriam's also recognizes, sometimes people just like to plug in "myself" for plain-old "me" even in cases where "me" would work as well or better.

Reflexive pronouns other than "myself" can show up doing these jobs sometimes, too. But "myself" is the most popular, which I personally suspect has to do with English speakers' fear that "me" is improper in sentences like "Speak to Bill or me." It's not. But I understand why "myself" might feel more proper or more formal.

If you find yourself naturally reaching for "myself" in certain situations, you don't have to worry you're making a bad choice, though some people may think you're using subpar English.

"Critics have frowned on these uses since about the turn of the century, probably unaware that they serve a definite purpose," Merriam's advises. "Users themselves are as unaware as the critics — they simply follow their instincts. These uses are standard."

June Casagrande is author of "The Joy of Syntax: A Simple Guide to All the Grammar You Know You Should Know." She can be reached at JuneTCN@aol.com.



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