

LEADERSHIP LIVES

EXPLORING LEADERSHIP / NAVIGATING LIFE

Putting Your Talents to Use

Lessons from the Author of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*

1. Early Talent, When Encouraged, Can Become a Powerful Force for Good

Julia showed a flair for writing from a young age. Her father and influential friends (including newspaper editor Charles King) supported her early literary efforts. She inherited her poetic gift from her mother, a published poet.

Lesson: Natural talent combined with encouragement and opportunity can grow into something far greater than anyone expects — especially when it is later directed toward a meaningful cause.

2. Choose (or Build) a Partnership Based on Shared Values

In 1843, Julia married Samuel Gridley Howe, a physician, reformer, and freedom fighter who was 18 years her senior. They shared a passionate commitment to the abolition of slavery. Samuel had already fought for Greek independence and founded the Perkins School for the Blind.

Lesson: A strong partnership built on aligned values and mutual respect can multiply your impact. Working together toward a common purpose is far more powerful than working alone.

3. Use Your Gifts in Service of Something Larger Than Yourself

Julia was a talented writer and poet. Instead of writing only for personal fame or pleasure, she used her gift to support the anti-slavery movement — contributing poems to abolitionist publications and helping edit an anti-slavery newspaper with her husband.

Lesson: Your talents become most meaningful when you direct them toward causes greater than personal success. Writing, speaking, creating, or leading in service of justice or humanity gives your work lasting purpose.

4. Stay Engaged and Active Even When Progress Is Slow

The Howes were deeply involved in the long, difficult fight against slavery — from opposing the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) and the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) to supporting anti-slavery politicians like Charles Sumner. They worked for years before the Civil War began.

Lesson: Meaningful change often takes decades of steady effort. Staying engaged during long periods of frustration or slow progress is essential.

5. Be Ready to Act When the Moment Arrives

In November 1861, Julia visited Washington, D.C., and saw Union troops singing the marching song "John Brown's Body." That night, she woke up inspired and wrote new lyrics to the same tune in the early morning hours on Sanitary Commission stationery.

Lesson: Great opportunities often come unexpectedly. The key is to be prepared — through experience, values, and skill — so you can respond quickly and effectively when the moment presents itself.

6. One Inspired Act Can Have Enormous Ripple Effects

Julia wrote The Battle Hymn of the Republic in a single night. It was published in The Atlantic Monthly in February 1862 and quickly became the unofficial anthem of the Union cause. President Lincoln loved it and famously asked for it to be sung again at a major event in 1864.

Lesson: A single creative act — born from deep conviction and timely inspiration — can far outlive its creator and influence millions. Never underestimate the power of one well-timed contribution.

7. Turn Personal Experience into Universal Meaning

Julia transformed what she saw and felt during her visit to the troops (the sight of soldiers, the sound of their marching song, the weight of the war)

into powerful, universal lyrics that spoke of justice, sacrifice, and divine purpose.

Lesson: The most impactful work often comes from translating your personal observations and emotions into something that resonates with a much wider audience.

8. A Life of Service Can Continue and Expand Over Decades

After writing the Battle Hymn, Julia Ward Howe did not stop. She became a leading advocate for women's suffrage, peace, and other social reforms. She lived a long, active life of public service well into her 90s.

Lesson: One major achievement does not have to be the end of your contributions. A life committed to service and growth can continue evolving and making a difference for many years.

9. Privilege Carries Responsibility

Born into a wealthy New York family with deep roots in American history, Julia used her education, connections, and resources to support causes she believed in — rather than living a life of comfort and detachment.

Lesson: Advantages in life (wealth, education, social position) are best used when they are directed toward helping others and advancing justice.

10. Words Can Inspire and Unite People in Powerful Ways

The Battle Hymn of the Republic gave the Union cause a moral and spiritual voice. Its stirring language helped soldiers and civilians feel they were part of a righteous struggle.

Lesson: Well-crafted words — whether in speeches, writing, songs, or leadership — have the power to inspire, unite, and give meaning to difficult times.