# Motherhood and the Theological Pie (or Crisis of Generativity: A Theological Issue)

*— by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore*

I am a middle-class Protestant seminary professor and feminist theologian; I am also a wife and mother of three sons, seven, four and two years old. It is the clash of these commitments that provoked these reflections and indeed, the writing of the manuscript, *Crisis of Generativity: Theological Issue*. . . . . The book was literally born along with my children, almost as inevitable and yet as precarious as their lives. The one would not have happened without the other; at the very same time the book barely survived the children as they its unforeseen demands. Or so it sometimes seemed. It is in the eye of this storm over my attention that the core ideas germinated, crystalized, and cried to be picked up and heard. . . . .

As a white feminist mother with Protestant convictions, I stand upon several thresholds, caught between cultures without a cohesive culture, neither inside nor wholly outside the traditions and cultures that have held me and those that have liberated me. Despite my best intentions, I still wrestle with the resilient cultural ideals of the "Father-Knows-Best" family that grasped the heart of America in the 1950s with a fierce tenacity and at the same time, with new, still sketchily drawn ideals of working women.

For the most part, the task of arbitrating the contradictions between cultures has been up to individuals. My own efforts have been strained at several points. Daily I get entangled in the opposition between public and private life. On the one hand, my vocation as devoted mother collides head on with my religious and feminist hopes for justice and equality and a "public" world not structured for and even hostile to children; on the other hand, my vocation as aspiring professor clashes with my religious and maternal desires for creation, nurturance and sustenance in the "private" world of birthday parties and school schedules.

I face a double bind. My heritage as a Christian feminist mother involves a forceful dual disinheritage. First I question marriage and motherhood and fear the entrapping snares of domesticity, *and* then I find myself questioning tactics for success in a male-defined work place. . . . .

What would new motherhood, new fatherhood look like? What would a new work world look like? These simple questions unfold into a vicious series of questions: How can we adjudicate the nurturing standards of the 1950s and the rigid standards of our fiercely competitive work places or should we overthrow them? If we overthrow them, how is one to make a life that has no precedent and that, seemingly, robs one of the support, validation, and guidance of the disparate traditions of both motherhood and feminism? Can one be a mother and still retain one's intellectual, professional personality? On the other hand, how does the ideal of equality in the workplace fare next to the reality of the delight many mothers take in relationship with their children? Can the dehumanizing parameters that have defined private and public life, segregating women and men, work and love along rigid gender lines, be refashioned or are they indelibly cemented into human psyche and society? What, if anything, do theology and church traditions have to say about all this?

At this particular juncture in religious history, American religious traditions in general are struggling to reckon with the imperative to recognize gender equality in all human relationships, in love *and* work. On the other hand, in society at large recent attempts to move women into work and men into families, with little recourse to the reconsideration of religious traditions and doctrines, have failed in many respects. Try as we might, American society cannot secure a full generative life for men and women without serious reconsideration of prevalent models and definitions of generativity.

While the term "generativity," first proposed by psychologist Erik Erikson, is neither familiar or easy to grasp, it

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remains an apt concept for our consideration. In this single word we find embodied a religious aspiration for a fulfilling adulthood that includes two aspects of human life that various theological traditions have long honored—meaningful vocation and fruitful procreation. Generativity means an encompassing orientation to a life of productivity, creativity, and procreativity. Although Erikson understood the term as strictly psychological, the term has important kinship with theological doctrines of creation, procreation, vocation and redemption.

Broadly speaking, Roman Catholicism has sanctioned procreation—"be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28)—and Protestantism has sanctioned vocation—"be fruitful and subdue the earth; till it and keep it (Gen. 1:28; 2:5, 15). Roman Catholic tradition has long affirmed the procreative capacities and requirements of human existence, associating these almost totally with physical reproductive processes. With the Reformation, Protestant traditions sanctioned the special religous vocation of all of life's work and fashioned a powerful work ethic that bestowed salvific powers on human labor. Work was understood as a direct expression of a unique human dignity and an affirmation of divine election.

But for many important reasons, both doctrines and ethics have largely lost their power and meaning in the last several decades of this century. Abiding by their commands no longer assures the promised abundancy of life. The Protestant work ethic, taken over by a corporate and largely male industrial work force, has degenerated from a communal ideal to an individualized compulsive workaholism focused on this worldly productivity and acquisition. And since the 1960s, the Roman Catholic procreative ethic has had to recognize the equal, if not greater, importance of the personal relationship of mutuality and fidelity in sexual, marital commitments. In both cases, part of the problem is the almost total dismissal of the sanctity of women's experience as women and as mothers. Both traditions have long collapsed a woman's vocational and procreational roles into a single monochromatic function: the social role of motherhood. A woman's work and love are restricted to children and family; a man's to his work. Under the resilient reign of these religious metaphors of human fulfillment, men and women in the twentieth-century parcelled up the generative tasks of public work and private love, productivity and procreativity between themselves to the dangerous point of impoverishing and endangering both domains as well as themselves and society at large.

Mainline Protestant traditions have been particularly silent. In contrast to more conservative churches, most people in these traditions now admit that fathers don't always know best; but they haven't determined who does, if fathers don't, or, more precisely, they no longer know exactly what is best. Many people in the pews, especially people under fifty, consider theological doctrines of male headship and female submission, narrowly extrapolated from Ephesians 5:22, wrong; women and men are equal before God. But exactly what this means for the common life of work and love in churches, in families, and in jobs is less clear. Women are elders, even ministers, but who runs the Sunday school program now?

Protestant heritage has undoubtedly shaped convictions about a worthwhile life. I can readily identify four premises that have crept into my living and being: 1) family and parenthood are valued as vocations in their own right, as worthy or even more worthy than celibate religious life; 2) love and children are signs of God's gift and blessing; 3) work is valued as a way people establish, develop and perfect themselves and never simply as a means for making money; and at the very same time, 4) the call to follow God relativizes all familial and vocational commitments as secondary to the coming of the kingdom and the new ecclesia with its reconstituted family of another sort.

But I know these four ideals as much from intellectual pursuits as from a clear memory of lessons taught and learned explicitly and consciously in churches. And there is little in current mainline tradition that gives real guidance in the midst of life's daily throes. Even worse, a great deal I have learned about exhaustive self-sacrifice, sinful self-assertion, the trappings of embodiment, and about the place of women and mothers in biblical stories and religious traditions—even the Protestant dismissal of Mary's role as mother of God and of feminine images of the deity—serves me very poorly indeed. The male theologians who have speculated about the nature of fulfillment and religious symbols have been far removed from the experiences of mothers and the immediate demands of the youngest generation. The very success that gives them voice and prestige depends on their leaving child care and home care to others as an essential requisite. Religious images of work and love reflect this detached state of its foremost religious thinkers.

In a word, beneath the middle-class scuffle over gender roles and child care are fundamental questions about the generative life of work and love that carry implications for American society as a whole. Theological doctrines of love, self-sacrifice, creation, procreation, and vocation must begin to respond to women and men who want to work in fulfilling ways *and* raise children. Christian feminist theology stands in a particularly good place to revise the recipes for motherhood and the theological pie, but as of yet, has mostly steered clear of the kitchen and sometimes for good reason. . . . .

A feminist maternal theological evaluation of doctrines of love and work necessarily builds and expands on two essential insights of feminist theology. First, theological and moral reflection begins with a thick description of human experience that gives privileged voice to the underside, the oppressed, the outcast who often struggle to hear their voices. This commitment plays back on the voices of feminists themselves and argues for the necessity of listening to new voices—the voices of women of color, the voices of those who mother, and others. Second, theological doctrines and cultural ideals of love as self-sacrifice have ignored and betrayed the experiences of women and mothers. . . . . A reconsideration of maternal needs will force a different reading of sacrificial love. Sacrificial love must be reconceived as a necessary but not inevitable means to the greater end of genuine mutuality. In Beverly Harrison's words, so-called "mere mutuality" is in actuality "love in its deepest radicality. . . so *radical* that many of us have yet to learn to bear it."

For women of color mothering and nurturing are vitally important; as Delores Williams observes, "womanist reality begins with mothers relating to their children." What does womanist reality see from this vantage point? The demand to make "a way out of no way," in Alice Walker's words of dedication to her mother. But this demand to nurture great numbers of people, exemplified by Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and others, is not usually mutually exclusive of the demand for black women's self-love and love for each other or without the expectation of female-male equity in the tasks of survival and fruition.

The basic impulse to "have it all"—the primary moral accusation thrown at many white working mothers condensed to one pithy phrase—is not the problem. Indeed, this impulse, rightly understood, gets at the core of human need and fulfillment. The pejorative accusation of wanting to "have it all" has tricked women into a guilty disclaimer of a valid human desire to work and to love as the essence of human creation and creativity. Rather all persons deserve good work and good love as meaningful human endeavors in themselves

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and the two are intimately linked. *We should love our work and work at love.* The phrase "doing it all" does better justice to this normative position than "having it all" which connotes a harmful possession of our work and our love. We do not own our vocational capabilities; our children and our relationships are not commodities or products. Contrary to these materialistic views typical of our market economy, our work and love are not something we possess, have, sell, or exchange; they are something we are and do with limited resources and lives. All women and men deserve to "do it all" in a limited sense, that is, to enjoy the fruits of their labors of love and their love of labor.

To ailing religious images and societal structures of generativity, a feminist theology that draws upon the experience of mothering can say this much: Ideals and structures for a generative life must encompass generativity in work *and* generativity in love. The demands and rewards of each for both men and women deserve distinct respect, status, and reward. The values of both generativity in work *and* generativity in love are different, yet equally valuable. Motherhood and children complicate and then, happily, reorient the entire question of abundant love and work and questions of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Liberation based upon sameness as the standard for equality flounders once the pregnant body and the child announce themselves as potential differences. We need a richer conception of equality in work and love and richer depiction of liberation. Can we articulate and enact more adequate ideals of human equality, generativity, and fulfillment that make the flourishing of mothers and children a possibility and even a priority? This question comprises the next frontier of liberation. Until we explore it more satisfactorily, initial efforts to alter public policy or innovative schemes to consolidate new gender roles remain partial and limited.

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# Book Notes

*Bread Afresh, Wine Anew: Sermons by Disciples Women* edited by Joan Campbell and David Polk. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1991. Reviewed by Stephanie McLemore, House Scholar and first year Ministry student.

*Bread Afresh, Wine Anew: Sermons by Disciples Women* offers a fresh perspective to the sermon genre. The thirty-two contributors have a variety of backgrounds—students, pastors, professors, and administrators—and represent several age groups and backgrounds. Two authors, Stephanie Paulsell and Jane McAvoy, are recent House Scholars.

Although women have been ordained in the Disciples Church for over one hundred years, their voices still struggle to be heard. The Disciple tradition is continually enriched through the contributions of women. "Our insight into the enduring good news is significantly expanded when we are exposed to witnesses whose voices have all too often been stifled or relegated to the kitchen." Although the sermons span a tremendous range of theological, ethical, and spiritual topics, they are unified in their voice. I was struck by the centrality of narrative in the preaching styles. Women do not have a monopoly on experiential preaching, however, the use of storytelling radiates power in their words. The gospel is always shaped through personal experience, cultural and historical lenses and the women here make their voice in the gospel heard.

I was given this book by my pastor as a graduation gift as I prepared to come to the University of Chicago to study for ministry. I think that she wanted me to gain a sense of validity and importance to the work I was about to begin. She wanted to affirm the role played by women in the church and in the gospel message. This collection makes those statements. Female preachers "all have one thing very much in common: They bring a fresh perspective to bear on an old familiar story."

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*Death in His Saddlebags* by Dan B. Genung (House Alumnus, 1938). Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1992. Reviewed by Kristin Johnson, House Scholar and first year Ministry student.

Filled with family folklore and a generous mix of sentimentality and adventure, Genung weaves together this tale about his grandfather, Charles B. Genung, from memoirs, unpublished letters, and stories passed down to him when he was a child. It is the story of Charley, a brave Arizona pioneer, his experiences in the Arizona territory, and perhaps most importantly the lives of friends and family he touched along the way.

Yet, more is preserved in this book than the memory of one man; Genung reveals the untold stories of countless men and women struggling through the hardships of pioneer life. In addition the reader also glimpses from the inside the often tenuous relationships between these pioneers and the Native Americans and Mexicans also living off the land. Charley became a friend of the Yavapai tribe, and his grandson does justice to their memory by naming those responsible for the "Wickenburg Massacre," for which the Yavapai had been wrongly blamed. Genung also relates the truth about the last days of the Appache Kid and various other stories which have become legend through years of telling.

Genung's prose is engaging and his characters seem authentic and true to their real-life personas. It is illustrated with several black and white photographs. Genung has recounted a colorful story which will certainly keep the memory of his grandfather alive. This book will be helpful for anyone interested in exploring the history of the Arizona territory, and just plain fun for anyone who likes old-fashioned adventure stories.

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*From Wasteland to Promised Land: Liberation Theology for a Post-Marxist World* by Robert V. Andelson and James M. Dawsey. Maryknoll, New

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