

Let the Children Come

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

"I WAS 'LIBERATED,'" remarked another preschool mother as we dropped our boys off at the door, "until I had children." Her passing remark captures a troublesome phenomenon. Her experience is not unique. In the march toward freedom, the women's movement wrestled with the issue of children but did not ultimately know what to do with children. Overturning gender roles and challenging the assignment of women to the home and men to the job, it never ironed out the details of child care and could not shake the reigning vision of adulthood, in which the model adult labors at work but spends little time with children. A lop-sided, one-dimensional notion of fulfillment which idolizes material productivity governs ideals for men and now for women. Children don't count for much in this view. But like the preschool mother above, many "liberated" women still try to fit them into their lives.

What exactly is going on here? Given the controversial nature of the modern family, simple solutions are not forthcoming. But silence is a mistake. We need to understand the sources of the silence on children, and we need to understand what children

teach us. Theological and moral reflection cannot offer realistic standards of human achievement without making way for children. Most of the men who work in these fields have been far removed from the immediate demands of the youngest generation. Feminists, then, have much to contribute in identifying the voices of children and mothers as central to the work of theology and ethics. Let the children come; let them enter a male-structured world that is ignorant of both the heavy demands as well as the values of child rearing. Let the children shake up our neat categories and force alternative visions.

Why Are Mothers So Silent?

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, whether the topic was premature birth (Buchanan 1986), abortion (McCormick 1989), or alternative reproductive technologies (Lauritzen 1991; May 1988; McCormick 1987), *Second Opinion* has issued articles by men featuring women's struggles connected with having children—a scenario not unique to this publication. In each case I have wondered, Where are the women, and what do they think? Why don't women have a "public" voice on these "private" issues so very close to their hearts?¹ Now, with three children of my own, I have some idea.

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The Fauborg of Toil and Suffering. Tempera painting by Georges Rouault, 1912.

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LET THE CHILDREN COME

One absolutely crucial source of the silence lies in what philosopher Sara Ruddick describes as the "passions of maternity," which are "so sudden, intense, and confusing" that we remain ignorant of and fail to deepen the thought that develops from mothering (Ruddick [1980] 1983:213). Putting aside my four-month-old to muse upon the category of four-month-olds is emotionally, even physically wrenching at times, the desire to hold blinding me to the desirability of pursuing the topic in the form of academic public discourse.

Serious involvement in child bearing and rearing involves a constraint, an internal and, in some ways, unrelenting tug of attachment: "You may close your eyes, . . . teach courses, run errands, . . . think about objects, subjects." But a mother is marked by a tenacious link to another that begins at conception and never goes away, French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has observed (1986:167). Pregnancy epitomizes this constraint and division.² The pregnant self is a multiple self. In the pregnant body the self and the other coexist. The other is both my self and not my self, hourly, daily becoming more separate until that which was mine becomes irrevocably another. My sons, little knowing, take that which was mine and venture forth into the world. As long as the woman has the womb that bears the child, we cannot ignore a biological inclination behind maternal investment (Rossi 1977:24).

Thinking about children reflects the secondary nature of all such deliberation. Children, particularly during the first few months and years, call forth a sense of immediacy, a visceral response to the cry of the moment. Children need one now, not after one has read, researched, and postulated. Abstraction obscures what is indispensable—attentive answer to

acute need. President of the Children's Defense Fund Marian Wright Edelman describes the tensions of writing a book on children. Granting that effective action requires analysis, she declares nonetheless: "I am less interested in formulating theoretical frameworks . . . than I am in feeding, clothing, healing, housing, and educating as many American

children as soon as possible" (Edelman 1987:viii). We cannot begin to estimate the amount of creative energy squandered in this daily clash between work and love.³ Anyone who wishes to reflect upon children out of direct participation in their care encounters a lively personal and ethical conflict between practical, concrete commitments to offspring and pursuit of theoretical work or indeed work of any kind.

A further constriction in the vicious circle of women's silence: the heavy physical, emotional, and spiritual demands of "reproducing the world" and, once it has been reproduced, maintaining it (O'Brien 1989). Women are busy minding the fort. On children women have much to say but little time, less energy, and almost no voice. Children rapidly consume these elements. This essay itself was hammered out in small pieces between minor crises in tending my children; writing it has been an arduous task that illustrates the nature and complexity of the silence. My "liberation" and that of most middle- and upper-middle-class women to perform these necessary (and sometimes satisfying and creative) tasks simply shift the weight from one group of exploited women—mothers—to another group—the babysitter, housekeeper, cleaning woman, day-care staff, teacher.

Women know the strain of "holding up half the sky" or often more than their share. In *A Room of One's*

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Own Virginia Woolf, facetiously reprimanding women for their lesser accomplishments, has her women reply, "We have borne and bred and washed and taught perhaps to the age of six or seven years, the one thousand six hundred and twenty-three million human beings who are, according to statistics, at present in existence, and that, allowing that some had help, takes time" (Woolf 1957:116). Speculating about children demands what most mothers lack: space, time, energy, money, permission, encouragement, conducive circumstances, choice, varied experience, and two other ingredients indispensable to full creativity—unrestrained solitude and "the essential angel"—writer Tillie Olsen's term for the woman who is thanked on the dedication pages of books by men for assuring a "daily life made easy and noiseless . . . by a silent, watchful, tireless affection" (Olsen [1965] 1978:12, 34).

Not surprisingly, few mothers have created enduring literature; distinguished achievements come from women without children; and when women with children do write, few use the "material open to them out of motherhood" as a central source for their work (Olsen [1965] 1978:19, 31–32). The work of motherhood and other creative work still seem mutually exclusive enterprises. (A colleague in the theology department recently declared that she had made her choice and that she couldn't have aspired to the heights she had if she had had children.) But the ultimate irony is this: deliberation about how to provide for children is done by those who do not tend to their daily care. Reflection in fields as disparate as the psychological sciences and theology upon development and the nature of human achievement is done by those who leave the care of children to others and have little or no idea how it factors into understandings of the healthy person or the full moral and religious life.

But the nature of women's silence on children runs deeper still. These personal and practical realities are intricately linked to complicated economic, social, and political realities, thus returning us to the disturbing contradictions that characterize women's liberation.

A few decades ago women had little or no public voice on any issue. Now some women have better public positions, but many stand with child in arms, suffering under current definitions of equality and liberation. A few stark facts highlighted by economist Sylvia Hewlett in *A Lesser Life*, her scathing attack on the "myth of women's liberation in America": Although fewer than 10 percent of households in the United States consist of a male breadwinner, a female housewife, and dependent children, our country fosters the fantasy by perpetuating "the least adequate family support system in the Western world" (Hewlett 1986:50). The number of working mothers has multiplied, but funds for day care have decreased, as has the social perception of its necessity. Indeed, the United States is *reducing* governmental support of children. The U.S., alone among industrialized countries, has no statutory maternity leave. By contrast, in Sweden, England, Italy, France, and 113 other industrial and developing nations, women receive from six weeks to 18 months of paid leave, two years' unpaid leave, job protection, fringe benefits, even credit toward seniority (Hewlett 1986:95–98).

When wage-earning capacity is considered, children are an asset for men, prompting promotions and raises, and a social and economic risk for women, heralding loss of job and good standing (Barciauskas and Hull 1989:12–13). America's wage gap—still one of the largest in the advanced industrial world—has everything to do with birthing and caring for children. The inability of women to have their salaries keep pace with men's salaries results not just from occupational segregation and discrimination but from the obligations that women have toward children. No measure of equality in current legal terms, no amount of hired help, no degree of support from the father can compensate for the number of interruptions that mark women's work lives. The days, weeks, and years needed for the birth and raising of children chip away at advancements, job security, and benefits during the key years for establishing a paid vocation; most women never get back on the fast track dictated by modern work mores.

A high rate of divorce in the U.S. complicates the picture. Divorce depresses a single mother's income as much as 70 percent. Sixty percent of divorced fathers do not contribute anything to the financial assistance of their children (Hewlett 1986:62).⁴ Since most children of divorced parents live with their mothers, they suffer accordingly.

If these observations aren't enough to make any "liberated" mother abandon her venture into motherhood and liberation, a second thesis reverberates throughout Hewlett's book: Feminists got mothers and children into this squeeze, but for all their ideological support, they don't really care what happens to either party. She does not mince words:

The feminists of the modern women's movement made one gigantic mistake: They assumed that modern women wanted nothing to do with children. As a result, they have consistently failed to incorporate the bearing and rearing of children into their vision of a liberated life. (Hewlett 1986:179-80)

She continues: "The women's liberation movement has not just decided to ignore children. . . . feminists rage at babies; others trivialize, or denigrate them" (Hewlett 1986:184). Not just anti-men, the movement has been "profoundly anti-children" and "anti-motherhood." In a word, "*motherhood is the problem that modern feminists cannot face*" (Hewlett 1986:185).

Hewlett is wrong here in several ways. To make a sure impression, she grossly oversimplifies the nature of the avoidance and silence on the part of feminists. She misplaces the blame. But she does raise a crucial question: If women have gained, why are mothers and children worse off?

Unfortunately, the contradictions pinpointed by Hewlett do not characterize just feminist responses to children. A nicely concealed contradiction distorts America's treatment of children in general. Popular psychology touts the import of the early years, and T. Berry Brazelton's books rise on the bestsellers' list accordingly. Candidates for political office kiss babies and promise policies supportive of the family. Yet the labors of love essential to the

welfare of children hold little value. Statistics on health, poverty, education, drugs, mortality rates, abuse, homelessness, and suicide reveal an incredible insensitivity to the actual demands of children.⁵ Child-centered ideologically; child-loving in reality we are not. As sociologist Judith Stacey puts it, "Americans seem to love *The Family* far better than families" (Stacey 1991:24). More to the point, Americans love *The Child* far more than children.

Second, Hewlett never questions America's definitions of success and the ideologies behind them. An immigrant from a depressed mining community in South Wales, she finds in America a "Promised Land" of justice and greater economic opportunity. But although she chooses a biblical image, she seeks no further insight into the power of religious ideals to shape economic needs and desires. Failure to broaden the analysis in this direction leaves her with sadly inept solutions. However helpful, public policies on day care and parental leave will not begin to touch the emotional turmoil, the moral dilemmas, and the religious contradictions of raising children in a culture that ultimately devalues them and those who care for them. We thus face a large crisis of generativity in American society: the value of nurturance has crumbled under the pressures of productivity, and we don't know what to do with children.

When psychologist Erik Erikson first articulated his timely idea of generativity and stagnation as the primary conflict of mature adult development, he happened upon a psychological concept that has normative implications for modern conflicts of work and love (Erikson [1950] 1963:266-68). To elaborate and fine-tune Freud's deceptively simple prescription for adult maturity, "to work and to love," Erikson proposed intimacy and generativity as the two focal concerns of adult development. He used the term *generativity* as a metaphor for several facets of work and love—procreativity, productivity, and creativity.

But the expression has greater range than any one of these activities alone. Generativity is the implicit moral and religious imperative at the core

of Erikson's psychology (Browning 1975:21-25, 181). The virtue of care and the idea of generativity are at once the second-to-last stage in the "eight ages of man" and the ethical axis of the cycle of generations as a whole. Adult care for what and whom one has generated, concern for establishing and guiding the next generation, the maintenance of life, the regeneration of the cycle of generations—these are the nuts and bolts holding the life cycle and life itself together. Only when a healthy sense of generativity is thriving in the culture can the virtue or ego strength particular to each stage—hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, wisdom—flourish. Cultural images of generativity, however, are ailing. To be sure, feminists have not found a way to integrate children into the "fabric of a full and equal life" (Hewlett 1986:184). But neither have men or antifeminists. Erikson aptly perceived the heart of America's identity crisis; he even understood the pathology caused by "generative frustration" (Erikson 1982:68). But he did not begin to grasp the extent of our current generativity crisis. He would never have wanted the synonym *productivity* to replace *generativity*, but that is precisely what has occurred. In the lives of men, in fact, we find a progressive restriction of the ideal from a comprehensive generativity of love and work to a technical, product-oriented generativity in work alone. Men studied by developmental theorist Daniel Levinson and his colleagues (1978:9) esteem the products of their work as the singular source of satisfaction and fulfillment, not connections to others, and particularly not connections to children. In the last century, men have followed a model of work and love that has increasingly led them to desert family commitments.⁶

Hewlett is not alone, then, in her confusion about who is to blame and in her endorsement of a

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limited definition of success where "milk and honey" equal the bottom line. Confused and conflicting ideals of generativity are widespread. Social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead names the clash between parent-as-parent and parent-as-paid-worker "the single deepest source of stress and anxiety in the American family today" (Whitehead 1990:4). In the hearts of men and women, an

American dream of a Promised Land in which one can work and have a fulfilling family life lives on but, more often than not, turns into a nightmare of anxiety, tension, and strife. Social, economic, and even legal structures of work and love reward material productivity while disregarding not only biological reproduction but also the

nurturance of humanity, including the nurturance of children. These structures punish women who choose reproduction and nurturance over production alone and discourage men from becoming more than marginally involved in activities that give and sustain life in society. Neither men, women, or children fare well under these unhealthy, divisive definitions of generative activities.⁷

Browning identifies the dangers of this distortion in the activities of work and love but does not link them to issues of gender and sexism. Modern society, he observes, so busy in its technological generation of products, has lost the rudimentary means to conserve, preserve, maintain, and generally take care of itself and its highly advanced technological creations. Erikson himself, Browning believes, specifies the "problem of modern man" as "his *nongenerative mentality*—his inability to care for what he creates" (Browning 1975:164). But the use of the masculine pronoun in this instance is unselfconscious. Neither Browning nor Erikson connects this nongenerative mentality to the destructive division of work and adult life that limits generative options for both sexes.

Though we should not blame feminists for failing to integrate children into the fabric of a full and equal life, neither can we entirely blame men. Men and women historically have occupied distinct roles as dominator and dominated, but both groups suffer generally from oppressive influences that further rigidify impoverished norms of generativity. A powerful code of socialization instills gender-restricted images of what each person can hope to generate, and this process begins incredibly early in one's life. Changes to these images occur in infinitesimally small steps. In addition, most men and women find themselves locked into unsympathetic work structures; change here also comes in small increments, if at all.

Finally, a deeply ingrained cultural antipathy toward connection and care operates just below the surface of daily life. We can hardly approach questions of children and generativity without stirring up sentiments of anger and fear toward

women and attachment. The dependency of children, the care, intimacy, attachment, self-revelation, and exposure that they elicit and require, are difficult for us. A man loses respect and credibility, so they say, if he takes leave from work to attend a new infant, a sick child, or an older child's birthday

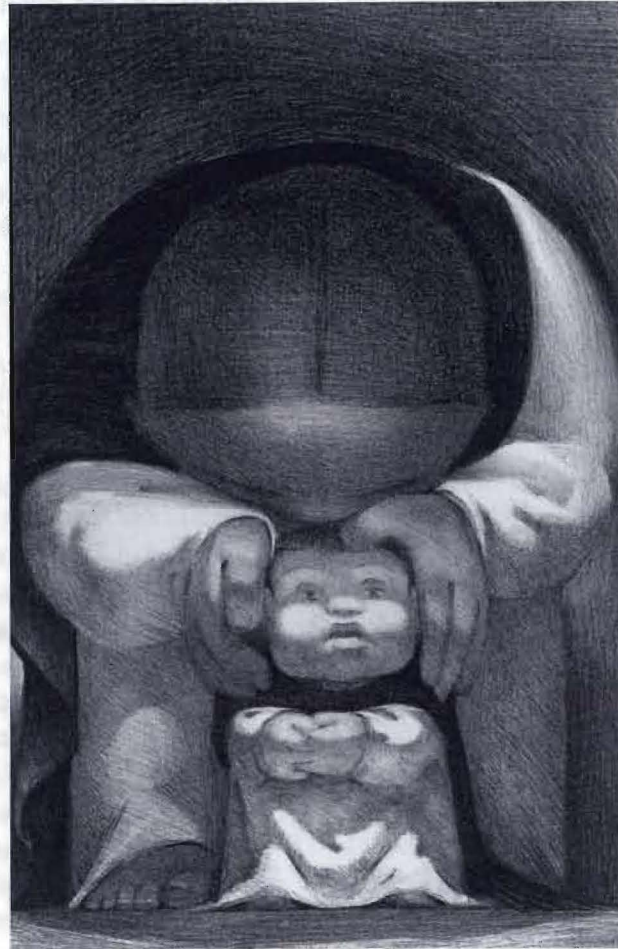
party. These prohibitions run deep and are difficult to dislodge. Sweden, for all its progressiveness, has been forced to consider ways to oblige men to take advantage of its liberal leave policies.

Anger and fear bring distancing and repression. Fear of the maternal, feminine web and the intercon-

nections that women and children embody motivates an insistence on the ideal of a purely separate, monolithic ego⁸ and, by extension, an insistence on a limited public ideal of generativity—a quasi-generative self accumulating products at a safe distance from relationships, from children and the care of children. Conventional wisdom labels motherhood and children uninteresting and even simple or mindless. We feel indifferent to the complicated efforts of women raising offspring.

In a society that esteems a generativity centered on productivity and denigrates the less tangible generativity centered on care, we should not

be surprised that mothers and children have neither been factored in nor fared well. Nor should we be surprised that when women sought liberation, the first order of business was not to secure the needs of mothers and children. Feminists have had good reason to feel reluctant about speaking up for the



First Steps. Lithograph by Jean Charlot, 1936.

Philadelphia Museum of Art, given by Sam Golden.

values of rearing children. Feminist theologians have ample excuse for not making children and how they fit into ideals of the good life a subject of serious study. For too long men left the relentlessly repetitive chores of "world-repair," the "million tiny stitches," the "cleaning up of soil and waste left behind by men and children" to women (Rich 1977:xvi). Creating public policies to allow more time for women to perform these activities is a dubious accomplishment at best and at worst a reinstitution of restrictive definitions of gender complementarity and circumstances of injustice. Retrieving anything related to the institution of motherhood⁹ and to children has its inherent dangers. Women have paid and continue to pay dearly for nurturing children, and these costs men have not known. The constraints brought by children are real. Reproductive difference, a potential source of power, is also the source of women's greatest vulnerability. Throwing the baby out with the bath water may have been the only viable option initially.

Yet to disavow the place of children is not, I believe, what truly thoughtful feminists ultimately had in mind in their struggle for equality. Unlike Hewlett, I cannot think of a feminist who hates children; I know several whose personal lives reveal embattled commitments to them, even if their work and writing do not reflect this. Women recognize the stultifying effects of female domesticity, yet they still have children.¹⁰ The end result: Women improvise, both to their advantage and to their demise. They attempt to rebuild viable models, innovatively finding ways to care for children *and* pursue a livelihood, selectively adapting certain feminist ideas to traditional strategies of work and love (Stacey 1987). Some women flourish; many improvise to such an extent that men are free to continue as if nothing has changed.

At the moment, the women's movement stands at a crossroads. Debate about difference and equality is easily one of the most controversial issues and popular distinctions in current feminist talk. Are women equal to men? Are women different in terms

of their reproductive activities? Philosopher Iris Young describes a shift in the mid to late 1970s from a humanist feminism that revolted against femininity and motherhood as the sources of women's oppression to a gynocentric feminism that retrieves values within traditionally female experience for a more radical critique of dominant social spheres. For some earlier twentieth-century feminists, female reproductive biology is a curse, pregnancy an ordeal, and children a hindrance to the development of women's full potential.¹¹ For some more recent feminists, female reproductive consciousness is at the heart of the women's revolution, pregnancy a worthy human endeavor, and children a complex source of new thought and experience (Young 1985a).¹²

But we should resist the temptation to make these categories mutually exclusive. If children have received little theoretical attention from feminists hitherto, it was more a matter of emphasis, priority, and self-protection than of hostility and rejection. Questioning motherhood and the place of children in women's lives was a means, not a foregone conclusion. The general movement of humanist feminism had to happen before gynocentric feminism could be seriously entertained; the second development assumes the achievements of the first. To set up an opposition between feminists for and against motherhood and children is to simplify feminist theory and practice (although clarifying differences among feminists for the sake of analysis and further conversation remains valuable). A rigid polarity ultimately threatens to divide and conquer women over what many care deeply about—their offspring.

Hence, although the current period has been typified as a stage of backlash or an erosion of gains made by feminism, and although clear evidence of certain setbacks abounds, this is also a period of reorientation. Children are an issue whose time had to come and has come.¹³ Theologian Valerie Saiving's pivotal article on theology from a woman's perspective (1960) draws implicitly on her experience as a mother, but she certainly did not or

could not make the source of her inspiration explicit. I am freer to do so partly because women like Saiving opened the doors of theological inquiry and vocational opportunity (see Miller-McLemore 1992). Certainly something is afoot. For the first time, the 1991 call for papers from the Women and Religion section of the American Academy of Religion asks for "reconsiderations of motherhood and mothering." A recently published *Concilium* issue suggests motherhood as a paradigm capable of overcoming the rift between the worlds of women and men and even among divergent cultures, nations, races, classes, and religions (Carr and Fiorenza 1989:4).

The issue of children may not have such extensive redemptive capacities. But we should not underestimate the vitality and clout of a feminist revolution of the private realm based upon a reconceptualization of generative processes, including the processes of birth and the rearing of children. First women established a section for women and religion. Now they can ask the forbidden questions that challenge the limitations of "male-stream thought": "What, if all labor creates value, is the value produced by reproductive labor?" (O'Brien 1989:13).

Giving Children Voice: Generativity Reconstructed

WHAT IS THE VALUE PRODUCED by reproductive labor? I am sure that O'Brien did not envision a simple answer. But one of the values or at least results of reproductive labor is children. And children undercut assumptions about the American dream. They allow us to reassess our definitions of labor, love, and productivity itself. Authentic ethical and religious images of generativity must figure children into the overall picture.

Recently, as they have begun to speak out about the revolutions inspired by mothering, women have

proclaimed new insights and truths. When Sara Ruddick allowed herself to explore the peculiar new energy that came from the experience of pregnancy, she recognized a conjunction of work and maternity that freed her from "an incapacitating work paralysis" (Ruddick 1977:140-41). Theologian Marilyn Massey reports a similar "unanticipated conjunction" upon giving birth. She felt an obligation to her unborn child to connect the indisputably physical act of birth with a heightened commitment to enter the realm of public discourse (Massey 1990:16-17). Ruddick asks why. Why should "new parenthood, which subtracts enormously from the time available for work, nonetheless make work more likely" (Ruddick 1977:140)?

There is no easy answer. In her own answer, beyond cautiously admitting the "pleasures of maternity" and the "inspiring" nature of infant care, Ruddick hesitates to credit children themselves. We all tend to underestimate what children evoke, contribute, and demand. The more sensual inclinations of fiction writer Mary Gordon permit her to come closer to the heart of the matter. Noting the difficulties of putting it into words, she observes that having children "just ties you into life in an entirely new way. . . . you have a new stake in the world. You look at it differently. . . . Because of them I feel that I know something about life that's both profound and joyous, as well as frightening. And this affects my writing" (M. Gordon 1989:3).

Children cast a new light on life, love, and work. In a much discussed book, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, in which psychologist Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues document turning points in intellectual development, several women name becoming a mother and attending to children as practices that dramatically transfigured their knowing (Belenky et al. 1986:35-36, 142-43). This experience provides a fresh set of categories. The very presence of children, bubbling with expressed and unexpressed human needs and proficiencies, provokes elemental questions about one's philosophy of life. Children see what we have long failed to note; they ask questions, thousands of questions.

Children can touch us and teach us; we don't let them. Several factors make this matter difficult to handle: the dangers of moralizing, the liabilities of speaking for children, the risk of tritely romanticizing them and the harsh realities of child care, the threat of falling back upon ideologies that subordinate women and children, and the peril of discounting situations in which children do not yield revelatory insights but bring tedium, frustration, and exhaustion. Can we unpack the liveliness and challenge of children without falsifying the havoc?

Cognizant of the risks, I proceed cautiously to tease out a few suggestive lessons. Something of value deserves careful retrieval and recognition. My experience, alongside recent writings of other women, confirms this. Nothing has ever subverted my peace of mind as my small sons have, and yet nothing has ever taught me as much about myself and my location in the world, about culture, patience, people, arbitration, justice, anger, care. Significantly, it must be acknowledged that at this point in history these are lessons that cannot come when life revolves solely around a child or when life entails monotonous, unrewarding work. They come with the advantage of a life that permits both satisfying work of one's own and the care of children. Genuine generativity must encompass some combination of these two elements of care and productivity, productivity in work *and* realization in love. The demands and rewards of each for both men and women deserve respect, status, and reward. Such an insight is precisely the sort that children prompt.

Children require both more and less than what was modeled in "Father Knows Best." The fantasy of the predestined, irreplaceable mother exaggerates the amount of energy that one person can or should

bestow upon children while woefully misjudging the damages of an absent father (see Chodorow and Contratto [1976] 1982). This fantasy of the perfect mother piggybacks on a two-century love affair with the myth of a primal maternal instinct for love of one's child (see Badinter 1981:xxii). The assumption that all mothers naturally love

their children has mushroomed into a full-fledged idealization of self-sacrificing motherhood. These ideals create virtues impossible to emulate; worse, they distort relationships between parent and child and between mother and father. Guilt becomes a primal reality in the lives of contemporary mothers; resentment and animosity toward fathers seethes just below the surface; fathers seem weary and grim.

Children do not benefit from this situation. They do

not need or benefit from the kind of self-sacrificial love that much of Christian tradition esteems as the ideal. Far from it. In a powerful article on parenting and sacrifice, theologian Christine E. Gudorf (1985) draws upon her own experience as adoptive mother of two medically handicapped children to overturn the universal presumption that genuine parenting entails heroic sacrifice. This in turn leads her to question the idealization of agape in Christian ethics. Contrary to everyone's immediate assumption that selfless love must have motivated her adoption of these children, she argues for a stronger dynamic. Although initially she and her husband gave considerably, this giving was never disinterested, unconditional, or self-disregarding. Their love involved a crucial self-interest that actually enhanced their capacity to give. The children's actions and accomplishments reflected both positively and negatively upon them. The parents wanted credit and

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reward, and over time, they hoped to recoup some of their losses. In contrast to conventional views of parent-child relationships, the children controlled the relationship at least as much as they did. But more than anything, the children gave to them. They gave them new visions, new hopes, new loyalties, and new commitments and forever altered their lives and identities.

Self-sacrificing love, then, should not be the ideal that we hang over the heads of parents struggling to love their children. Not only is it impossible, it harms persons, particularly women who are already overprogrammed to give endlessly, leaving them ashamed of the self-interest and needs that naturally accompany their love. It harms the recipient with disguised demands and manipulations. It harms men who stand by, depriving them of their own chances to love and misleading them into expecting the impossible of their wives and children. Mutual love, with its give-and-take, should be the ideal, and agape only a transitional movement toward its establishment. Love between parent and child involves ample self-sacrifice certainly, but ultimately this love should aim at mutuality (Gudorf 1985:182). Mutual love does not begin mutually, but mutuality is the goal.

Responsiveness to others and responsiveness to oneself need not be exclusive of one another. Acting responsibly toward oneself and one's needs can sustain rather than impede connection to children. Parents and mothers in particular do better to admit

and even affirm the hopes and needs they harbor. Erikson is singular in his perceptive psychological analysis of this engagement between generations. A "mutuality" and "an ecology of mutual activation" between child and adult, youth and grandparent, young and old governs each stage of growth. The adult both gives *and* gets, and the child both gives *and* gets. A mutuality in which "one's self-interest is often, but not always, also the interest of the other" is interspersed with many moments of self-sacrifice. But they are "just that—moments in a process designed to

end in mutual love" (Gudorf 1985:184, 186). Children operate as partners, albeit less adept and seasoned, in the practice of mutuality in its temporal dimension and development. This generativity allows the child to continue to grow; it expects the adult to do likewise. Theories of development that focus so essentially upon the child's progress, including Erikson's theory, fail to consider adequately the immense coinciding, reciprocal changes in the



The Family. Oil on canvas by Mary Cassatt, 1892.

The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Va. Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.

adult, developments absolutely necessary for adequate care. If the mother and father do not balance their own interests with the work of parenting, if they do not grow with their children, the children will not prosper.

At the same time, in rearranging the family and dislodging women from the home, we dismiss the amount of energy, time, love, empathy, responsiveness, and moral and religious guidance that children need. Children require more. In Dorothy Dinnerstein's frequently cited book, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, she declares six months a "generous" estimate of the amount of time that each child should remove a woman from her normal sphere of activity. To be "physically a mother," she concludes, should require only a minor percentage of one's mature adult life span (Dinnerstein 1976:25).

Unfortunately, mothering is not merely physical. Such an estimation of the demands of children assumes a social and economic hierarchy in which someone else, usually another woman, usually from a different class and race, picks up the slack of the remaining months and years. It readily adopts a model of relating to children "in which men turn their fathering on and off to suit themselves" and view parenting as an appendage rather than the crux of family life (Rossi 1977:16). This view tends to commodify children. Our society thinks of children as objects or products of conception and of women as simply producers and laborers on a reproductive assembly line (see Rothman 1989:19, 23; May 1988).

But children themselves refuse to be something that one does on the side as an extracurricular activity when convenient. From a theological perspective, children are not products; children are gifts. Child rearing is a serious yet time-restricted vocation of a fairly definite number of years—more than Dinnerstein proposes but not requiring one's whole life exclusive of other interests and vocational pursuits. It is a wholesale, everyday commitment yet limited daily; no one can sustain constant requests. Everyone needs "work of one's own" (Ruddick 1977).

But ultimately children question the highly prized place of work in American life-styles. In the refrain of Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the Cradle," the son asks again and again, "When you comin' home, Dad?" The father answers, "I don't know when, but we'll get together then; you know we'll have a good time then." Children see the world differently from adults. If invited in, they impart an alternative discourse. They foster questions about priorities and values, particularly values that detract from attending to the value of life's unique, unrepeatable moments.

In the best of circumstances, children possess an inexplicable *joie de vivre*, however short its duration, that emerges from living fully in the present. Giving themselves unto their activities, they don't hedge their bets with a thousand worries. They have no reason to hurry. In fact, as my two-year-old convinces me daily, they resist being hurried. When with my children, I practice an altered mode of being, walking and playing *with* them, not *ahead of* them. This outlook undercuts anxiety about the irrelevant, the unnecessary, the inconsequential. It rules out or at least slows down life on the "fast track."

Postindustrial occupational structures are particularly unsympathetic to this different pace. Definitions of success based on market prices and rewards, long hours, an uninterrupted developmental sequence, competitive concern for advancement, and unquestioning devotion to a job or an employer preclude children and children's time. Predicated upon the assumption of a male worker with a homemaker spouse and upon a sharp separation of private, personal life (women and children) and public work (men), modern work structures call for a single-minded professionalism and a disregard for the world of children.

This fast-track culture makes all too difficult the formation of stable intimate relationships on an equal, or, for that matter, any real basis. Men exchange the rewards of nurturing another smaller being for the mixed blessings of paid work. Women face irreconcilable conflicts between a satisfying family life and meaningful work or any kind of paid

work at all. Social, political, and economic definitions of generativity stand at odds with the needs of children and parents in their "private" lives.

Children need more in another direction. They literally clamor for a wider range of social relationships than this current division of private and public generativity allows. A one-year-old instantly recognizes a peer and inspects the other with a single-minded curiosity; a young child eagerly awaits the admiring attention of other adults; a three-year-old develops a special attachment to a child-loving ten-year-old; a ten-year-old befriends the dad across the street to learn how to pitch. Even small children, I am convinced, need many caring "parents," not one or even two.

Our competitive, individualistic society has been quick to delimit and isolate the tasks of rearing children. Only in industrial and urban society has the job gone to the mother alone. "We are now just beginning to realize how devastating it can be for children to be intimately exposed only to one person"—an "unacknowledged and essentially unrewarded servant"—during their early formative experiences (Rorty 1977:44). The isolated household deprives children of the support system that in the past helped reduce the weight upon parents and gave children ready access to peers and adults beyond them as guides, mentors, regenerators of their world (Rossi 1977:25). Mother as sole nurturer skews a child's psychological capacities for attachment and separation along gender lines, pushing the son out of the family's intimate relationships and drawing the daughter inexorably in (see Chodorow 1978; Dinnerstein 1976). Granted, raising children engages the individual parent, especially during the first several years, and these early attachments are vital. But the care of children, at its heart, is also a social and communal enterprise, involving a broader nexus of kin, neighbors, other

parents, friends, and many other unrelated adults (Whitehead 1990:5). Care of children is far too important to be left to mothers alone.

Other periods and traditions correct ours. In the course of human history, singular adults didn't raise children; villages did. In Akan culture, mothering is a religious duty, argues Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye. All persons, indeed the whole community in a sound social, economic, and political system, should embody a commitment to children if persons "are to be fully human, nurtured to care for, and take care of themselves, one another, and their environments."

You may "have no biological children" but you "have children" (Oduyoye 1989:23–24). Many Western European countries have public policies that reflect the greater value they place upon care of the child as a communal and social responsibility. Americans may not realize how unique we are in the privatistic view that characterizes many social settings where several children are present. At the playground, restaurant, or church coffee hour, each adult woman usually sees herself as responsible for her own child and no one else's, unless explicitly asked or given permission; adult men see their duties to the children present as a great deal more secondary to their own talking, eating, and working than do the women. To do otherwise is to overstep certain customary bounds. Many an Asian or African mother would see these boundaries as rather reckless and absurd. In many ways, they are.

FEMINISTS HAVE SERVED NICELY as a lightning rod for the problems that have emerged as American society tries to realign these boundaries of accountability to children more justly. At times men have also. The accusations of each party are partly valid.

Although feminists and mothers often take the blame and suffer the guilt, disregard for children and the family is not their fault.

Teetering, and often incongruous, work and family structures have become the "postindustrial norm" (Stacey 1987:9). Men and women share the burden and responsibility.

But the problems lie deeper in complex understandings of human fulfillment. Although feminists and mothers often take the blame and suffer the guilt, disregard for children and the family is not their fault. Feminists and working mothers merely join the general populace in the acute failure to find or create adequate means of loving and working—that is, of caring for *whom* we produce while we are all so busy worrying about *what* we produce and consume. We receive money, status, power, and privilege for material generativity but little beyond an insincere ideological support for the immense generative labors of reproducing the world. It's not just a strategic matter of sharing labors equally. We

need a reconception of what it means to be a generative person in work and love in society at large. Until we face this broader dilemma, ethical deliberation about child abuse, abortion, new reproductive technologies, experiments with the human genome, even just war will yield only partial solutions.

Children complicate and then, happily, reorient the entire question 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 a richer depiction of liberation. Can we articulate and enact more adequate ideals of human equality, generativity, and fulfillment that make the flourishing of children a possibility and even a priority? This question stands at the next frontier of liberation. ☉

NOTES

1. McCormick's article on abortion provoked an initial response (Miller-McLemore 1990).
2. For descriptions of this phenomenon, see Young 1984, 1985b:25–26, 27–31; Rich 1976:47–48, 161.
3. There are a handful of helpful essays on this clash: Suleiman 1985, 1988; Miller-McLemore 1991b, 1991c, 1992; Olsen [1965] 1978; Lazarre 1976.
4. Hewlett's analysis relies upon the groundbreaking study of divorce by Lenore Weitzman (1985).
5. See the studies by Edelman (1987) and Sidel (1986).
6. For other studies of this situation, see Ehrenreich 1983; Vaillant 1977; Dittes 1985; Halper 1989.
7. Elsewhere I have investigated this problem and its repercussions for men and women both in general terms (Miller-McLemore 1989, 1991b, 1991c) and as related to new reproductive technologies (Miller-McLemore 1991a).
8. See Keller (1986) for an in-depth exploration of the connections between sexism and idealization of separation and the separate ego.
9. This refers to Adrienne Rich's important distinction between the rich experience of being a mother and the oppressive institution of motherhood as constructed under patriarchy (Rich 1976).
10. Indeed, few issues are of graver concern, Ruth Sidel discovered in 150 interviews with young women across the country, than "the question of how to combine work and child rearing" (Sidel 1990:193). See also T. Gordon 1990.
11. Young cites Beauvoir [1952] 1974; see also Firestone 1970.
12. Young cites Griffin 1978; Daly 1978; Gilligan 1981; O'Brian 1981; Ruddick [1980] 1983, and several works by Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray; see also Lazarre 1976; Lorde 1984; Young 1984, 1985b.
13. Sociologist Mary O'Brian observes, "Feminist scholarship is *now honing in* on the problems of reproduction, of birth, of the historical significance as well as the emotional trauma of motherhood" (O'Brian 1989:10, emphasis added).

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