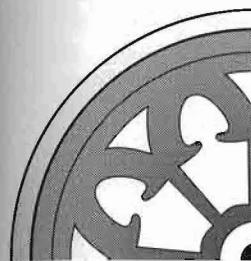


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9



# What's a Feminist Mother to Do?

Dedicated to  
my great-grandmother,  
Myrtle Alice Lee McA Dow

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

For those less influenced than I by commercial television of the 1960s, the question of "What's a Feminist Mother to Do?" is a play on words of an advertisement ditty for laundry detergent forever imprinted on my preadolescent brain some thirty years ago. Holding up a sad-looking pair of grass- and dirt-stained jeans, the TV mother laments, "What's a mother to do?" Or, at least, that's how I remember it.

Although I have forgotten whether it was Cheer or Tide that best solved this mother's problem, I have not forgotten another, more insinuating message: it is mothers who are essentially responsible for family stains and the task of keeping the household clean. Like it or not, the duty of preserving family purity in both its literal and symbolic forms permeated my earliest visions of motherhood. It probably did so for a multitude of white, middle-class, television-raised children. Yet who can blame the media and the market for capitaliz-

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ing on what were widely held cultural beliefs about mothers and family laundry?

Fortunately, popular culture was not the only influence on my dreams. On the corner of a table in my dining room sits an antique, leather-bound college album from the class of 1894 of Disciples-affiliated Eureka College. Within its hard cover, my great-grandmother, Myrtle Alice Lee, a member of an independent Christian Church, is pictured. She is one of the five women graduating in a class of seventeen, in many ways a position of privilege at a time when few women went to college. Although the point of her education may have been as much to enrich the life of the home as to equip her for a public vocation, her education was part of a broader movement that continued to expand the horizons of women at the turn of and into this century. A 1960 pamphlet of news of the graduates, inserted into the album later by my grandmother, her daughter, Lois Lee McAdow, tells us that Myrtle was class secretary and became a "fine educator," teaching in Eureka and Webster City, Iowa. She was also a mother.

My grandmother, likewise a college graduate, used to write me letters in French to help me practice a second language and exercise her own knowledge. She prized the activity of knowing. When she married my grandfather, a Baptist, they joined the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as a sort of compromise between their two church traditions. Although I cannot say that either my grandmother or my great-grandmother were feminists (and might even be bothered by such a label), they both participated in social, economic, and technological changes in this century that made the first and second waves of the feminist movement almost inevitable in response. From them, transposed across a few generations, I gained the value of learning, the import of Christian faith, and the strength of women's self-worth.

Rita Nakashima Brock's introduction to this volume suggests that understanding women's lives in the Christian church means "understanding how the feminist movement has touched women in churches, in seminaries, and in pulpits." Understanding our lives also means understanding how feminism has touched women in families, as mothers with children. This has never been an easy matter. Reigning stereotypes cast feminists as anti-men, and also anti-children. While these labels may capture a bit of the flavor of feminist struggles to claim a place for women, they sorely miss the substance of the struggle. Although feminists certainly challenged institutional views of motherhood and family that constrained and harmed women, and challenged the men who depended upon these views, few feminists are actually either anti-men or anti-children. These labels falsify history. They also deter us from accurate under-

standings of the difficult problems mothers face and the kinds of solutions feminists have tried to offer.

In this chapter, my intent is simply to broaden impressions and provoke curiosity about what Christian feminism may mean for women, mothers, families, and children. When feminism is defined as the repudiation of any ranking of people as inferior or superior according to various traits of human nature—a definition to which many feminists adhere—there are more women who qualify as Christian feminist mothers than most people might initially imagine. Yet, if cultural stereotypes continue to make "feminist motherhood" seem like a contradiction in terms, what's a feminist mother or, more precisely, a Christian feminist mother to do? Suffice it to say, the problems for women have always been far more complex than commercial lyrics would have us believe. Moreover, contrary to popular opinion, neither dirty laundry nor conflicts between work and family should ever be the sole responsibility of mothers and feminists. I would like to begin to correct some of the myths about feminism and motherhood by covering three vast areas in broad strokes: motherhood and North American feminism; motherhood and Christian feminist theology; and finally, feminism, mothers, and pastoral care. Obviously, this introductory chapter will not do justice to the historical and social complexity of any one of these matters, nor will it begin to cover the diversity of perspectives on motherhood, families, pastoral care, and so forth. However, it will attempt to initiate discussion of a subject often sorely overlooked in both church circles and theology, by first tracing shifting strategies in regard to motherhood in feminism in general before turning to some questions raised specifically for Christians. In both secular and Christian feminism, we will see a significant shift in feminist strategies from a rejection to a qualified restoration of motherhood, but the questions of motherhood and family are far from resolved.

### **Motherhood and North American Feminism**

Motherhood presents feminism with a catch-22. In order to achieve equality in a male-dominated world, some have felt that motherhood must be completely rejected, or at least downplayed. But to downplay motherhood is to cast aside a basic biological, emotional, and social enterprise that stands at the center of the lives of many women and communities. Yet, how can women reclaim motherhood without giving in to the cultural tendency of defining women simply in sexual terms as wives and mothers? All too often, reproductive difference has been exaggerated and manipulated and the love of mothers for their children has been romanticized and ideal-

ized as innate and unconditional precisely in order to deny equality to women.

Hence, from the beginning of the first feminist wave to today, a tension has existed between feminists who claim the centrality of motherhood and those impatient with domestic distractions. It is fair to say that the conflict between women's claims as mothers and their claims for equality as individuals in the public sphere has been an ongoing, almost inherent, problem in the history of women and human rights. Indeed, the debate about motherhood is a critical ingredient behind the changes in strategies of the dominant, middle-class North American feminist movement that Brock described in the introduction. In this section, using Peggy Mackintosh's schema of five phases of feminist consciousness as recast by Brock, I want to look at some changes in feminist consciousness and tactics as they relate to mothers.

I am told that both my grandmother and my great-grandmother suffered mild depressions for which they received rather primitive treatment by today's standards. While it would be unwarranted for me blindly to rule out emotional problems as a cause, I am convinced that personal quirks were not the sole root of their anguish. The social limitations for women were at least equally responsible. For women with needs, talents, and desires for satisfying work of our own, the plight of determining the right laundry detergent—my metaphor for the social pressure to make domestic chores one's highest calling—could not help but lead to an inhumane deterrence from fully participating in life. When an early twentieth-century psychoanalyst, Karen Horney, attempted to understand the problems of women of this era, she described the contradictions of the "feminine type" in the 1920s caught between desires to pursue their own ambitions and desires to please fathers and husbands:

Women were permitted to pursue education but expected to become mothers. They were encouraged to be sexually emancipated but supposed to limit sexual desire to monogamous marriage combined with asexual motherhood. They were told that they could have careers but were expected to defer to men at work and at home. They were enticed by ambition but taught to find salvation in love (Westkott, 1986: 50–51).

It is no small wonder that many women, my heritage included, suffered arrested energy and lost hope. What is surprising is that people like Horney were so quickly dismissed by both their contemporaries and, even recently, by clinic, academy, and church (she never made it onto any list of classic figures in either my academic or my clinical training, for example). As needed as it was at the time,

Horney's work did little to alter the bias against women at the heart of culture.

On the other hand, given the anxieties surrounding gender and change, maybe this is not so surprising after all. If we have managed to forget Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (another critical tract that never made it onto any list of significant Enlightenment readings or into any family table conversations), maybe it is just a matter of course that Horney, as *woman*, has also been disregarded. Yet, despite the slights of history, their prescribed goal—a "female hero" who assumes responsibility for claiming that she herself is worthy of care and that the world is her domain as well—has permeated consciousness more than we can ever know.

In the first phases of consciousness-raising—what Brock has described as "Just Like a Man" and "Add Women and Stir"—feminists contested powerful demons: a post-World War II North American mindset that idealized the breadwinner husband, his homemaker wife, and the increasingly isolated suburban, nuclear household with its fascinating gadgets and fast foods. Behind this stood the nineteenth-century Victorian ideal of motherly domesticity, now firmly entrenched in the modern psyche. These images of motherhood were bolstered by religious ideals of moral piety, sexual purity, and wifely submission. And they assumed a white middle-class whose ability to create such a unique home environment partially depended on immense sacrifices by the working class and other ethnic groups who often could not do so. By the mid-twentieth century, for the white middle-class, motherhood had become a profession in its own right, bolstered by home economic classes and majors in interior decorating.

Although people acted as if everyone had always lived in breadwinner-homemaker families from time immemorial, this image of motherhood was quite relative to twentieth-century Western society and remained beyond the pale for most working-class and minority families. When those in the women's movement in the 1960s challenged the 1950s image of happiness, they demanded something few women had ever had before—parity with men in the marketplace and in the household. However, in seeking equal pay and a shared family life, they neither anticipated the immense emotional and social roadblocks nor understood the ways in which their challenge to sexism was blind to racist and classist superstructures that also preserved structures of inequality.

Feminist strategies of "Just Like a Man" and "Add Women and Stir" urged women to enter the work force and seek the same rights as men, shattering the "cult of true womanhood" that defined the home as woman's sphere. However, these early feminist strategies

tended to ignore an entire substrata of North American society. In contrast to feminist protests about the traps of home and the right to work, many women from the working class and different ethnic backgrounds had had no choice but to manage mothering and employed work side by side in order to survive. For many, dedicated motherhood was a key to the endurance of the family and community. Moreover, it is partially slave and working-class labor that made it possible for the middle class to restrict mothers to homemaking. Repeatedly, from slave to current times, white claims on black mothering have taken many women out of their own homes to care for the homes and children of whites. Without understanding this, women's "liberation" only perpetuated the pattern. Upper-strata mothers who desired creative, professional work often simply bought from those in lower economic brackets the home services needed to sustain family life—housekeepers, live-in nannies, gardeners, caterers, decorators, contractors. Women's "liberation" in this vein simply shifts the weight of domestic chores "from one group of exploited women—mothers—to another group—the babysitter, housekeeper, cleaning woman, day-care staff, teacher" (Miller-McLemore, 1991a: 12).

Here, in the tension between equality and family, we see an initial factor behind a shift in feminist consciousness and strategy. Growing awareness of the different ways women in diverse economic and ethnic groups experienced motherhood helped initiate a change in second-wave feminist strategies from the "Just Like a Man" and the "Add Women and Stir Strategies" to the "Women-Centered" and the "Include Everyone Strategies." Feminist protests about the entrappings of the housewife do not make much sense to those robbed of chances to establish safe, strong homes, or to those fighting to prepare their children for survival in a hostile, racist, discriminatory environment. Motherhood, rather than being derided as an exploitive, oppressive, or sexist institution, must be cherished to persist at all, for the sake of the endurance of the larger group. It is not motherhood that is the obstacle to freedom, but racism, lack of jobs, skills, education, and a number of other issues.

In the introduction of this book, Brock points to a second critical ingredient in a shift in feminist strategies: motherhood itself. Early feminist strategies also tended to ignore the real pleasures of motherhood, despite the multiple hardships. Sara Ruddick (1989) is not alone in her experience of motherhood as a pivotal turning point in her life, work, and feminist ideals. Autobiographical notes in the prefaces of books and casual remarks of other women reiterate the theme: "Until my children were born, I went along quite nicely" (Rossiter, 1988: 11). Simply put, woman cannot bear children "Just Like a Man."

Moreover, the capacity to bear children tends to change a woman's view of the world and what's important.

In *Maternal Thinking*, Ruddick dares to suggest that through the very act of securing children's survival mothers themselves engage in seldom recognized complex philosophical and ethical thought processes. A few other feminists began to use their embodied pregnant and maternal experiences as ground for new reflections (Kristeva, 1986; Suleiman, 1985; Young, 1984). In a kind of cultural gestalt, across a variety of disciplines, from law to literature, women began to notice the ways in which psychological analysis, literary critique, legal practice, moral theory, public policy, and so forth have ignored the mother as a subject. Many began to assert the role of the mother as thinker and participant in her own right. Feminists in psychology, for example, began to analyze not just the needs of the child in human development, but the needs of the mother's development in relationship to the child. As literary critic Pauline Bart remarks, time had come to consider "'Portnoy's mother's complaint'" (quoted by Luepnitz, 1988: 167).

Feminists still wanted equality with men, but now recognized that equality must recognize differences, including those differences created by motherhood. Law professor Mary Becker, for example, authored an essay in which she claims that in granting men and women the same right to child custody, divorce proceedings have failed to acknowledge the greater intensity of maternal involvement with children. Although not without its dangers as a position, she is right to underscore that failing to recognize "how difficult it is to equalize the emotional attachment of mothers and fathers to their children will inevitably cause continuing inequality" (Becker, 1992: 167). Only a recognition of certain differences between mothers and fathers will promote justice.

A third significant factor related to motherhood, women's immense workload as a result of the notorious "second shift," also influenced a change in feminist strategies. Middle-strata mothers who began to work "Just Like a Man" glimpsed problems that working-strata women and single mothers have always known and endured to some extent: what Arlie Hochschild popularized as the "second shift." Based on time use studies done in the 1960s and 1970s, Hochschild estimates that over a year women worked an "extra month of twenty-four-hour days a year. Over a dozen years, it was an extra year of twenty-four-hour days" (Hochschild, 1989: 3-4). When the framework is stretched beyond the United States, the distortions grow only more apparent. A 1980 United Nations report indicates that women worldwide perform two-thirds of the world's labor, receive 10 percent of the pay, and own 1 percent of the property.

In short, feminists realized the import of maternal and domestic labor. As long as the workplace still expects the worker to have a wife or a servant, as long as men are no more willing to pick up the broom than their fathers, as long as an underclass of women take care of the homes and children of those in the upper stratas, certain feminist strategies for change will simply be ineffective. And we must contend with what Hochschild calls a "stalled revolution" (Hochschild, 1989: 12). Intimate connections to children and desires to preserve the delicate, domestic fabric of home and community create problems that extend far beyond obtaining good, affordable child care or parental leave policies.

Resurrecting the stalled revolution involves challenging an economic and social system that views children, home, and community life as "nonwork" and that views market labor as almost completely independent of the labors of family and community. It means recognizing motherhood and domestic matters for their critical place in human survival and for the real hours of labor that they entail. It even means finding feminist values in motherhood in its many diverse shapes and forms without thereby returning women to motherhood and marriage as singular, viable, exclusive careers.

### Motherhood and Christian Feminism

In a 1980 article on politics and the family, Roman Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether states the "*imperative need* vigorously to contest the claims of the New Right to represent the interests of the 'family'" (Ruether, 1980: 264, emphasis added). Feminists and other progressives would do well to keep the issue of the family in our own camp, she argues, and not allow conservatives to accuse us of being against the values of families and children. She concludes, "The home is too important a place for all of us to give it away to the right" (266).

Among Christian feminist theologians, the discussion on the family has advanced beyond what Ruether proposes. In fact, feminist theologians have been talking about family values of a different sort for longer than many people might like to suppose. At the same time, it hardly seems that anyone has heard or listened. In too many cases, extremely helpful theological reconstructions of families and work based on just, shared responsibility have simply not reached ministers and congregations, much less families and the workplace.

Why is this? Broadly speaking, white, middle-class feminist Christian theologians have worked harder to promote the feminist view that the patriarchal family no longer has a place than actually to identify alternative Christian family models. The conversation is

even more sparse when it comes to the role of motherhood. Many theologians are mothers, and advocate maternal God imagery and language, but few have investigated in any depth what is learned about Christianity from this pivotal life experience. Few have made the complex intersection of work and family a primary topic of theological research. A careful study of the complex relationship between Christian feminists and mothers is in order. This section will trace a process in feminist theology that closely resembles the general shift in feminist strategies that we explored in the last section from a rejection to a qualified restoration of motherhood.

I recall vividly one of my own experiences of a "woman-less church" of predominantly male leadership. At some point in the 1960s, my home congregation in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) voted to allow women as deacons. To young eyes adapted to all men marching down the aisles in dark suits and enamored by our own male minister, I felt strong cognitive dissonance: these women looked starkly out of place. But why? From almost everything I had been explicitly taught about the priesthood of all believers, the unity of all Christians, creation in the image of God, the love of Christ, and the justice of the kingdom, women belonged around the communion table as much as men. The best explanation that my youthful, naive reasoning could muster was based simply on clothing: it must be their colorful dresses, I thought, that convinced me that their participation was somehow "wrong." Now this memory simply serves to remind me of the extent to which antipathy toward women and resistance to inclusivity is deeply embedded in our human psyches and social systems, including (or especially?) religious traditions and practices.

Western theology and society have yet to recover from the likes of the author of 1 Timothy and the damage perpetuated in Paul's name. As Marti Steussy mentions in her chapter, in a few brief passages in the second chapter of 1 Timothy, women are indicted to "learn in silence with full submission." Women, Timothy declares, shall neither teach nor have "authority over a man." The very order of human creation dictates that women follow men, and in the fall, Eve, not Adam, was deceived. If there is salvation to be had, it is "through childbearing" (1 Timothy 2:11-15a). These ideas about female silence, sinfulness, and the sanctity of childbearing have done their share of damage. The model of male headship and female submission triumphed perhaps above all when it became the family model so enthusiastically affirmed by many (although not all) of our sixteenth-century ancestors in the Protestant Reformation. Most recently, the evangelical right has claimed these "traditional values" as *the* biblical stance on the family despite the fact that several other significant

scriptures contradict this position. No wonder some feminists have done away with Christian notions of family values and with the value of motherhood altogether.

To make any progress at all in such a world, a first obvious step was to acquire what men already assume—the vote, a place in worship rituals, a position on the church board, fresh liturgical language that includes women, jobs held traditionally by men, equal education. The list goes on. In these and many other ways, women were added and institutions of work, church, family, school were stirred. In this feminist struggle for a place alongside men, the place of motherhood simply did not figure in as an important factor. Indeed, for many white, middle-class women, devoted motherhood and the family were seen as instruments of control, limitation, and violence.

While second-wave feminist theologians followed the consciousness-raising model of the women's movement that made female experience a primary source of knowledge, few initially chose the commonly shared experiences of mothering as a central text for study. Motherhood came too close to women's negative experiences of traditional biologically defined roles that feminist theology wanted to challenge. When the second wave of feminism condemned Christianity for lending religious sanction to male superiority and female submission, for the most part feminist theologians in the 1960s and early 1970s agreed with this critique. Religious reinforcement of sexism was contested on at least three fronts: male God language and ideology; the exclusion of women from religious vocation and reflection; and the religious sanction of subordination of women and mothers in the home. Initially, feminist theologians used the tactics of "Just Like a Man," "Add Women and Stir," and "Women as Victims" to challenge exclusive language, to secure ministerial positions, and to dispute male headship in the family.

By the late 1970s and 1980s, however, the feminist project in theology shifted significantly from a critique of a male-dominated Christianity to a reconstruction of its positive meanings based on a women-centered perspective. As Steussy, McAvoy, and others have shown in earlier chapters, this entailed the recovery of traditions at variance with male hierarchy within Christian scriptures, traditions, and communities, and the retrieval of alternative Christian symbols, myths, and rituals. Similarly, alternative Christian family values and norms for motherhood also surfaced. For the most part, however, the quiet stream of thought on mothers and families has seldom been lifted up and appreciated. While I cannot begin to tell half the story in just a few pages here, I will try to give a flavor of the discussion.

As Elizabeth Lee Thomsen's chapter on biblical interpretation illustrates, first-wave feminists themselves relied on, rather than re-

jected, church structures and religious tenets to further the cause of women's rights. Although the elite group of nineteenth-century women's rights activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Willard had little sense of the problems so familiar to us today of female poverty, racial oppression, child care, parental leave, and so forth, they were among the first to make a strong case for gender-equal partnerships of shared responsibility in the home and for active, devoted fatherhood. A chief source for their position was belief in Christian principles of love and justice. In the secular histories of feminism, the important role of Christian values is all too often ignored. But, contrary to the impression given by the religious right, Christianity has not just endorsed male dominance and the patriarchal family as a religious norm; it has also acted to liberate women and has itself created precedent for gender justice and women's equal worth.

Significantly, a classic essay, written in 1958 at the very beginning of second-wave feminism, represents a powerful exception to the general antipathy toward biological mothering and cuts across several of our categories of feminist strategies. Valerie Saiving begins her article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," by plainly stating, "I am a student of theology; I am also a woman" (Saiving, 1960: 100). She has seen, she implies, some problems that men have traditionally overlooked. Her redefinition of sin as involving self-loss as much as pride and of love as requiring self-affirmation as much as self-giving should be recognized and remembered for priming the pump of a thirty-year period of revision and reconstruction in theology. And it is, I believe, her own maternal experience that furnishes the ground for a revelatory breakthrough in the nature of self-love and agape. Although she never claims so directly and few other feminist theologians tend to notice, implicit in her essay is a third qualifying phrase, "I am also a mother."

Writing under the guise of the third-person singular, Saiving struggles to understand the many implications of the "central fact about sexual differences": "In every society it is women—and only women—who bear children" and who remain "closest to the infant and young child" because of "the physiology of lactation" (103). While men must strive to achieve what mothers already have—a role in the powers of creation and the existential confirmation of childbearing—women face an entirely different set of temptations that male theologians have seldom understood. Rather than prideful, self-assertion that disregards the needs of others, mothers become so immersed in attending to external needs that they commit not the sin of self-centered will-to-power, but the sin of self-loss. Women's sin is better understood "as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an

organizing center for focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition...in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self." Then, she suggests something scarcely put forward as a religious ideal of salvation for mothers thus far: the moments, hours, and days of self-giving must be balanced by moments, hours, and days of "withdrawal into, and enrichment of, her individual selfhood if she is to remain a whole person" (108-9).

In a more recent interview about her essay, Saiving tells us about the personal context out of which she made her more abstract generalizations about female experience. Divorced, with a child, she had returned to graduate school after a thirteen-year hiatus to finish a degree in religion begun during World War II. At that time, she was the only woman accepted because "they were having trouble finding enough students [men] even for a ministerial degree." The paper itself was written for a class, while she was, in her words,

trying to take care of my daughter Emily who was very small then. She was three, or four, maybe. I was trying to be a responsible student and also a good mother, and sometimes it just seemed impossible, especially since I was living in the city, and I didn't have any relatives or anybody like that to call on. I don't know what else to say....(Saiving, 1988: 108-9).

While Saiving draws implicitly upon her experience as a mother in her original essay, she did not or could not make the source of her inspiration explicit until more recently. Others, including myself, are freer to do so partly because women like Saiving opened the doors of Christian theological inquiry and vocational opportunity.

A recent essay by Sally Purvis, "Mothers, Neighbors, and Strangers: Another Look at Agape," suggests another reason why it has not been easy for many religious scholars, primarily men, to admit that children and parenting could be an important source of ethical theological reflection. Traditionally, male theologians have distrusted "special relations" between family members as too subjective, too arbitrary, too instinctual, too biased to inform objective, universal statements about the human good (Purvis, 1991: 19). Only recently have theologians begun to challenge this norm.

In defiance, a few feminist theologians, such as Purvis, Christine Gudorf, and myself, use maternal experience as a powerful tool to better understand theological categories of love, justice, redemption, human nature, sacrifice, and so forth. Contrary to everyone's instant assumption concerning Gudorf's decision to adopt a two-year-old who could not walk, talk, or eat, and a five-year-old who could barely walk, dress, or wash himself, selfless love, she realizes, was not a primary or sufficient factor. Her essay, "Parenting: Mutual Love and

Sacrifice," argues against Christian interpretations of *agape* as unconditional, self-disregarding self-sacrifice. Rather, Christian love must involve a measure of necessary self-love that actually enhances our capacity to give. As she discovers through her own investment in mothering, all love involves sacrifice, but ultimately aims at the give-and-take of mutuality. Moments of sacrifice, including Christ's sacrifice on the cross, are "just that—moments in a process designed to end in mutual love" (Gudorf, 1985: 186).

Just as in the feminist movement at large, women in other ethnic, religious traditions, both within and outside Christianity, have valued motherhood and respected maternal creativity and strength. As Paula Gunn Allen points out, the Laguna Pueblo/Sioux believe that at the "center of all is Woman." The ability inherent in mothering to transform something from one state to another is an ability "sought and treasured" among Native Americans (Gunn Allen, 1989: 22, 27). According to Delores Williams, African-American "womanist reality begins with mothers relating to their children" (Williams, 1989: 183). Mothers are honored for their wisdom about making "a way out of no way." In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams lifts up the slave-girl Hagar—mother of Ishmael, Abram's first son—as a powerful figure in African-American women's religious experience. Hagar's example of willful survival with God's blessing has inspired mothers to support one another and to perceive the nurturing of children as a task of the entire community.

Other books signify a change in the times. In 1989, Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza edited an issue of *Concilium* titled "Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology." It is suggested that greater explorations of motherhood have the capacity "not only for overcoming the split between the worlds of women and men but also splits among different cultures, nations, races, classes, and religions" (3-4). While this is perhaps far too optimistic a hope, essays in *Inheriting Our Mother's Gardens*, authored in 1988 by women from across the globe, seems to indicate that this is at least partially true (Russell, Pui-lan, Isasi-Díaz, Cannon, 1988). As Kris Culp asserts in her chapter, from the Beguines to the Salvadoran Christian Mothers for Peace and Life to middle-American church women, "women have been artisans of communal survival in many places and times," even though such public and domestic labors are seldom recognized as absolutely essential to the endurance of human society and human existence.

### Feminism, Mothers, and Pastoral Care

Apart from a very important body of literature on domestic violence, abuse, and pastoral care (Clarke, 1986; Fortune, 1983; Pellauer, Chester, and Boyajian, 1987), little has been done on mothers and pastoral care per se. Although I have only begun to consider the implications of feminism and motherhood for the field of pastoral theology, I can say that one important development in pastoral care and theology today is a recasting of the field based on a better appreciation for the diversity of human experience, including that of women of diverse backgrounds (Miller-McLemore, 1993). In light of the discussion about feminism and motherhood, we would do well to review, even if only roughly, some changes afoot in pastoral care that reflect feminism's significant influence.

Pastoral care will never be the same. Pastoral theologian Emma Justes states that if clergy "are unable to travel the route of hearing women's anger, of exploring with women the painful depths of experiences of incest and rape, or enabling women to break free from cultural stereotypes that define their existence," they should not be doing pastoral counseling with women (Justes, 1985: 298). When those involved in pastoral care do not know how to recognize the realities of violence toward women, they foster further damage and violence. Particularly in situations of sexual abuse, for example, the problem in pastoral response is not too little empathy, but too much indiscriminate empathy by an uninformed pastoral caregiver that surfaces long-repressed feelings that overwhelm rather than help the person in need (Glaz, 1991). All pastoral caregivers must sharpen their sensitivity to the stress of women's experiences as wage-earners and homemakers (Miller-McLemore, 1991b), the economic devaluation of women in the workplace and women's poverty (Couture, 1991), health issues of concern to women ("Focus on Women," 1991), the implications of female images of God for self-esteem (Saussy, 1991), and so forth.

With a few significant exceptions, women in the field of pastoral care and theology have come up through the ranks of higher education approximately one generation behind women in religion and theology, such as Ruether and Fiorenza. One possible reason for the lag in the more active participation by women is the proximity of pastoral theology to the church and the conservative nature of congregational life. Despite the pastoral nature of much feminist theology and careful treatments of specific issues in pastoral care such as abuse or spirituality, there have been no books by a single author on pastoral theology from a woman's or a feminist perspective until quite recently (cf. Demarinis, 1994). And until the recent publication of *Womanist Care* (1993), which is not explicitly presented as a book

on pastoral theology, the participation of African-American women has been almost entirely missing from the discussion. Meanwhile, more general books on theology such as Emily Town's *A Troubling in My Soul* (1993) and Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993) are helpful resources and hopeful signs on the horizon of what it will mean to understand care from a womanist perspective.

What will it mean for the practice of pastoral care to bring new voices into play? *Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care* offers an initial indication (1991). Edited by Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, the book includes the work of five authors in ministerial settings and four in the academy. Chapters on new pastoral understandings of women in the first section and new pastoral paradigms in the final section frame other chapters in the middle on conflicts of work and family, alternative family forms, gynecologic processes and problems, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and depression. Almost every man who has read this text in my introductory pastoral care course testifies that it powerfully illumines women's lives. Women students want to send multiple copies to their ministerial colleagues, men and women alike. These students have heard a "cry," as one student expressed it, that they had never heard or understood before; they begin to hear in a different way that understands a woman's concerns from the inside rather than from the outside. Instead of blaming the woman, for example, for causing physical abuse and encouraging her to stay with her husband, a caregiver seeks to empower the woman to change the situation. Instead of assuming that women are equal now that they can seek jobs outside the home, hearing in a new way opens us up to the complex problems that continue to plague women and gender relations. Instead of presuming that they understand women—women who have suffered miscarriage or chosen abortion, women who are depressed, women who are sole parents, and so forth—many readers realize that they have only begun to sit down and genuinely listen.

Traditionally, those in pastoral theology have used Anton Boisen's powerful metaphor to define the proper subject of pastoral theology—the "study of living human documents rather than books" (1950, cited by Gerkin, 1984: 37). By lifting up the importance of the "human document" in theology, Boisen and others sought to revitalize theological reflection by turning away from doctrines and treatises to lived human experience and suffering as a deeper source of reflection. However, today, the "living human web" rather than document suggests itself as a better term for the appropriate subject for investigation, interpretation, and transformation in pastoral theology (Miller-McLemore, 1993). We can no longer focus on the "human document" as if it stands separate and alone from social and cultural

forces. The focus on care narrowly defined as individual counseling must shift to a focus on care understood as part of a wider cultural, social, and religious context. Reflective listening in pastoral care, while a valuable tool in many respects, is insufficient to understanding the diversity of human experience within a variety of ethnic, economic, social, and cultural settings.

In other words, when an individual woman enters the pastor's office for counsel, her personal problem can no longer be understood or resolved without also understanding and addressing, even if only to a limited extent, social, cultural, congregational factors of oppression, alienation, exploitation, diversity, and justice. For example, a woman's struggle with her body image and sexuality or her fears about her work and her children after a divorce can no longer be seen simply as personal emotional issues; they are intricately related to a social system that fails to support working mothers and to a socialization process that forbids validation of female desire. Indeed, to think about pastoral care from a feminist perspective requires prophetic, transformative challenge to systems of power, authority, and domination that continue to violate, terrorize, and systematically destroy individuals and communities. This shift in commitment is evident in a variety of recent publications, such as James Poling's *The Abuse of Power* (1991), Pamela Couture's *Blessed Are the Poor* (1991), Larry Graham's *Care of Persons, Care of World* (1992), and my own *Also a Mother* (1994).

What can women and men in congregations do? Congregations need sensitive, informed, open public discussion of some problems that have been heretofore taboo for many congregations. Congregations and their leaders often have a close connection with the most intimate moments in people's lives over the human life cycle. For better or for worse, they stand in a critical place to influence people over intimate questions about work and family. When it comes to conflicts of families and work, time has come to disturb the "conspiracy of silence," in Janet Fishburn's words (1991: 141), that enshrouds what happens in the family lives and to break the unwritten rules about what can and cannot be discussed during "Joys and Concerns" in many typical small church worship services. If it is primarily or partly within the family that children first come to have a sense of themselves and a sense of human and human-divine relationships that is foundational to moral and spiritual development, then it makes all the difference in the world whether this experience is one of unequal altruism and one-sided self-sacrifice on the part of women and mothers or of justice, mutuality, and reciprocity. If Christian feminists and congregations do not get clearer about alternative egalitarian family and work values, then people will not have a good

defense against the nostalgia for the "way we never were," as Stephanie Coontz's book title puts it.

Many people are hungry for stories by which to live. They want to know how to share domestic and economic labors, particularly in a society that typically forbids such equal sharing. Several kinds of questions are ripe for discussion. How can people change the division of labor inherent to conventional gender role definitions? Can we talk in greater detail about what democratic relationships between men and women might actually look like in real life, especially when such relationships involve children? What have people tried? What works and what doesn't? How can people change the division of domestic labors in the congregation itself, which continues to presume that women will run the Sunday school, coffee hour, nursery, funeral meals, and assume positions of leadership both in the congregation and in the work world? (I vividly recall a conversation in the church nursery a year ago in which a woman in her mid-fifties, who worked full-time as a legal secretary and was the mother of four children, lamented her inability to help with the church school program because she was also acting chair of the elders!) What will it take to teach men to tend to the chores of relationships, domesticity, and children? As important, what will it take to reclaim the values of caring labor in society at large for both men and women? At the very least, young boys and girls must begin to understand that a woman must not be expected to work full-time, mother full-time, chair the elders, and teach Sunday school, and that a man might not only be able to take up more domestic tasks in the home and in the church, but might even benefit and learn from them.

One of the more complex challenges facing feminist Christian discipleship is determining the place and role of motherhood and the family. The subject of motherhood has created both barriers to and, more recently, avenues for renewal for women and feminists. Not all women can, want, or need to become mothers. Women have paid and continue to pay dearly for nurturing children, costs that many men have not known, at least not in the same way. For mothers and children, the family has often been a violent, abusive institution. On the other hand, since more than 90 percent of all women eventually become mothers, for feminists to ignore motherhood in female experience is to bracket an immensely important factor. Moreover, many women have attested to becoming a mother as a "catalyst" that launches new worlds, possibly new schools of thought (Guerrera Congo, 1988:76). Maternal knowledge inspires new ways of thinking about God, obedience, freedom, love, justice, and so forth.

As I conclude in *Also a Mother*, in a society driven by the marketplace that devalues the taking care of children, elevates material pro-

ductivity, places in jeopardy those in significant caretaking roles, and forbids men serious concern over friends, children, family, and domicile, 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 values of rearing children and motherhood.

Yet to disavow children is not, I believe, what truly thoughtful feminists ultimately had in mind in their struggle for equality. The dismissal of motherhood was more a matter of emphasis, priority, and self-protection than hostility and rejection. Now, because of those who have gone before us and those who have sustained each feminist wave through its almost inevitable backwash, Christian feminist mothers and theologians can ask, What is the value of reproductive labor? How does it belong to the Christian story?

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10



## August in Her Breast

*Prayer as Embodiment*

Kay Bessler Northcutt

*This essay is dedicated to the "Women of the Word" Christian Women's Fellowship of Harvard Avenue Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in honor of their study and discipline of prayer, in recognition of their lives of deep commitment, and in gratitude for their nurture of me as their pastor and teacher.*

### Absolute Attention

As a woman nourishes her child  
with her own body and milk,  
so does Christ unceasingly nourish us.

—Saint John Chrysostom (*Christian Prayer*)

**M**y mother, whose infants arrived "before the days of clothes dryers," tells of hanging my diapers out on the line to freeze-dry in the January bitter cold. (Evidently there were any number of American women who preceded NASA in pioneering this particular technology.)

She laughs now, telling it, of the diapers "stiff as a board" flapping in the blow of the January winds across the Oklahoma prairie.

Her mother, imploring her to be sensible, wrote letters trying to dissuade her from such practices, cautioning my mother that she might "catch cold in her breast" while standing in the wind. Apparently my grandmother meant a breast infection when she warned my mother against catching "cold in her breast." A nursing mother with a breast infection *today* experiences intense pain, but the infection can be controlled by antibiotics. Nevertheless, my grandmother