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

— by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

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

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

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

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

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

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

While the term "generativity," first proposed by psychologist Erik Erikson, is neither familiar or easy to grasp, it remains an apt concept for our consideration. In this single word we find embodied a religious aspiration for a fulfilling adulthood that includes two aspects of human life that various theological traditions have long honored—meaningful vocation and fruitful procreation. Generativity means an encompassing orientation to a life of productivity, creativity, and procreativity. Although Erikson understood the term as strictly psychological, the term has important kinship with theological doctrines of creation, procreation, vocation and redemption.

Broadly speaking, Roman Catholicism has sanctioned procreation—"be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28)—and Protestantism has sanctioned vocation—"be fruitful and subdue the earth; till it and keep it" (Gen. 1:28; 2:5, 15). Roman Catholic tradition has long affirmed the procreative capacities and requirements of human existence, associating these almost totally with physical reproductive processes. With the Reformation, Protestant traditions sanctioned the special religious vocation of all of life's work and fashioned a powerful work ethic that bestowed salvific powers on human labor. Work was understood as a direct expression of a unique human dignity and an affirmation of divine election.
But for many important reasons, both doctrines and ethics have largely lost their power and meaning in the last several decades of this century. Abiding by their commands no longer assures the promised abundancy of life. The Protestant work ethic, taken over by a corporate and largely male industrial work force, has degenerated from a communal ideal to an individualized compulsive workaholism focused on this worldly productivity and acquisition. And since the 1960s, the Roman Catholic procreative ethic has had to recognize the equal, if not greater, importance of the personal relationship of mutuality and fidelity in sexual, marital commitments. In both cases, part of the problem is the almost total dismissal of the sanctity of women's experience as women and as mothers. Both traditions have long collapsed a woman's vocational and procreational roles into a single monochromatic function: the social role of motherhood. A woman's work and love are restricted to children and family; a man's to his work. Under the resilient reign of these religious metaphors of human fulfillment, men and women in the twentieth-century parcelled up the generative tasks of public work and private love, productivity and procreativity between themselves to the dangerous point of impoverishing and endangering both domains as well as themselves and society at large.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The basic impulse to "have it all"—the primary moral accusation thrown at many white working mothers condensed to one pithy phrase—is not the problem. Indeed, this impulse, rightly understood, gets at the core of human need and fulfillment. The pejorative accusation of wanting to "have it all" has tricked women into a guilty disclaimer of a valid human desire to work and to love as the essence of human creation and creativity. Rather all persons deserve good work and good love as meaningful human endeavors in themselves (Continued on Page 8)
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and the two are intimately linked. We
should love our work and work at love.
The phrase "doing it all" does better
justice to this normative position than
"having it all" which connotes a
harmful possession of our work and
our love. We do not own our voca­
tional capabilities; our children and
our relationships are not commodities
or products. Contrary to these materi­
alistic views typical of our market
economy, our work and love are not
something we possess, have, sell, or
change; they are something we are
and do with limited resources and
lives. All women and men deserve to
*do it all* in a limited sense, that is, to
enjoy the fruits of their labors of love
and their love of labor.

To ailing religious images and soci­
etal structures of generativity, a femi­
nist theology that draws upon the
experience of mothering can say this
much: Ideals and structures for a gen­
erative life must encompass generativ­
ity in work and generativity in love.
The demands and rewards of each for
both men and women deserve distinct
respect, status, and reward. The values
of both generativity in work and gen­
erativity in love are different, yet
equally valuable. Motherhood and
children complicate and then, hap­
pily, reorient the entire question of
abundant love and work and ques­
tions 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 Rich­
er conception of equality in work and
love and richer depiction of libera­
tion. Can we articulate and enact
more adequate ideals of human equal­
ity, generativity, and fulfillment that
make the flourishing of mothers and
children a possibility and even a pri­
ority? This question comprises the
next frontier of liberation. Until we
explore it more satisfactorily, initial
efforts to alter public policy or innov­
arive schemes to consolidate new gen­
der roles remain partial and limited.

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McLemore is Associate Professor of
Religion, Personality, and Culture at
Chicago Theological Seminary. This
presentation took place as part of the DDH
Forum series on Monday, March 1,
1993. Excerpts from the first chapter
of her forthcoming book, _Doing It All: A
Feminist Theology of Generativity and
Mothering_ (Abingdon, 1994), are
reprinted here. Used by permission._

Book Notes
__Bread Afresh, Wine Anew: Sermons
by Disciples Women_ edited by Joan
Campbell and David Polk. St. Louis,
Reviewed by Stephanie McLemore,
House Scholar and first year Ministry
student.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

_FROM WASTELAND TO PROMISED LAND:
LIBERATION THEOLOGY FOR A POST-MARXIST
WORLD_ by Robert V. Andelson and
James M. Dawsey. Maryknoll, New
(Continued on Page 9)