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Moral Aspects of Maternal Deprivation

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"Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously but thou excellest them all." This quotation from the *Book of Proverbs* was obviously written for all ages. Motherhood was certainly intended to be a praiseworthy calling for educated women in a complex society. What then of critical evaluations of the modern role of woman? Are they at variance with this ancient view or do they support it? Relevant to both of these questions is the problem of maternal deprivation.

The relationship which exists between a mother and her child transcends in intimacy that which is possible in any other inter-personal relationship. This intimacy derives, to a large extent from that period of time when their attachment is a physical and biological reality during gestation. The profound associations of this relationship and the creative satisfactions of the bringing forth of the child are always cherished by the mother. For the child, however, this sense of intimacy, is related, not to the pregnancy, but to the tender care which the mother provides during infancy. The need which the mother has to continue her closeness with the infant will lead her to the caressing and fondling which are so essential to the infant's

awareness of affection. As the child's needs increase with age, his rich and rewarding relationship with his mother is varied in myriad ways by relationship with the father and siblings.

Certainly one of the signal developments of the last twenty-five years of specialized child care, particularly child guidance, has been the growing conviction that the child's future mental health is critically related to the quality of parental care he receives during his earliest years. Those with the opportunity for first hand observation of the developing child and his milieu have been increasingly convinced that what is essential for mental health is a continuing warm relationship between the infant and his mother in which both find joy and satisfaction, particularly during the first three years of life. From such a relationship, the child develops the strengths of personality which enable him to control the disruptive influences of anxiety and guilt. The absence of such a relationship leads to anxiety, excessive demands for love, hostility against those who fail to provide this love; and, from this hostility, finally, guilt and depression. Such strong emotions in a psychologically and physiologically immature person can lead to disorganization and breakdown in later life. This is the syndrome of maternal deprivation and its incidence and influence are widespread.

Maternal deprivation can occur in a variety of degrees and from a variety of causes. A child may be maternally

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deprived if his mother is present in the home but aloof and unloving. He is more likely to be maternally deprived, however, as a result of periodic or continual absence of the mother from the home. The severity of symptoms resulting from the absence of the mother from the home may be modified by a mother substitute who is both known to the child and loving and to a lesser degree by a loving stranger. Only the best of institutional care provides adequate mothering to prevent severe maternal deprivation and even a short-term stay in an overcrowded, under-staffed institution apparently permanently traumatizes those infants under three years. Clinical observations on the effects of maternal deprivation are supported by a very large compendium of systematic and statistically controlled studies (see Bowlby J., *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, W.H.H. Monograph No. 2 1952); (Yarrow, L. J. *Psyche Bulletin* 58; 459, 1961.)

Maternal deprivation, then carries with it the well documented risk of the production of a person with distorted character formation and anti-social tendencies. Beyond this however, there is another effect of maternal deprivation which comprises the child's ability to interact with favorable influences outside the home. As pointed out by Laretta Bender, the child who has had no experience in identifying with a mother during the first three years of life is, to a degree, ineducable. He cannot identify with the teacher and her aims; he cannot be motivated to concentrate on a task or work toward a goal. He has no capacity to form concepts of good and bad and no inner life about which he may be taught to articulate. If these three specters of mental illness, delinquency, and mental retardation hover over the totally maternally de-

prived child, they also threaten those who suffer from lesser degrees of maternal deprivation. If a mother wishes to insure her child the optimum in emotional stability, social adjustment and intellectual attainment, it is quite obvious that she cannot commit herself to prolonged enforced absences from her young children.

We are not concerned, of course, with those who must, of necessity, work outside the home because of death or illness of the husband or dire economic necessity. The ultimate human economy in such cases would certainly be for the state to provide some assistance, which would insure the mother's ability to stay with the infant at least through the first three years of life. Such assistance is obviously not always forthcoming.

Our real concern is with those who voluntarily choose to work outside the home because of a desire for material comfort or social compensation. In our success-oriented society, it is quite obvious that successful motherhood is much downgraded. By innuendo or open statement purely womanly duties are disparaged. Household duties are represented as something in the nature of slavery. The small tasks of housework are dwelt upon as something utterly dissociated from love. Motherhood is decried as something in opposition to personal fulfillment. The selflessness of motherhood is mentioned only for purposes of pity and apology and no purely womanly task is looked upon as imparting any joy or dignity to its performer. Women are told that their mystique demands that they escape from their "hidden life" to exert some influence in society. This despite the fact that almost no adult remembers his mother as someone either hidden or influential. Most of these pressing commitments to self or imagined econo-

mic necessity have about them the same hollow ring as those original biblical excuses for not attending the wedding feast. Whether or not they are sincerely preached, these conceptions of the woman's role fall on gullible and unsure ears. They exert a disquieting influence, particularly on the immature mother who already has a very uneven relationship with her children and perhaps even looks upon withdrawal of affection as a suitable form of punishment for children who annoy her. The best way for her to withdraw love may be to withdraw herself into a job, a club, a cause, or a hobby.

The question is whether such an optional withdrawal from the home is morally permissible for the mother of pre-school children. The question is particularly pertinent in these days of great difficulty in procuring satisfactory domestic help or in finding well-operated nursery schools.

Surely the traditions and utterances of the church over the years have been opposed to working mothers. In his allocution to working women on August 15, 1945, Pius XII alludes most pointedly to this position: "We know well how arduous it is, while remaining faithful to the law of God, to fulfill the duties of a working woman in some public enterprise and at the same time those of mother of a family . . . The efforts of the Church on behalf of a wage sufficient for the sustenance of both the worker and his family had and have precisely the object of bringing back as well the wife and mother to her proper calling in the home." Pius XII also has a word for those educated mothers who feel compelled to continue their education or to employ their skills out-

side the home: "Does not our time make idols almost of knowledge, action, and independence? Is it not perhaps true that too often modern culture loses in clarity, depth, and solidity what it gains in extension?" (all. to the Institute Cabrini, 1945). In pediatric practice, one is more likely to see the college-educated mother overwhelmed by motherhood then stultified by it. No wonder then that she wants to flee from the challenges of the home into an organized and predictable work situation where she feels more confident. The oft-quoted statement of Chesterton summarizes this situation with clarity: "Babies need not to be taught a trade but to be introduced to the world. To put the matter shortly, woman is generally shut up in a house with a human being at a time when he asks all the questions that there are and some that there aren't. It would be odd if she retained any of the narrowness of a specialist. When domesticity is called drudgery, all the difficulty arises from a double meaning of the word. If drudgery only means dreadfully hard work, I admit a woman drudges in the home as a man might drudge at the Cathedral of Amiens or drudges behind a gun at Trafalgar. But if it means that the hard work is more heavy because it is trifling, colorless, and of small import to the soul then I give it up; I don't know what the word means."

The issue, then, of whether a woman should be deeply involved outside the home may be, in very real terms, whether she is to deprive the child of her essential presence. As such, the issue should include considerations not only as to whether she *should* leave but whether she may morally do so.