

Unrealized and Unrecognized: The Paradox of Maternal Power

Keynote Speaker: **Ann Crittenden**, journalist and author of *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued*

You can't imagine how happy I am to be here. During the long and often lonely years I was working on my book *The Price of Motherhood* I dreamed that all of you were out there. I knew it couldn't be just me. I'm so happy to discover that — that we mothers are not alone. There are millions of us, and we are just beginning to realize that power.

Power. That's my assigned topic of today: the paradox of maternal power. And it truly is a paradox, summed up, perhaps, in this anecdote: a few years ago there was a 20th reunion of Rhodes scholars in Washington. The graduates were busily comparing notes on their accomplishments when one of them, a mother, asked: "Does fighting the world's fight include having babies?"

Imagine that that question had to be asked! Of course everyone knew that the correct answer was yes. We all know that "having babies" is, as everyone is quick to tell you, "the most important job in the world." We all know that our own mothers were probably the most important people in our lives, and we all know how important we are in the lives of our children. This personal power is acknowledged in virtually every society. The Jews have an ancient proverb: "God could not be everywhere, and therefore He made mothers." The Arabs too have a poem: "The mother is a school; if she is well reared, you are sure to build a nation."

Yet, and this is the paradox, we also know, from our own experience, that much of this is lip service. We know that the routine, unheralded *heroism* that it takes to raise a child is not really considered to be "fighting the world's fight." We know that, as important as it is, raising children is still not considered an "heroic" activity. Motherhood is still not seen as one of the high human endeavors—an undertaking requiring courage, persistence, imagination, skill, self-discipline, and taking oneself to the limit. Mothers work behind closed doors, in private, and are not thought to be "serving their country" or the broader community. Mothers are often denied the basic "Three R's" that go to labor that is highly regarded: respect, recognition, and remuneration. Mothers are paid, literally, in love alone.

This is indeed a form of power. Mothers are at one and the same time, the most powerful, and the most powerless group of people in the world. Mothers are the cornerstone of society, and the greatest wealth producers in the economy. But do you know what the single biggest risk factor for poverty in America is?

Motherhood.

Do you think that if mothers had real power that would be true?

Do you believe that if mothers had real power the United States would rank 54th in the world in access to health care for mothers and children?

If mothers had power, do you think that we in the U.S. would have the highest rate of child poverty in the entire developed world?

If mothers had real power, do you think that the U.S. would rank 32nd in mortality rates for children under the age of five, alongside Cuba and Cyprus, countries with a fraction of our wealth?

Do you think that we would be one of only six countries in the world with no guaranteed paid maternity leave? And because we have no right to stay at home with a new baby, we have the highest percentage of infants in day care among all developed countries.

Do you think, if mothers had power, we would be saying "money is no object," and throwing tens if not hundreds of billions of dollars at some problems, and refusing to spend a public nickel on the health and education of young, preschool children?

I don't think so!

The Avenger and The Nurturer

We seem to be entering a frightening time, when Warriors dominate the news and the centers of power. But I believe that this is no time for Mothers to retreat, and allow their priorities to be brushed aside once again. So I'd like to talk a bit about the most powerful the two most powerful archetypes in human culture, the Warrior and the Mother.

Since time immemorial these two have been linked: Mars and Venus, the Destroyer and the Creator, the Avenger and the Nurturer: mirror images of one other. They represent two intrinsic parts of the human whole; two forces within the human personality; two essential functions in all societies. The Warrior protects the group from its external enemies and the Mother shields us from our internal enemies of neglect, carelessness, ignorance, and despair. Protection and social reproduction: we couldn't exist without either one.

Over the ages compelling mystiques have developed around these two vital figures. The cult of the fearless warrior and the cult of the selfless mother both encourage sacrifice in the name of a higher, communal good. Both of these ideals have been utilized to inspire young people to undertake gratifying, but also difficult, painful, even life-threatening tasks.

Until very recently, young people themselves had no say in the matter. They had to serve the tribe, the group or the state in their assigned gender roles. Men had a compulsory duty to give their lives in war if necessary, and women had a compulsory duty to give birth to the extent of their capacity. And those who served in arms and those who raised healthy children were intimately intertwined: patriotic mothers were taught to send their sons off to battle, and on battlefields, wounded young soldiers cry out for their mothers.

Soldiers were dragooned, shanghaied, impressed, conscripted, drafted, and otherwise forced into military service. If a hapless recruit deserted, he was shot.

By the same token, being a mother was woman's destiny, no more to be resisted than her monthly period. There were no legal abortions, no contraceptives, no divorce, and no profession other than marriage for women, unless one chose to marry Christ and become a nun.

One could view this coercion as society's acknowledgment that Warriors and Mothers are essential — our most valuable players, if you will. But powerful changes have challenged the need to force every man and every woman into these old molds.

Honor and Reward

Modern warfare no longer demands mass armies, and modern medicine, lower infant mortality rates, overpopulation and the expense of rearing a modern child have lessened the demand for large families. We just don't need as many warriors and mothers. And men as well as women have rebelled against crude coercion in their lives.

The cultural revolution of the 1960s ratified an historic shift away from the kinds of conscription that enforced extreme gender roles. Both men and women demanded choice, and they got it. Compulsory military service and compulsory motherhood were both abolished. The draft, and the bans of contraception and abortion were swept away. The pillars upholding the old gender stereotypes came tumbling down, freeing men and women to be what they wanted to be; free to be me, as the liberating slogan proclaimed.

Just because they have the hormones to produce babies, girls no longer have to be mothers, any more than boys with the testosterone to be on the front lines have to go to war. This is an incredible revolution; arguably the greatest in human history.

But a funny thing happened along the road to this unprecedented freedom. It soon became apparent that freedom might not guarantee that enough people would still be willing to perform the old essential tasks. Soon after the abolition of the draft, the quality of military recruits began to decline. And soon after women's liberation, women, particularly the most educated and ambitious women, began to have fewer children, later in life, or even not at all. The possibility arose that in the absence of coercion, maybe people need some incentives, or at least some tangible thanks, for performing society's most important tasks.

The point I am getting to here is that this country has responded to only one part of this challenge. Since the 1970s we have established an elaborate incentive system for warriors, but none for mothers.

Even though many men would probably pay for the privilege of being fighter pilots or special forces, young men (and women) are enticed into the military with the promise of incomparable benefits—not one of which is contingent upon actual service in combat. Full retirement after 20 years. Lifelong medical care, with prescription benefits. Educational subsidies, housing subsidies, job preferences, and the country's best day care — subsidized — for their children. Being a warrior may not pay well, but it certainly guarantees a degree of comfort and security.

We also know that many women would pay for the privilege of being a mother, because we do. Yet Mothers, unlike Warriors, have no incentives or support to do the best possible job they can. Mothers (and children) have no medical care, no G.I. Bill, no low-interest housing loans, no extra points on civil service exams, no discounts on their auto insurance. People who raise their own children earn no Social Security credits, no unemployment insurance, no disability insurance or workman's compensation — none of the normal insurance that covers those who are employed full-time. What mothers do is not even considered work. Officially, a mother at home is "not in the labor force." Her work is "unskilled," and her productivity is not worthy of inclusion in the Gross Domestic Product. Like a child, she is classified as a "dependent."

There are no statues in the parks to great caregivers, and no services in national cemeteries honoring their lives.

Dedicated parents do not tend to rise in business or to make partner. They are not sought after on the lecture circuit or on the nightly news. They are not considered experts, and they don't write legislation, otherwise known as the rules of the game.

There is no preparation for parenthood, comparable to the basic training that turns military recruits into effective soldiers. Both war and child-rearing are getting more complicated, but only one requires any training. I've often wondered, if "mothering" is natural to women, and "fighting" so natural to men, why this huge discrepancy in training and preparation? I know that many new mothers feel like soldiers being sent off to battle with no weapons and no air cover.

Equality for Mothers

This is the anachronistic situation of those who care for children. We train, equip and reward members of the military and we have the world's best fighting force. We rely on an ill-paid or unpaid, poorly equipped and untrained army of volunteers for our internal defense, and then we wonder why so many families aren't doing a better job. We maintain the illusion that good care will just happen, and then we wonder why we have a shortage of skilled childcare workers, nannies, and teachers. As economist Shirley Burggraf has explained, "getting women's work done when women are no longer volunteering their unpaid or underpaid labor is what much of the discussion of family values is all about."

What is to be done? I believe the answer is to restore the ancient stature of the Mother, and to put Mothers, for the first time in human history, on a real basis of equality with Warriors.

We need to reconceptualize child-rearing as highly skilled, productive labor. We need to see the work of caring for dependents not as a strictly private endeavor, but as a public service of the highest order. Child-rearing may be rooted in the private home and family, but how well it is done has the broadest public implications.

Until we recognize that the traditional female contribution to society is as important as the traditional male contribution, women will never be equal, and children will never be well

treated. Some women have known this for a long time. At the beginning of the 20th century Leonie Rozade, a French feminist, dared to suggest that "If one gets rights for killing men, one should get more rights for having created humanity."

And more than 60 years ago Virginia Woolf had this to say, in her book *Three Guineas*:

"...the world as it is at present is divided into two services; one the public and the other the private. In one world the sons of educated men work as civil servants, judges, soldiers and are paid for that work; in the other world, the daughters of educated men work as wives, mothers, daughters — but are they not paid for that work? Is the work of a mother, of a wife, of a daughter, worth nothing to the nation in solid cash? That fact, if it be a fact, is astonishing... wives and mothers and daughters who work all day and every day, without whose work the State would collapse and fall to pieces, without whose work your sons, Sir, would cease to exist, are paid nothing whatsoever. Can it be possible?

"Ah, you will interpose... Husband and wife are not only one flesh; they are also one purse. The wife's salary is half the husband's income. The man is paid more than the woman for that very reason — because he has a wife to support. The bachelor then is paid at the same rate as an unmarried woman? It appears not... but let it pass. Your statement that the wife's salary is half the husband's income seems to be an equitable arrangement, and no doubt, since it is equitable, it is confirmed by law. Your reply that the law leaves these private matters to be decided privately is less satisfactory..."

This was written in 1938. Today, "the daughters of educated men" have a chance, like the sons, to be civil servants or judges or even soldiers. But if they also elect to be mothers, not all that much has changed. ✱