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Perfect Madness? Motherhood in a Postmodern Age

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Warner, a biographer of Hillary Rodham Clinton and co-author of a book with Howard Dean, interviewed 150 women over a four year period in order to take the pulse of motherhood today. Her book, featuring a title that implies desperation, depicts modern motherhood as an impossibility. To make her case, she first rejects what she characterizes as two erroneous understandings of motherhood. The first is that offered by traditionalists, who argue that a mother's first responsibility is to her home and to the nurture of children. Warner quickly dismisses this picture as a relic of a bygone past.

At the same time, Warner dismisses the early feminists—including figures such as Betty Friedan—as neglecting the possibility of a woman's choice to find fulfillment in motherhood.

Actually, Warner has not moved as far from the early feminists as she thinks. Her portrait of motherhood is deeply rooted in the ideological foundations of modern feminism. She may refer to the present as a "postfeminist era," but her basic assumptions about a woman's place in society and the nature of male oppression reflect decidedly feminist sentiments.

The "mess" Warner portrays consists of mothers who are deeply unfulfilled and conflicted. Speaking of these women, Warner summarized her concern: "By any objective measure, they had easy lives—kids in good schools, houses in good neighborhoods, dependable husbands whose incomes allowed them to mostly choose what they wanted to do with their time. Most had chosen to pursue Mommy Track jobs—part-time work, a big cut in ambition and salary. But they didn't mind that; they knew that that was a privilege. Still, there was something that bugged them. It ate away at them. It cast a pall on all the rest. What they couldn't make peace with was the feeling that somehow, more globally, they were living Mommy Track lives."

These "Mommy Track lives" are "filled with kneepads and bake sales and dentists' appointments and car seats." Warner's sense of crisis is directed at the sense that these mothers live less fulfilling lives than their husbands. The feminist dream promised more than this.

Judith Warner recognizes that her concerns are characteristic of her own generation. But, this is a generation largely shaped by a therapeutic concept of the self and a vision of life as a continuing experiment in self-expression and fulfillment. For many of these women, motherhood has become a trap, a prison of confinement that locks them out of a world others inhabit.

"I think of 'us' as the first post-baby boom generation, girls born between 1958 and the early 1970s, who came of age

politically in the Carter, Reagan and Bush I years. We are, in many ways, a blessed group. Most of the major battles of the women's movement were fought—and won—in our early childhood. Unlike the baby boomers before us, who protested and marched and shouted their way from college into adulthood, we were a strikingly apolitical group, way more caught up in our own self-perfection as we came of age, than in working to create a more perfect world.”

Choice stands at the center of this younger feminist worldview. “Most of us in this generation grew up believing that we had fantastic, unlimited, freedom of choice,” Warner argues. Nevertheless, she laments the fact that many of the women in her generation face choices far more limited than they had imagined. “You can continue to pursue your professional dreams at the cost of abandoning your children to long hours of inadequate childcare. Or: You can stay at home with your baby and live in a state of virtual, crazy-making isolation because you can't afford a nanny, because there is no such thing as part-time day care, and because your husband doesn't come home until 8:30 at night.”

Clearly, Warner and her friends really did think they could have it all. As she acknowledges, they envisioned motherhood and professional life as a matter of “balancing” responsibilities and fulfillments. It didn't work. Warner presents motherhood as a pathology of stresses and frustrations. “I read that 70 percent of American moms say they find motherhood today ‘incredibly stressful’,” Warner reports. “Thirty percent of mothers of young children reportedly suffer from depression. Nine hundred and nine women in Texas recently told researchers they find taking care of their kids about as much fun as cleaning their house, slightly less pleasurable than cooking, and a whole lot less enjoyable than watching TV.”

By any measure, this is a very sad and disturbing vision of motherhood. When Newsweek puts this article on its cover, it is sending a significant signal to the culture at large.

Warner does have some legitimate concerns. She writes about the stresses of motherhood in an age of frantic activity and constant entertainments for children. She laments the exhaustion that comes from ferrying children from one soccer practice to another and the sense of responsibility, felt by many women of her generation, to be the “perfect mom” of the post-feminist fairy tale.

Then again, the fairy tale was a fantasy from the start. Parenthood is not a matter of perfection, and the nurture of children is one of the most time-consuming, demanding, and unrelenting responsibilities that can fall upon any human being.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Warner's article is the fact that it is so decidedly focused upon the mother rather than the children. The mother stands at the center of her narrative, and the mother's needs—perceived and real—frame the “reality” around which her proposals are formed.

In an Op/Ed column in The New York Times published on Valentine's Day, Warner cited a report by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University to say that “children are a ‘growing impediment’ to a happy marriage.” Just in case anyone missed her point, she suggested the following question: “Is our national romance with our children sucking the emotional life out of our marriages?”

No doubt, Judith Warner must love her children. Nevertheless, she writes as if her children are an imposition in her otherwise untroubled life. She blames “the motherhood religion” for this sense of oppression, arguing that “motherhood in America has been unmoored from reality and turned into a theology.”

She roots this “religion” in the Victorian cult of motherhood and argues that America's social institutions failed to adjust this myth in the wake of the feminist revolution.

Whether she recognizes this factor or not, Warner's concerns are almost entirely limited to relatively well-off mothers with substantial education and professional opportunities. Her concerns do not easily translate to the single mother who must work in order to keep food on the table.

Furthermore, her economic concerns are transparent. She complains that “middle class life is now so

expensive that in most families both parents must work gruelingly long hours just to make ends meet.”

Warner reveals a bit of her own economic background in the narrative of her book. She spent a considerable amount of time in France, where she learned to love the welfare state. She writes as if the opportunities she has known can be easily and legitimately generalized to an entire generation.

In reality, the economic aspirations of those who identify themselves as “middle class” have been skyrocketing over the last generation or two. What was considered safely middle class as a lifestyle just a generation ago is now considered to be insufficient.

Accordingly, Warner’s most practical suggestions amount to a Europeanizing of American society. She suggests tax subsidies that would encourage corporations to adopt “family-friendly policies,” as well as “government-mandated childcare standards and quality controls that can remove the fear and dread many working mothers feel when they leave their children with others.” It doesn’t take long to realize that Warner is calling for government-subsidized childcare for all citizens.

She also calls for “flexible, affordable, locally available, high-quality, part-time day care so that stay-at-home moms can get a life of their own.” Consider just the last few words of that sentence. Without skipping a beat, Warner argues that stay-at-home moms do not have a life of their own unless they can put their children into another’s care for some considerable amount of the day.

Beyond this, she calls for “creating vouchers or bigger tax credits to make childcare more affordable,” for paid family leave for women, and for other forms of government support. “In general,” she argues, “we need to alleviate the economic pressures that currently make so many families’ lives so high-pressured, through progressive tax policies that would transfer our nation’s wealth back to the middle class.” Well, here we meet the economic proposal in its bare political form. She wants someone else to do much of the nurturing and spend much of the time required by children, especially in their younger years. Someone else should do a lot of the paper-cutting, the party-planning, and the educating of children so that mothers can have “a life of their own.” Following the European example, employers should be forced to pay maternal leave and to hold jobs open for as many as three years after a baby’s birth.

What is sadly missing from this entire picture is the affirmation that motherhood—like every other major responsibility—necessarily brings limitations. The myth of the “perfect mother” is not corrected by marginalizing motherhood as a hobby for women who want it all. Everyone experiences limitations, and no one—male or female—enjoys a life of unlimited choices. This is the real world, after all, so those who are driven by Warner’s mix of ambitions are almost certain to be frustrated.

The last thing we need is for our children to be nurtured in institutional settings and for government to become the surrogate parent for our children—part-time or full-time. Newsweek’s cover story and Judith Warner’s new book serve as a significant cultural alarm that should awaken us to the fact that motherhood has been pervasively redefined in our generation.

In reality, motherhood is one of the highest callings on earth. Inevitably, the experience of being a mother brings limitations into a woman’s life. At the same time, those limitations represent the liberating lines of transcendent purpose.

Judith Warner presents bold arguments and depicts the motherhood crisis in colorful terms. Without doubt, we must recover a higher concept of motherhood than this. Accepting Judith Warner’s proposals for fixing the motherhood crisis would be, in itself, a form of perfect madness.

