

## Motherhood and Feminism

### *Lessons from the Titanic*

*This essay examines my transition from career woman to stay-at-home mom, and how motherhood has raised my consciousness as to the naivete of the feminism I once embraced. In championing more power for women in the public world, feminism can no longer be seduced into accepting a male-defined scenario of how working life should work—the scenario of the ideal worker unencumbered by any family commitments that guides most corporate, professional, and governmental policy. Few workers are ever “ideal” (unless they have a full-time stay-at-home wife), nor is the world they live in. Continuing to acquiesce to such impossible ideal circumstances is rather like setting sail on the Titanic. The still rigidly gender-divided reality of parenting in most families throws into sharp relief how our “post-feminist” culture continues to devalue the “women’s work” of caring for a home and rearing children even as it makes that job necessary for all other jobs to occur. My new mother-feminist consciousness makes clear to me the next goal of feminism. We must make the culture of the (paid) working world adapt to the needs of mothers and children, allowing the work of parenting children to become what it should be: not a disaster waiting to sink us but the rudder intended to guide our communities to calmer waters.*

I have a new feminist consciousness now that I have given up my career in order to meet family needs. A few years ago, rather than continue a commute after being unable to land a job in the same town as my husband, I resigned from a tenured position in an English department to stay home and take care of three children—infant twins and a four-year-old. I was 37 years old and closing the book on my chances of returning to academia, no matter what well-intentioned friends and colleagues said about the changing atmosphere in universities that might provide me opportunities to re-enter the profession. Although I had planned my life quite carefully up to and including the arrival of my first child,

events in my life after his birth were increasingly not under my control. Brian Green (2003) discussing superstring theory in *The Elegant Universe*, comments about laws of physics that “new laws come into play when the level of complexity of a system increases” (17). I know of few systems more complex than a nuclear family with several small children and two adults working full time. And in the end I did not find myself quite up to that level of complexity.

It has been a rocky road for me, emotionally, since leaving my career to be a full-time stay-at-home mom, which I consider myself despite a few semesters of part-time teaching. I have gone through, and continue, an identity crisis as I have seen myself morph from the person I really am into someone else, at least as seen through other’s eyes. Whenever my children’s teachers and friends and even the neighbors call me Mrs. Hobson, as they do most of the time, I feel as if I have been miscast. My real self wants to say “Actually no. It’s Dr. McDonough”—but that seems pretentious for a woman who spends most of her day doing laundry, running household errands, managing family finances, cooking, cleaning, and sorting out the myriad activities, conflicts, and commitments that arise from parenting three active boys. On one level, I want to be a mother like my own was, and remains—someone who always has time for her children, never acts as if they are an interruption or a bother, always seems to know how to support and encourage them. On another level, I don’t want to be defined only by my children or for my life to be only in service to someone else’s needs.

So, I find myself wondering: have I been derailed by motherhood even though I consciously chose it for myself? In the past five years, I have felt shanghaied by a system that makes it so difficult for a woman to pursue a career and parenthood. Being unable to “find a balance” between work and home life, did I cop out to a gender stereotype? When push came to shove in balancing my wants and those of my children and husband, I gave up my personal goals for their greater good. I just could not make our family life work any other way because I did not want a frantic life. Having experienced the demands of full-time work and parenting I knew that feeling of skating on the edge where one slip up, one cog not working right in the machine of our lives threw everything into chaos. I knew how it felt to be one place but know I was needed somewhere else. Although my work life was often a respite from the demands of family and my family life a respite from the demands of work, the demands of both soon pushed our family into a pace of life with which I felt uncomfortable. Family dinners of home-cooked meals should not be a luxury. The decision to keep a sick child home from day care or school should be based on the child’s needs rather than on a work schedule. And small children simply need lots and lots of time. I was lucky enough that we could, with careful management, afford for me to stay home with the children—first on temporary leave, and then completely unemployed. At the same time, it never felt like a choice. If I could have landed a job in the town where my husband worked—one with flexibility for tending to children’s needs—I would have chosen that.

Thus when I first read Miriam Peskowitz's *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* (2005), I felt relieved. Here was a researched, thoughtful study voicing all the doubts and concerns I had been recording in my own journal over the past five years as an unintentional stay-at-home mom. Peskowitz's interviewees were voicing my sense of loss over a career I never planned to give up as well as my happiness at having the chance to be home when my children are young. They reflected my fear of not being able to return to rewarding work and my discomfort with the traditional gender roles into which my husband and I have fallen. They mirrored the solace I have encountered from the support of other mothers I know, and they acknowledged the self doubts I sometimes feel over whether I am doing a truly "good" job of mothering despite my long hours and commitment to it. And most of all, the women of Peskowitz's book give voice to the burden that I have carried as a mother that some how it is all up to me, alone, to make things work for my family against the pressures of a corporate/consumer-driven culture.

The mother's or woman's perceived burden to "make it all work" is increasingly significant as I think of my ideas of feminism before I became a mother. Those early feminist ideas were about being in control of my life and my choices. Choosing what to study, what to do, where to go. My life, my future, were all up to me. The possibilities seemed boundless back then. I look back on that twenty-something woman and realize how little I knew about what choices would be available to me once I stepped out of the position of the ideal worker unencumbered by family commitments. So many of the arguments about parenting and work conflicts grow out of the issues of choice or the lack of it. Motherhood has made clear to me that a focus on personal choice often obscures the lack of choices that are offered us. More particularly, these choices often do not acknowledge the unpredictability of life, especially, but certainly not limited to, life with children. Increasingly I see the working world being created like the Titanic: built with such utter faith in one course of events that a simple matter of providing enough lifeboats has been overlooked because no one thought to consider the potential complications if an unexpected (or even an expected) obstacle were to arise. Any mother could have told those architects, designers, and financiers that obstacles will arise and that the improbable, unexpected, or unlikely can (and often does) happen, and thus should be planned for and accommodated.

In championing more power for women in the public world, feminism can no longer be seduced by the best-case scenario ideal of how working life should work that guides most corporate, professional, and governmental policy. Workers are not all "ideal," nor is the world they live in. Workers do get sick. They have important commitments outside of the office that include spouses, partners, children and parents whom they care for. Even when everything else is going smoothly in their lives, they still have to see doctors and dentists, pick up prescriptions, buy stamps, bank, update car registrations and driver's licenses, buy groceries, have their cars serviced, and a myriad of

other errands that usually have to occur during traditional “working hours.” Since becoming a stay-at-home mom, I have increasingly been the one to take care of these things not just for me but for my whole family—including my husband who has moved into greater and greater time commitments to work in order to support our family on his salary alone. Many days I wonder how he would do these simple things just for himself if I weren’t here, much less manage to handle all the childcare, too. As it is, he has given up any semblance of personal time or regular exercise because he just can’t fit it into the day and also spend time with the children and cover the few parts of the childcare needs he can fit in. He has become the ideal worker whose work in the office is made possible only by having a spouse at home who covers the work of every other aspect of life for him from calling the exterminator when the house gets invaded by ants (and waiting at home during the four-hour time slot in which they might arrive) to washing his shirts for work (he irons them—I’m not a total domestic diva). If he wonders how he’d take care of the house and children without me, I have had many a sleepless night wondering what will happen to our family if he were to get sick or injured. Could I get decently paid work with such a huge gap in my resume? Are we on our own Titanic sailing gaily along toward some iceberg that will hit us unexpectedly one night? Do we have enough lifeboats?

As I have gotten older, I feel less and less in control of my life. And I wonder if that is the effect of maturity or the result of the insecurity that our still rigidly gender-divided parenting culture has created. A culture that still devalues the “women’s work” of caring for a home and raising children even as it makes that job necessary for all other jobs to occur. Do I feel insecure and uncertain because I am no longer an independent wage earner who supports herself and instead am relying on a (male) partner to take care of me and our children financially? Or do I feel insecure because the experiences of living make me realize the world itself is an insecure place full of the unexpected, the unlikely, the unpredictable. I know that despite our current workable arrangement our family may be just one unexpected event away from personal and financial disaster.

Many things hit us unprepared. Things that, as a friend of mine said to me recently, we never signed up for. How was I to foresee that a necessary job change on my husband’s part would dictate a move for the family and a commute to work for me, and then I’d be facing the arrival not of just a second child but unexpectedly of twins? Or how could my friend foresee her beautiful first son would turn out to have so many special needs? Or why would another friend of mine have been expected to “plan” on being diagnosed with MS after the physical trauma of giving birth? If motherhood has taught me anything about life, it is that the concept of being in control is tenuous at best. Birth defects, breast cancer, miscarriage, divorce. Life is full of things we never signed up for. So, is the concept of being “in control” of one’s life really possible for anyone? Given the uncertainties, I have come to believe that all of us, mothers or not, need to readjust our glasses to a realistic rather than an idealistic view

of the world, and couple it with the most significant trait any person can have: adaptiveness.

For me, the goal of the next wave of feminist activism is at last clear: expanding adaptiveness from our lives into the life of the culture we inhabit. Women are adaptable. We excel at it. Biologically, our bodies are coded to adapt to amazing extremes in the process of procreation—as anyone who has experienced or witnessed pregnancy and labor can attest. That women have for centuries been doing the work of bearing and raising children on top of the labor of the home and of the field and factory attests to the female ability to adapt to extraordinary demands. The question is, should such demands of adaptiveness be limited to women? Are we, as one of my friends recently put it when asked to take on yet another project at work on top of her already overflowing work load and her “home” work of parenting five children, being punished for our competence?

My nine-year-old son recently watched a television program in which scientists discussing the shrinking Y chromosome speculated that the male of the species could eventually die out due to becoming unnecessary for perpetuating the species. The genetic evolution of some species has been toward parthenogenesis, the female of the species adapting to a point where procreation is possible with no input from the male. My son, who is just on the cusp of really getting the whole sex thing, voiced concern over the idea of men dying out. “Do you think that’s true?” he asked me. I had a flashback to an earlier discussion regarding his fear about what would happen to people when the sun becomes a red giant and burns up the earth in a few million years. I comforted him then by saying that given the long time we have to prepare for such an event, I was sure that our distant descendants of the human race would figure out a survival plan. Looking at his concerned face as he contemplated the idea of men—such as he will be one day soon—eventually becoming genetically unnecessary, I did not give a hint of the round of articles that came out a couple of years ago about the obsolete male, fueled in part by scientists in Japan successfully forcing parthenogenesis in genetically altered rats (Kono, *et. al.*, 2004; Loebel and Tam, 2004; Kirchheimer, 2004). That a Google search of the term “obsolete male” would turn up over two million hits. Instead, I told him I did not know if such a thing would happen, but that evolution occurs slowly over many thousands of years, so it would be a long, long time before we have to worry about it. “And maybe by then,” he replied, “We’ll have figured some things out.” “I hope so,” I said.

But I was thinking we need to figure something out now. My husband and son don’t want to be obsolete men who are just obstacles to women’s success in the world. They don’t want to have their contribution to family reduced to their paycheck. They want to be working partners in the business of life. And I’m sure that women don’t want to have to evolve into some double-bodied creature that manages to be in two places at once—earning a living and parenting her children—or, worse, evolve into two types of females, like worker bees and

procreating bees. Probably there are many men who still need to adapt further to the necessary roles of active fatherhood and full partners in running the home. But a key change needs to occur in our culture. Unless we advocate for significant change in the structure of our societies—changes that adapt to the needs of parents and children by valuing the traditional “women’s work” of home-making and child-rearing, we may be headed to cultural disaster. How long can we survive no paid family leave, little flexibility for workers to attend school functions or parent teacher conferences or to take care of sick children or elderly parents without jeopardizing their jobs, the high price of motherhood (so well documented by Ann Crittenden, 2001) that forces stay-at-home and part-time working mothers to sacrifice financial security in order to parent their children, welfare policies that insist on forcing mothers of young children into the work force?

As it stands now, with too many corporate and government policies that either conflict with or fail to acknowledge family needs, I can’t help but wonder—is America insisting on becoming the Titanic? A luxury liner, the grandest ship in the world with all the amenities imaginable for the upper class and locked decks to prevent the lower classes from climbing out—all sailing merrily to a watery death because we refuse to provide adequate lifeboats, escape routes, and support ships during the inevitable challenges of life? The biggest and most predictable set of challenges that the majority of adults face in life reside in parenthood. I think it’s time our culture starts to recognize that raising children isn’t like an iceberg in treacherous seas threatening to do us all in. It’s more like the rudder that should be properly positioned to guide us to calmer waters.

## References

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