

We need to restore integrity of motherhood

By William C. Kashatus

Each Saturday morning my young son and I pay a visit to grandma's house. No sooner does she open the door than my boy jumps into her outstretched arms and cuddles her with a simple, sincere gesture of loving affection. The next few hours are spent reading stories, playing the piano and listening to my mother introduce her grandson to the same lullabies, books and morals she taught me so many years ago.

My mother has been the greatest influence in my life. She gave me "roots" by creating a protective and loving environment so that I would one day have the "wings" to set out on my own with a sense of responsibility, compassion and respect for myself and others. Her example reminds me that motherhood is the most virtuous of all callings. Yet it is not always appreciated as fully as it should be by contemporary society.

Historically, motherhood was inextricably tied to the prosperity of our nation. According to historian Linda Kerber, author of *Women of the Republic*, early American mothers were intelligent and self-reliant. They voiced political opinions, exhibited a sense of patriotism, and had a serious educational bent, which they employed entirely for the benefit of their children.

Over the course of the 19th century, our democratic society required a qualitative motherhood in which the character of children a family raised mattered more than the number. No one expressed this belief better than Catherine Beecher, whose *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* was the most popular book on homemaking and child-rearing in antebellum America.

The success of democratic institutions, as is conceded by all, depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of people," she wrote. "If they are intelligent and virtuous, democracy is a blessing; but if they are ignorant and wicked, it is only a curse." At the same time, she noted that it was "equally conceded, that the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand."

Beecher urged the women of her era to view themselves as professionals because their examples would ultimately influence the body politic and, if carried out in a virtuous manner, there would be no greater achievement known to the human race.

Too often, contemporary society fails to acknowledge the political, cultural or personal significance of motherhood. Instead, the stereotype of a domestic figure whose "proper" place is in the home and whose main role is to "subordinate" herself to the needs of her family exploits what was once admired by both men and women as the most virtuous of all professions. It is high time that we abolish that stereotype.

Though I don't tell her nearly as much as I should, I love and admire my mother tremendously. Having entered the ranks of parenthood myself not so long ago, there is not a day that goes by that I am not grateful for the "roots" and "wings" she has given me. Ultimately, nothing can ever match the meaning she has to her life. Or to mine.

William Kashatus is a Quaker school teacher in Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

COMMENTARY

Friday, May 2, 1997