

A Daughter's Anxieties on Childhood, Adulthood, and Motherhood

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Notwithstanding the nature-versus-nurture debates, societies still see children as blank tablets to be written on. Children are made in the physical sense by their parents, and formed in their personhood by the values and ways of life their parents impart on them. There is the assumption that a child internalizes the values of his or her parents through socialization and interaction, and is, in all senses, their organic product. The permutations of various genes may both help and hinder a child's assimilation of certain values, yet the care of a child is what is considered to be of utmost importance, as this determines the manifestation of a child's traits. Both parents shape a child. Both parents inscribe meaning upon and impart language and culture to the child. Yet when we speak of childcare, house care, and reproductive care, the role of women comes to mind. Reproductive work like childcare falls upon women—as a given more than a choice. A woman's particular situation merits reflection on the idea of care and filial relations.

It is often said that little girls are destined to be mothers. For many women, maternity is a given. Once a woman's sex is determined, her role as mother predisposes her to the care of those she has borne from her womb. If it is a gift, one cannot truly say, for the fact of womanhood demands that the title “mother” be taken on, because a woman is said to

be incomplete until she has given life to another. This is different from the male and his giving of life. A man may father children and be unaware of their existence. A woman can't ignore the swelling of her stomach and the aching of her breasts, and is made very aware of the pain that comes with childbirth.

To be a woman is to be a part of the tradition of giving life, of care and nurture—a tradition that remains the same through repetition in various cultures and various ages—that makes the infinite possible and creates a sisterhood of women who know the pangs of birth.

To be a woman is an accident of nature. No one asks to be born a woman. For most women, motherhood is not something chosen, as motherhood in various cultures and times signifies the completeness of woman. Motherhood is not a calling but a demand upon a woman, such that she is not just for herself, but both a vessel for the being she calls forth, and a vessel for the continuation of her society and her culture. How else can human society be propagated? Although the idea that there is life outside of childcare and motherhood continues to be a nagging concept, it is often left unexplored by most women, because for them, this life was never presented as an option.

Tied to the dichotomy of mothering or not mothering, is there really a freedom that comes with being a woman? Yet there is hope. There is still choice and autonomy in bringing forth another being into the world and in forming that person.

The task facing a woman in motherhood is daunting, for she mothers that infinite possibility—a fragile being she can just as easily shape or break. The infinite responsibility is heightened by the fact that the mother was once a child herself, acutely aware of the techniques of care her own mother or father (but more stereotypically her mother) had shared with her, and which she herself has practiced in caring for younger siblings or younger relatives, as she played the role given to young girls in various cultures. It is quite possible that for a woman, the presence of a child is not a call to love, but a demand, that she must give herself wholly to this being's care. This utter self-giving, which many cultures have taught

women but is often attributed by culture to “genetics,” is what is called a woman’s instinct to care.

And what if care is not instinctive at all? That is where anxiety and guilt come in. A woman who has a child, or has seen others caring for their child, realizes the extreme sacrifices that must be made in order to bring a being into the world. One’s whole world revolves around this being who demands full attention. One wants to respond in love, but the ever-present fear of never loving enough is also there. From doctors to teachers to parents to friends, a cacophony of voices is out there to tell a woman when and how to love a child. How will a woman perform her supposedly instinctual role well if those around her prevent her from doing so? There is the anxiety of being held to certain roles and pre-requisites for child bearing; there is the guilt of falling short of such expectations. Who are you to mold such a being? How are you to avoid the mistakes of the past and present? How do you respond to the call to bring a creature into the world, when you realize that your whole identity is both eclipsed and fulfilled by answering this call? Such are the musings of various women on their role as mother.

These are my musings as a woman, growing up in an alternative family situation, having spent more of my life with two sets of parents. Both my parents changed gender roles equally, both fulfilling the role of mother and father, caregiver, and breadwinner. As a woman, who is currently the age at which her parents had her, as a woman who is still unsure of being a mother in the future, anxieties about childbirth and childcare are constant and consistent. One sees the sacrifice parents give and the life changes they take when a child comes into their lives. One sees the care. And often, one sees and feels the effects of certain techniques of care, techniques one may want—but fails—to omit from the rearing of one’s own children. The extent of the sacrifice being asked is tremendous. I am a woman who still relates more to the role of a child than a potential mother, who is afraid of having children because of her anxieties—the fear of having a child with the same anxieties and brooding thoughts as mine, who is afraid of having a child grow up in an age of vast information with a vast potential for

distress. Nevertheless, the idea of infinite possibility is one of hope, and to be a parent is to be one full of hope. For when one is called, one responds immediately—one's response almost a reflex, automatic. This may well be the only way one can stand in the face of infinite and overwhelming responsibility.