



*What's
a
Mother
To Do?*

Conversations
on
Work & Family

MICHELE HOFFNUNG

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To John Mack Faragher
For What We Share

Preface and Acknowledgments

I am a mother, a wife, a college professor. For more than twenty years I have balanced the responsibilities of my family and my career. With the benefit of a job that has flexible hours, a spouse who shares home responsibilities, and relatives and friends who help, I have managed to raise wonderful children, earn a living, accomplish many of my work goals, and still maintain my sanity. Yet, when female students ask how I manage to “do it all,” I know full well that I have not. There were years when I could do no original research or writing. There were long stretches when I had no time for myself. There is much I look forward to doing when my children are on their own, although I like them so much I am in no hurry for them to be grown. Being their mother has given meaning to my life, but it has also limited my range of accomplishments.

Like many young girls growing up in the fifties, I never even considered the option of a child-free life. I always knew I wanted to be a mother; my dreams were filled with babies, many babies. When I occasionally worried about having children, my concern was biological — would I be able to become pregnant? I decided early in life that I would adopt if my body failed me.

At the same time, I never doubted that I would go to college. I did not have any firm notion of what I would be when I finished college, but I felt lucky that I could be whatever I wanted. I did not feel the pressure to be a doctor, or at least a dentist, that I know my older brother felt. Because I was a girl, I would not have to support a family, so I could be anything.

My first career decision was to become a high school English teacher. My parents approved. My mother was an elementary school teacher so I was choosing to be like her, but not exactly. I majored in psychology, minored in English, and planned to take the necessary education courses for certification. In my senior year of college, encouraged by my academic success, I changed my mind. I applied to graduate schools in psychology and was accepted. Instead of practice teaching, I prepared to enter a doctoral program at the University of Michigan. Suddenly I was aware of having disappointed my father. In his mind public school teaching was the perfect job for a woman, one she could leave and reenter, one she could always fall back on. A Ph.D., he informed me, was too much education for a woman. Since I was determined to go to graduate school, he urged me to stop with a master's degree.

I did not consider the potential conflict between being a wife and mother and being a psychology professor. My father's warning that I would make myself unmarriageable fell on deaf ears. My brother had already given up medical science for psychology and I saw no reason why my professional choices should be limited by my gender. And I certainly never changed my commitment to becoming a mother. If no one would marry me, I rationalized, I could eventually have a baby on my own.

Before long, in spite of my father's fears, I was balancing the conflicting demands of career and motherhood. During my second year in graduate school I married a man eleven years my senior who had two children. Though his sons lived with their mother, he was an involved father. In spite of the fact that we were in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and they were in Chicago, we visited with them every other weekend and they lived with us for much of their non-school time. His age and our involvement with his boys combined with my strong desire for children and led us to start a family right away. My first son was born in June of my third year of graduate school.

I never considered not working. I thought having a baby during graduate school would be easier than when I was starting a new job, and I am sure I was right. I did not want to wait to become a mother until I had established myself in my career,

although that is what I usually advise young women today. I started my first job as an assistant professor when my son was fourteen months old. I taught three days a week, was with the baby four days a week, and wrote lectures, graded papers, and edited my first book during nap times and evenings, often working well into the night. By mid-year I was a physical wreck. Luckily I was able to rest and recuperate during intersession and return to work in better shape for second semester. What, I have often asked myself, would have happened to me if I had had a profession that did not have intersessions, or three-day-a-week teaching schedules? What if my spouse had not also been a college professor who could arrange his schedule to complement mine, or had not been willing to share childcare?

Questions like these are what motivated this book. My story is but one particular variation on the theme of balancing employment and motherhood. My situation was difficult but not impossible. I had hard times but lots of rewards as well. I wanted to find out from other women how they manage the complicated choices about employment and motherhood. At a time when, more than ever before, women have control over their fertility as well as the opportunity to work outside the home, how do they make decisions about whether to have children and when to have children, whether to have careers and when to have careers, whether to stay home or to continue employment? And how much do their decisions actually affect their day-to-day lives?

It was three years later that I gave birth to my second son. My older son was in cooperative daycare; the baby came to work with me. I had a bassinet in my office; colleagues watched the baby while I was in class or at a meeting. Like all nursing mothers I was exhausted all the time, but with my second baby I was an experienced mother and teacher. I had learned a lot in three years of employed motherhood, enough so that I just expected to teach my classes and tend my children; I did not expect to do research and writing during that year. I had learned that if I wanted the joy of another baby I had to give up the fast track to professional recognition.

My research productivity picked up slowly once my children were out of infancy. Still, it is no accident that I finally found time to pursue my questions about motherhood well after my youngest child was in school. By then divorce and the creation of a new blended family had made me mother of three, including a stepdaughter between my two sons in age. Until that time I was too busy with the demands of motherhood and employment to study them systematically! Cooperative daycare required parent turns and parent meetings. Kindergarten required picking up midday and providing childcare in the afternoon. Even school days required afterschool supervision and care on sick days and snow days and holidays, but that still left me some private time, which felt like a lot compared to the demands of pre-school care.

While having children slowed down my career, it also enriched my professional interests. More than my extensive schooling (perhaps in spite of it), my experiences as a mother connected me with critical issues in women's lives. I thank Josh, Sarah, and Jesse for inadvertently raising the questions that motivated this book. I thank them also for believing that in addition to being their mother I could do anything else I set out to do.

As I ventured into this project I received assistance from several sources. I wish to thank the Quinnipiac College Faculty Research Committee for its continuing support in the forms of research funds and reduced teaching loads. Members of the Anna Wilder Phelps Social Science Seminar of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women: Laurie Crumpacker, Kay Dunn, Ruth Harriet Jacobs, Frinde Maher, Diane Margolis, Robin Roth, Jane Torrey, Eleanor Vander Haegen, and Mary Roth Walsh, provided intellectual support for my early ideas about this book and read and commented on an early draft of a chapter. I thank them for their thoughtful reactions which helped me reconceptualize the book, as well as for their continuing encouragement. I also thank Peggy McIntosh for obtaining the funding and creating the Mellon program that brought that group of faculty women together. Parts of chapter one appeared in a slightly different form in the essay, "Motherhood: Contem-

porary Conflict for Women" in Jo Freeman's *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, 1984 and 1989.

I also wish to thank the individuals who have assisted me along the way. Ellen Greenhouse and Rachel Ranis were helpful consultants as I prepared to do the interviews. Susan Carter Elliott listened to all the taped interviews and made independent assessments of the women's experiences. She also listened to my endless talk about the project and read several drafts of several chapters. Susan's enthusiasm for the project, and love and encouragement for me as I obsessed with it, have been invaluable. Pearl Brown, Caltha Crowe, Steve Elliott, and Kathryn Marshall read and commented on early versions of several chapters. Emily Stier Adler, John Mack Faragher, Ellen Greenhouse, and Robin Roth generously took the time to read and comment on my entire manuscript. Their criticism has improved the book immensely. Marge Wood of Trilogy Books made valuable suggestions both large and small.

This book would not have been possible without the participation of the thirty women who opened up their homes and their lives to me. I am grateful to each of them for sharing their pain as well as their joy, for teaching me about themselves, and myself as a result.

Most of all, I wish to thank Johnny. As husband/lover/co-parent/friend he has helped to shape my life and my vision. He has been my chief supporter and critic throughout the long process of researching and writing; willing, in spite of his own demanding schedule, to listen to my problems, read drafts of my manuscript, and keep me one step ahead of my word processor. His contribution to my work and to my life is beyond measure. For these reasons, and more, it is to him that I dedicate this book.

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1

Changing Ideas About Motherhood

Motherhood has a special position in the lives of women today; it brings with it both enormous benefits and enormous burdens. Bearing and raising children is essential work, necessary for the continuation of society, satisfying to human generative impulses, and highly valued in the lives of mothers. At the same time, it is undervalued by society and conflicts with other important aspects of women's lives — employment, economic independence, and egalitarian marriage. Mothering is done at home, outside the world of achievement, power, and money. It consequently pulls women who mother away from productive work for at least part of their adult lives.

This has not always been true. Recent work by social historians indicates that our modern notion of motherhood has its roots in the nineteenth century, when mothering became the highly exalted function of females to care for their children and impart to them the highest spiritual values.¹ Prior to this glorification of motherhood by the nineteenth-century middle class, the bearing and rearing of children was integrated into the other work women did and was not women's most important work. In a subsistence farm economy, survival required women as well as men place productive work before reproductive concerns. Women and men worked side by side, in and around the home. Women were responsible for food and clothing production for the family, which involved many complicated skills, as well as for cooking, laundering, cleaning, and childcare.² Infants were tended when possible, and were sometimes played

with, but were never the center of their mother's attention. Their care was largely the task of older siblings. Those children who survived infancy quickly took their places in the social and economic life of the family.³

Industrialization simultaneously disrupted the unity of home and workshop, decreased patriarchal power, and devalued women's work within the family. Life in industrial society is characterized by distinct separations: work from play, production from reproduction, adulthood from childhood. Adults work, children play. Work takes place in the office or factory, relaxation in the home. Activities done outside the home are reimbursed with money; inside the home, activities are done for love. Within this new set of values, which emerged during the nineteenth century, women were assigned to the home as non-producing homemakers. In this context, mother-work became the focus of their attention. As work transformed into wage labor in factory or office, the family took on new meaning. It became a refuge, the place to which dad and kids came to recover from the pressure and pain of alienated work and school.⁴ The burden of providing the comforts of home was assigned to women.

The combination of homemaking and childcare is a full-time job, but it carries none of the economic benefits that employment outside the home provides. Although these reproductive tasks were more physically demanding in days gone by, they were not severed from the productive work of the family or imbued with heavy psychological significance. In contrast to the economic value of women's work in the past, today a woman's devotion to "women's work" makes her dependent on the people she tends. It results in an economic dependence on her husband — a man chosen for love — and a psychological dependence on her children as products of her mothering.

We all know that the work women do in the home is valuable. It is scary to imagine life without it: dirty floors, dirty clothes, empty refrigerators, wet and hungry babies, and so on. The problem is that in spite of its human value, such work brings no money, no status, no prestige. A woman who devotes herself entirely to family work ends up apologizing that she is

"just a housewife." One who is employed in addition ends up with two jobs and one paycheck, a paycheck that is likely to be smaller than her male counterpart's because he is likely to have a wife to care for his home and children, enabling him to devote full energy to his work.

Other historic changes have made more choices possible for women. Prior to the nineteenth century, abstinence was the only effective method of controlling fertility.⁵ Technological improvements and political struggles have made contraception relatively safe, effective, and available in the twentieth century. With the repeal of restrictive birth control legislation in the 1960s, heterosexual intimacy is no longer inseparable from maternity. This leaves contemporary women with more choices than ever before.

Most women want to be mothers and most mothers want at least two children, but many do not want to stop working outside the home and many must work to support their families.⁶ As a result they control, to a large extent, the rate and timing of their childbearing in order to lessen its demands and maintain their other commitments. In our country the birth rate has decreased steadily since the nineteenth century;⁷ in the last three decades alone, the fertility rate of American women has fallen nearly 50 percent.⁸ Women have made a dramatic choice to have fewer children, to end their childbearing earlier, or to start their families later. This steady decrease in the number of births per woman reflects more than the availability of contraception. It also reflects a perception on the part of increasing numbers of women that life has exciting and rewarding experiences to offer in addition to childbearing and that these are within their reach.

American women's participation in the labor force has increased steadily since 1900; gradually until 1940, more rapidly since then. In 1900 only 20 percent of all women of working age (16-64) were in the paid labor force. By 1980, 52 percent of women aged 16-64 worked.⁹ Not only has there been a change in the number of women in the work force, but there has been a dramatic shift in the pattern of employment in women's life cycle. In 1900, the highest proportion of female workers were

young, single women. If a woman worked it would be before marriage; very few worked later in life. Although this pattern was still true in 1940, the number of women working was higher. By 1950, however, while young, single women continued to work, married women in their late thirties had begun to return to the labor force. For the first time, employment rates for women 40-44 years old exceeded those for women 25-29. By 1960, the trend was so pronounced that the highest labor force participation rate for women was among 45-49-year-olds. The greatest increase since 1940 has been for married women living with their husbands.¹⁰ In recent years this trend for married women to be in the labor force has expanded to include women with children, even women with preschool children. In 1988, 53 percent of mothers with children under three were in the labor force, and 51 percent of mothers with infants under one were in the labor force. Of the mothers of preschoolers who were not employed, 25 percent said they would choose to work if safe and affordable childcare were available.¹¹ For a variety of reasons, more than half the mothers with preschoolers are employed.

As I look at the lives of the women around me — friends, relatives, and colleagues of about my age — I am impressed by the range of choices these women have made in the timing of childbearing. A best friend about my own age gave birth to her first child just weeks after my oldest reached majority. A few of my friends have children older than mine, a few are now trying to start families, and others fall everywhere in between. Almost all have careers as well. My acquaintances do not represent contemporary women in general, but their various decisions regarding childbearing are an indication of women's changing options.

As my personal experience illustrates, there are two sets of expectations for contemporary women. We are expected to be individuals who achieve in school and prepare to take our equal places in the world of work. We are also expected to want husbands and babies and to take primary responsibility for family life.¹² Although these expectations conflict, the conflict is not always acute. Most girls learn to compartmentalize, to

keep separate the feelings associated with achievement from those associated with femininity, and to handle them as mutually exclusive.¹³ Separation is one strategy for coping with essentially contradictory expectations.¹⁴ Indeed, the very structure of modern life makes this distinction appear "natural." Girls achieve in school; then, at home, as daughters and sisters, they assist in women's caretaking roles.

Although family responsibilities fall disproportionately on daughters rather than sons, and wives rather than husbands, to a large extent women can meet these responsibilities and still strive for individual success in the world outside the family. Schoolgirls can do the dishes as well as their homework even though their brothers are not expected to. Wives can make dinner after a day of work even though their husbands sit down and watch the news. Through school, during the early years on a job, or in a childless marriage, middle-class women may notice contradictions, feel anger at sex discrimination at work or unequal responsibility for housework, or feel guilt about their shortcomings; but to a large extent they can manage to fulfill both sets of expectations. It is the birth of the first child that provides the strong push to stay home and typically brings abrupt and complete change in the new mother's life activities.¹⁵

Women assume primary responsibility for infant and child care. Even mothers who are employed make the arrangements for childcare while they are out of the home and do the primary care when they are home. Women do this in part because it has traditionally been expected of them. They also do it because early in life they develop a connected sense of self, a sense of interdependence in relation to others that makes the activity of caring for others' needs vital to their own well-being. Women feel connected to their children, and to other family members as well, and typically do not envision their own development separate from that relational context. While young boys too develop this ethic of care, they are more likely to learn to give it up in their quest for a masculine identity which stresses autonomy in relation to others.¹⁶ Women, as a result, are the