Perspectives on Motherhood: A Report on a Conference

Joan Manheimer

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Perspectives on Motherhood, a day-long conference designed to bridge the gap between women's studies scholars and women of the surrounding community, was held on Saturday, April 4, at Sarah Lawrence College. The teachers and administrators from the Center for Continuing Education and the Women's History Program who co-sponsored the conference saw it as the beginning of a network linking current feminist scholarship and the lived experience of a wide variety of women. Despite these aspirations, we were surprised at the volume and range of concern our subject triggered in the community. The conference attracted enormous attention and a tremendous response. Four hundred participants registered; workshops filled up quickly; evaluations raved: "A wonderful day—a wonderful idea." "Great! More of this!" A number of factors accounted for our success, not the least of which was dumb luck. We had stumbled onto a topic that cuts across class and race distinctions and has been the focus of particular tension for contemporary women. Despite radical changes in women's lives, motherhood remains the snag of many of our ambitions and the embodiment of many of our hopes.

The savvy and generosity of community leaders who worked with us also contributed to our success. When our Women's Studies Steering Committee initially met, we hoped to open our campus to women who ordinarily would never venture near. So we drew on our expertise to devise workshops on such appealing subjects as "Ethnic Perspectives on Motherhood" and "Images of Mothers in the Culture." Only when we took our suggestions to community activists did we recognize the bias implicit in our efforts. So trained were we to entertain a theoretical approach to any question that we did not realize that the language in which we couched our proposals was academic and implied a similarly academic audience. We were innocently prepared to announce our sincere intention to open our campus in terms guaranteed to keep it closed. As one community consultant put it, "If you want real ethnic and class diversity at this conference, forget that 'ethnic perspectives' crap and address the real concerns of minority women.”

So we started again, listening as women in various sectors of the community—government, media, community organizations, our own students—told us about the concerns of women they knew; and we emerged with a list of problem-oriented workshops: Choosing to Mother—If and When; Nine to Five: The Working Mother; Single Parenting; Fathering; Teenage Pregnancy; Raising Free Children: Non-Sexist Education in the Home; When the Bough Breaks: Domestic Violence; Politics and the Family; Step-Parenting; Discipline Problems; Lesbian Mothers; Mothering the Exceptional Child; World of Our Mothers: Relationships Among Generations of Women.

The networking we aimed for was part of the planning for the conference as well as of the event itself. Each of the workshops was team-led by a member of the community and a Sarah Lawrence staff or faculty member. Our keynote speakers similarly both signified and realized our desire for dialogue among different groups of women. Grace Paley, a writer and teacher at Sarah Lawrence, opened the conference by reading two short stories about mothers. Persis Charles, a historian at Sarah Lawrence, spoke on "The Figure of the Mother in History," and Elsie Harry, chairperson of the Westchester Welfare Rights Coalition, described "Mothering without Money.” While the language, style, and particular questions addressed by the three speakers differed radically, their concerns were similar.

Because we wanted everyone who was interested in the conference to be able to come, we charged only $3.00 for registration, offered an optional lunch at $2.75, and provided free day care. Even with these economies, the cost of the conference was small and easily covered by a generous grant from the Billy Rose Foundation.

We had to schedule extra sessions of several workshops—The Working Mother, Discipline Problems—but the greatest demand was for Non-Sexist Education in the Home and for Relationships among Generations of Women. True, each of these workshops incorporated a film, but I suspect, more than that, that the enthusiasm they generated signals two areas of pressing concern and a sense of developing possibilities for women. How can we raise children free of the stereotypes that have constrained women and men and the relations between them for ages? How to enjoy the flexibility of life now open to women without damaging the love and exchange among women of all ages?

To answer these and other questions and to facilitate the development of the network, we considered several strategies: a directory, some version of the proceedings, perhaps an annual conference. But one of the workshops began our follow-up for us. The members of the Non-Sexist Education Workshop constituted themselves a network and asked for further meetings, which will begin shortly. We hope eventually that Sarah Lawrence will be the focus of a range of educational experiences like the ones that took place on April 4. The Motherhood Conference demonstrated how easily rigorous, searching discourse can proceed in a language other than academese. We also learned about women's deep hunger to talk seriously about a role that has defined, elevated, controlled and given meaning to their lives. We hope that sustained dialogue of the sort that occurred on April 4 can forge that hunger into some real freedom for women.

Joan Manheimer is the Director of the Sarah Lawrence Center for Continuing Education.

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