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3. Thicker than water?

Mothering and Childcare (1985)

Ruth Wallsgrove

Though I've never wanted to give birth myself, I've always liked children, and believed I could work out some sort of relationship with them outside of motherhood. At one point I would say, if anyone asked, that I wanted to be an aunt. Beyond that I didn't think particularly theoretically, just assumed we should work out alternative ways of bringing up children, and that my part in this would be to commit myself to children who weren't 'mine'.

When I began to meet feminist mothers of small children, I kept my eye out for possible ways to become involved—a search for compatible children and (more tricky) compatible mothers. I'd be the first to admit that I was young and foolish, not offering much more than babysitting, but everyone was happy enough with that.

When challenged some years later to make more of a commitment, to do more real sharing, I was actually thrilled. Over time I'd come to appreciate what children require and began to adjust my life. The box of toys, the changes of clothes, the potty and nappies, the routine procedures of feeding and cleaning, the regularity of time—all those things I acquired. I ended up deciding, in a crisis, to take on two children full-time, when their mother felt she couldn't cope with them any more.

I have ended up losing altogether those children, the two human beings I cared most about in the world. My situation is not, in fact, very unusual: it has happened to several other working-class mothers and middle-class non-mothers in the women's movement that I know of. The circumstances that made life so difficult for the mother in the first place, probably forcing her to seek other carers for her children—her poverty as an extremely oppressed working-class woman—was precisely the issue that blew up in both our faces. I can't feel blameless in or oppressed by that situation, however angry and hurt I was.

What made me much more cynical politically was the attitude of other, middle-class feminist mothers. Some of them knew instantly who to support when I lost access to the two I'd lived with—and it wasn't me. Whatever my experiences or commitment, I was a Non-Mother, on the other side from them.

It's not that I think non-mothers have done everything right. I do realise that those of us who get involved with children in ways other than giving birth to them have the

freedom to be irresponsible, to leave, to cause trouble by going on about the right-onness of sharing and of mothers giving up certain things without understanding that lectures do not instantly alter feelings, and that the mother only has our word that we'll keep our side of the bargain. I've seen all that happen. I can get lost whenever I choose. And that's one reason I'm not a mother. I don't really want sole responsibility for a child every day. But I don't get lost. I don't interfere, in the name of some higher political good, between the children I look after and their mothers. I do try to make the mothers' lives a little more pleasant, because helping lift the burden of work and exhaustion off mothers is a large part of the point for me.

But I do take it very personally every time a feminist mother complains about how non-mothers are oppressive, giving no support to mothers, and how children aren't taken seriously as an issue. You could say they don't mean me, really, but I don't know any more. The fact that the mothers whose children I have looked after didn't want me being any closer than I was doesn't prove there aren't others who'd appreciate sharing more. But I almost feel that the extent of my commitment is precisely what most feminist mothers don't want. They want support, on their terms, but they don't want to share.

Does that sound horrible? I don't think it is—or it is only if we all believe that shared childcare, to the point where the boundaries between being a mother and not being a mother become blurred, is the feminist way forward. But who now wants that? Not those who are choosing to be mothers, obviously. I know there is the line that no-one really chooses to have children; I suppose in many senses none of us choose to do anything. But if we don't accept that women, in certain privileged circumstances (such as being in the women's liberation movement) can make a choice to have children, aren't we claiming we're entirely passive, entirely without control of our lives? That women who do think very hard before they get pregnant are entirely misled in believing they are making a positive choice?

The argument that women don't choose, while intended to silence liberal nonsense about how women who have children should have to suffer the consequences of society's poor treatment of them, can end up sounding suspiciously mystical, as if there's something about giving birth, about making a baby with some bits of the same genetic material as yourself, that is so different as to make any comparisons between 'before' and 'after' meaningless (and conversation between mothers and non-mothers impossible). Or as if women don't choose, it's something spiritual moving in us ... Excuse me, I've heard this one before somewhere.

Insisting that women don't 'choose' can sound like an insistence on a definite boundary - a statement not so much that women can't make sensible choices, but

that motherhood is in itself qualitatively and intrinsically quite different from any other way of being involved with children. Perhaps that's what we all believe.

I'm going to take it that some of the women around me are making an informed choice to become mothers. What is it that they are choosing? Some of them, I know are choosing to become mothers because shared childcare didn't work out for them: they were never given enough time or say with children that didn't 'belong' to them, and sometimes even lost them, as I did. They have come to feel the only way to make sure of a secure relationship with a child is to have one of their own. Of course I understand that. I felt, for the only time in my life, that I wanted a child just after I'd lost all access to the two I'd been parenting. I couldn't do it, mostly because I knew no child of my own would ever substitute for them. But other women feeling they have to have their own child are accepting the division between mothers and non-mothers. A division, ultimately, of control?

Women I know—feminists, mostly lesbians—who are choosing to have babies want to be *mothers*, not non-biologically-determined parents. They want to *have* a baby, not access to someone else's. They want it to know they are its mother, to be identified as mothers socially, even to be the one who *has* to get up in the middle of the night. If that sounds crazy to some non-mothers, it doesn't to me. I know something about what you get back for doing that; and part of what I know is that you get a sense of power. Not just over the child, but also in relation to other adults. Mothers are oppressed by male-dominated society in so many ways. But I think many feminists who are now choosing to have children want to have some area of life, childcare, where they'll have the last word, where the importance of their position as the one and only 'Mum' is assured.

They know, of course, that they'll have to struggle for control with schools and other institutions, particularly if they are Black, Jewish, working class, lesbian, and/or disabled. But they can choose, by using self-insemination, not to set up any struggle for control with individuals, either fathers or female non-mothers.

Women are coming more and more to want to have their children without interference from other adults. Many mothers around me, non-feminist as well as feminist, aren't looking for ways to offload the caring, but positively appreciating being the adult who's in control. What they do want, and need, is more money, better housing, more and better childcare facilities - nurseries with parental control, schools with more parental say. And creches at conferences and childcare for meetings and socials, as a matter of course. All that has to be a priority for the Women's Liberation Movement.

And yet, if I've stopped being angry at feminist mothers, individually and collectively, I think I'm going to remain a little sad—I suppose, at the passing of my youthful idealism about new ways of bringing up children, which break down society's divide-and-rule into mothers (Real Women, but ignored) and non-mothers (who don't even count as adults). Is the only way to survive such a woman-hating, child-excluding culture to take the small power and status the label 'mother' gives us in return for the isolation? And if so, how can we prevent endless tensions between mothers who feel unsupported, and non-mothers who feel betrayed?