

The Predicament of Motherhood

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I was asked if I would speak in connection with the Mother Day celebration on a subject regarding Motherhood and I was very happy to accept it despite the fact that my talk about motherhood puts me in a predicament. It is a very touchy subject to discuss what motherhood means today and what it could mean in the future. It was not too long ago throughout the ages that motherhood was glorified. The relationship of a mother to her children was considered the ideal relationship; holier than anything else, deeper, most profound. Mothers were glorified, they were admired, and what has happened today? Today they are the center of accusation. For no reason mothers are blamed for all the difficulties teachers have with their children. Mothers are constantly advised that they are selfish, don't give enough love, they spoil and ruin their children. Keep in mind, today mothers like ever in the past, try to do the best they could for their children; they devote themselves for them; they want to make them happy. I don't think there are many women in the whole world who at the moment when they become mothers won't want to do the best they can for their children. And how do they wind up? Criticized on the one hand and effected with a deep sense of guilt on the other.

One of the titles which I submitted for the talk today was not "The Predicament of Motherhood" but "The Tragedy of Motherhood." There is no doubt that mothers enjoy their children. They love them, but from my experience with mothers, I must say that their enjoyment of their children as they grow older is quite outweighed by pains, the insults, the worries. I don't think there is any other function for that in a few centuries, that only in a few decades, this glorified, admired function of a mother became now the object of scorn and accusation, and of tragedy? This is what I would like to discuss with you. It may perhaps give you some comfort

you as mothers or grandmothers, that the difficulties which you encounter are not of your making. Mothers are the victim of a cultural predicament. They haven't chosen it, they were forced into a role which is almost impossible. And once we can come to grips with the cause of this predicament, we may gain some insight of our future developments about the way out. The difficulty of being a mother is, as I see it, tied in with the difficulty of being a woman. Feminine and masculine roles and as such the role of motherhood, were pretty well defined throughout the ages. The mother and the woman was warm, emotional—she could give love, affection, stability; husbands and children could depend upon her, upon her love and her support. The man could come home from his fight in life's historical struggle for survival to the peace of his home where he was cherished and served by his wife. All that is gone and it is gone through a democratic evolution. Many people realize and speak about changes that take place in our society but very little to do I hear about the reasons for the changes and the direction of these changes. They are a consequence of the democratic evolution. Democracy means more than a political system of representative government. Democracy means a change in human relationships from the traditional form of superiority—inferiority, dominance and submission—to a relationship of equality.

We speak a great deal about the equality for races. We speak about the equality for sexes in regards to business, wages, so on, and rights, but we don't realize fully that this equality which women have gained changes their function, changes their relationship to man, affected all aspects of feminine existence, and it is rather comical—a sort of tragic comedy—to see how people grapple with this change without knowing what is going on. Right now we are in the midst of an extensive discussion about the immortality in colleges. College presidents and deans come up with the request we want to maintain premarital chastity, which is a lie. I don't believe

that anyone of these educators who speak in favor of premarital chastity mean it. What they mean is feminine chastity, not premarital chastity. I don't think any educator has the slightest illusion to demand men be virgins when they enter marriage, because they don't come out for this. What is happening is that when women attain equality they cannot behave like women did in the past. And if women can't behave in the same way, men can't. The only differences on our campuses is now that the boys don't meet two kinds of girls—the nice ones and the less nice ones—they meet one kind of girl who could be both. In other words, you can no longer function in a traditional way if you grant women the same rights as men. And people don't come out openly and say we want to stand by the old double standards. The whole situation is confusing and confused because nobody wants to admit what goes on. The new moral code evolving is not merely because their children are indulged and everyone wants to do what he wants which adds to the picture but it is mostly due to the fact that girls won't behave like their grandmothers. They have the same rights and claim the same rights. This is one of the many aspects of the function of the woman in the moment, of equality, of democracy changes completely.

We have today in our societies and in our families a change in the typical masculine and feminine setups. It was not too long ago that the typical man was strong, decisive, responsible, reasonable, reliable, and the typical woman was, as I said before, soft emotional, and loving. Not long ago, the idea was that woman had the right to change her mind. If you wanted to do some kind of negotiation with the family, you needed the approval of the husband. The woman neither had the right nor the qualifications to be reliable. Do you know today this antiquated concept of womanhood is officially acknowledged in one of the earliest and oldest American democracies because political democracy does not go together with social democracy and equality? It is hard to believe, but the women in Switzerland have no franchise—they can't vote—and do you know

why? Because women are too emotional to get involved in politics. This is the opinion of the Swiss citizen. Today, this year, they have no equality, the women there, and there are many places where women do not have equality. But after they become equal, they shed this characteristic feminine attitude. Today when a salesman wants to make a sale to the family, he won't go to the husband unless the wife approves, she is the one that has to take on the responsibility.

Today we find the trend to a new symbol of woman, A woman has to be good, not emotional, good; she has to know what is right and she upholds the propriety. It has come to such a ridiculous extent that when a woman does something wrong, she has to do it in the right way. For instance, women are willing to have affairs, but according to the opinion of my patients, there is quite a great controversy. What is better, to go with a man to a motel or make love in a car? And the opinion is quite divided—according to one woman to go to the motel and according to another the opposite. There was a wonderful film with Ingrid Bergman (I don't remember the name) where she had an affair with a man who was married and he was unhappily married, so it was all right to do wrong and have an affair; but when she found out that he was not married, she broke it up because it was not right to have an affair with a man who doesn't want to marry her. You can see how involved the situation may become if one has to be right even if he does something wrong.

This doing right is a characteristic of the modern woman. They are so good that neither their children nor their husbands have a chance. And we see the effect on the family. The more responsible the woman becomes, the more irresponsible becomes the children and the husbands. There was a time when father knew best. Today father doesn't know best, mother does. When I came to this country, most of the divorces were asked by husbands who wanted to leave their

wives; today perhaps a sizeable percentage, if not most, of the divorces are asked for by women who are dissatisfied with an inferior man—they don't behave properly, they don't do anything, they don't communicate with them, they stay out, they are only interested in business or politics or golf—the three areas which men still preserve for themselves and don't let women come too close that they have one area in which they can feel superior. But in the nicer things of life—in education, art, reading—the men yield to the women in order to outclass.

I remember a funeral service of a relative of mine. She was Jewish, a rabbi extolled her virtues as a Jewish mother, As a Jewish woman. She was so good that anybody who wanted something from her would get it. She was so just and fair she always helped everyone whose luck was down. She was glorified as a wonderful mother and I knew her and I considered everything that was said about her as accurate. I knew something more than the congregation did, that the little boy she had was a spoiled brat who couldn't do anything for himself because he had such a good mother. She did everything for him, as all our mothers do. You see, this is the predicament. When mother loves, when she is giving, when she is responsible; she does not get the results which she had a right to hope for. She gets the opposite perhaps. The men become irresponsible, they shy away from home, they are not socially interested, they don't behave themselves, they are criticized by their own wives, and they shy away from all activities where they feel they lose this status of maleness of superiority—which they still think Fate has bestowed upon man and the society no longer grants man superiority.

Now, out of this comes a great variety of difficulty. Let's first talk about the more superficial aspects. Many women are torn between the question of motherhood or career. Our scientists, our experts, our public opinion makers insist that a place is in the home. It was so for centuries, it was so for thousands of years. The Greeks in Athens and the Germans had a simple

formulation for a woman's function. The Germans had the three K's---kirche, kuche, kinder--- church, kitchen, and children. The Greeks had a very similar one—children, cooking and weaving. These were the three roles for women. Public life was not for them; it is against motherhood. Motherhood has chastity; motherhood has devotion to the home. But this was an expression of male domination; women were relegated to the inferior position, because men controlled in communities; they controlled in politics; they were the masters. As we became democratic and developed equality, you could not keep women in this position although we still try to do so. It is simply impossible to give women the same education as man, let them go to college, and then strike off everything they have learned “No good! Stay home! Play bridge! Take care of children! Cook!” One cannot on one hand give women all this education and in most cases the women get the best education by their own choice. I invite you all to go to our high schools all over the United States and you will see the good, trim-looking, industrious little girls and the tough bullies of boys for whom being clean and studying is sissy stuff, who only want to play ball and be real men. I propose a study which will be made in the universities; I have only some personal information about it but if we make a study about the percentage of boys and girls on the honor role and the top positions, there is always more girls than boys. And we know that on all their deficiencies, the ratio is the same---three or four to one---whether it is remedial reading, delinquencies or psychosis. Boys, boys are deficient, women are good and right and adjusted.

The women have not only an equal education to man, but they are superior—they know more, they learn more, and then we relegate them to home. In my mind, it is a great mistake culturally to deprive women of a useful function in the community. It is a mistake supported by certain psychological theories that the child needs the proximity of women. And it is the same

psychologists who are undermining the most glorious educational experiment—the kibbutz in Israel communities where feeling that they were neglecting the children, this kibbutz education was excellent; it had wonderful results. Then they felt the child needs more of the mother. Notwithstanding the fact that I know very few American mothers or fathers who spend two hours every day enjoying the children and playing with them as a mother in the kibbutz. In my mind two hours spent in a wonderful relationship is more important for the development of the child than 24 hours of all this hustle and this reminding and coaxing and criticizing. Most of our children get all their attention by disturbing and when they are nice and good nobody pays any attention to them because mother is glad to get a little bit of peace and quiet. They tend to feel the intensity of the whole more suddenly together. This is more than most parents have time to spend together with the children as intensively as they do in the kibbutz. We are told that the mother needs to spend more time, when actually it is the quality of the time spent more than the amount of time. And the mother who is tied down to the house, who can't feel her strength or value in doing something for the community, is much too vulnerable, much too much concentrating on the children; who from this concentration do not benefit, they only get harm. Because then children demand more and more and mother keeps busy with them because they believe by themselves they are nothing unless they can keep mother busy. And our children keep the mothers busy. They are openly disturbed for the very reason, nonconsciously but very effectively, to keep mother busy, to involve mother, because only then do they feel they have a place, only then they can be loved. Many children feel that if you don't do what I want, you don't love me, and mothers want so much to be loved, so they give in more and more and the children demand more and more and take on less and less responsibility for themselves. The idea of broken homes is a ghost thrown in every family. Actually experience shows that when a mother

knows what to do with a child or when a father knows what to do with a child, he alone can influence him perfectly well. But this fear that if mother is not devoting herself to the family, if she stands up for her own rights, if she does something for herself, it will ruin the children is deeply imbued. Every American girl who gets married is frightened at the prospect “how will I be able to raise my children? How can I make a success of motherhood?” Very little do these girls know that one of the worst requisites, and the worst impediments to success is to be concerned with success.

Success is a by-product. If I do everything that I should do, what it is necessary to do, the chances are that I will succeed. If I am preoccupied with the obligation to be a success, I intimidate myself. I become anxious and afraid, and the chance is much greater that I will fail. We are here to function and not to prove how good we are, we are here not to do the best, not in order to be a success, but to be useful, to do our share. This over-ambition of the mother is communicated to the children and very few educators know already what is so obvious when you see it, that most of our underachievers, while the greatest educational calamity of our time, most of these underachievers are over ambitious. If they can't be the best, they may prefer to be the worst. They will only participate in activities in which they can be on top. Over-ambition, far from being a stimulation to achieve, becomes in many cases the source of deficiency—an obstacle to participation to contribution. In this sense then, we can see that mothers today are confronted with a task for which they are utterly unprepared.

For a long time, we believed in the mother instinct. Every woman has this mother instinct. She will try to love and protect and today we see that the more she tries to protect, the more she tries to love, the more her children take advantage of her. It is not that the children don't love their mother, but some of the most loving children won't hesitate to tell their mother

“I HATE YOU” because mother didn’t do what they wanted, to punish her. Mother is heartbroken: “My son, my darling, my child doesn’t love me.” They do not mean it in one minute, but it is affective in getting mother under his thumb. Today, out this desire to love, out of this desire to protect, we train all over the United States and all over world where the democratic development takes place. We develop a whole generation of tyrants. Our children are tyrants. They think they have the right to do what they want. Anybody who gets in their way is unfair. And only when they can have a gold star and some particular recognition is it worth studying. Our best students study for the same wrong motivation—only for glory, what they can get for it. All this because when we raise children, we give them the feeling that children have the right to do what they want and we as adults, particularly we as mothers, have to take on the responsibility. I said deliberately “We, as mothers” because one of the characteristics of our time is that motherhood is no longer limited to women. It is not the first time in history that that took place. This peculiar change and its peculiar consequences, has a very simple primitive mechanism—or how shall I say development, which is called the COUVADE. The couvade is found in many primitive tribes. It consists of the practice of when the woman gives birth to the child, the father takes the child, goes to bed with it and lets the mother serve both, the newborn infant and the father. It is one typical example how a man took on a woman’s role and why? In my book on marriage, I tried to point out this is probably all taking place in the primitive society which changed from a matriarchal society in which women were dominant to a patriarchal society. And like our women try to imitate man by smoking, wearing masculine dress, and so on, so when the man became dominant after the women were, they tried to imitate women’s role and one of them was to go to bed when you have a baby and let others take care of you. That was not only limited to women, but men did it.

You can see, therefore, that the typical role of men and women has nothing to do with the physiological functions of the sexes. It is merely culturally determined. Today we find that most fathers don't care. They let women do what they want because they know they have not the ability, they have not much to say as the women don't listen to them. Very often when women come to our centers for consultation and we tell them what to do, the husband always says "but, who will listen to a husband?" and so in most cases, men shy away. But in some cases, you will find that men behave like typical mothers—in a protective way. I had a family the other day where the woman didn't care, she didn't want to get up in the morning, she wasn't interested in family life, she wanted her own way—she acted like a typical man—and the father was a good guy who had to wake them up, to see that they had breakfast, to see there was harmony in the family, all the functions of the woman. Therefore, I can well say "We mothers" because it has nothing to do with the sex whatsoever.

But, we mothers are confronted with the fact that raising children in the traditional way is no longer possible. It simply does not go. Raising children has always been based on tradition and the tradition of raising children from generation to generation past has been adjusted to the autocratic society in which we live. The main influence on children is pressure from without, reward and punishment. After it became democratic, not only women became equal to men, but children gained the status of equality characterized by their ability to decide for themselves. You simply can no longer make a child behave, study, apply himself. You have to stimulate him from within. The traditional method of pressure no longer is effective. We have to learn new principles of raising children in the democratic setting. Instead of being an authority that can demand, parents have to become leaders and stimulate them from within. They have learned about the motivation of children and have found out to their great surprise that whatever children

do wrong has a purpose. It has a purpose to keep parents busy or to defeat them, or to hurt them because they've felt hurt by them, or to be left alone, because the children feel they can't do anything right anyway. We have to help parents to understand children because if parents don't understand children in their way of correcting the child's misbehavior they make it only worse. When a child wants attention, the mother feels annoyed "Don't do that," "Do it by yourself," and the more you scold, and the more you coax, and the more you talk, and the more you explain, the happier are the children. You invite them to do it more and more because they want to keep you busy. They don't mind a little scolding, they don't mind a little punishment, provided you keep busy with them. And when you fight the child, "You can't do that to me," the child wants to show you that he can do it to you, and he does. In all this power conflict in which parents get involved, the children win out nine to one. Only when the mother gets really mad, really yells, really spansks, then for a short moment she has the success of superiority. A few minutes later, she gets defeated time and time again.

This is indeed a predicament. Parents don't know how to influence children. At the time when every little child knows perfectly well what to do with mother and father, this you can see if you watch what goes on, how the children maneuver the parents, and it is the child who provokes the parent, either to be nice or be nasty. The child decides, I will be liked, and he is charming. Or the child decides my little brother is more liked, she doesn't pay enough attention to me, nobody loves me anyhow, and regardless how much you love a little child, when he thinks you don't love him he will provoke you to prove that he is right. So you are getting angry, or you are scolding him, or you are punishing him.

We need basically new principles of raising children in a democracy and in our classes, our guidance centers and our books we try to promote this but it will take at least five to ten

years before the generation of parents will catch on to the simple principles of how one can be effective with children. But in the meantime, the ideal which mothers have about what it means to be a mother are working against her. It is this “goodness,” this “responsibility,” this “love,” this pity and sympathy, that parents and mothers have, which does the greatest harm to their children. For example, a child doesn’t get up in the morning. Why? Because it would prefer that mother and father got him up, dress him, tell him what to wear, argue with him. The more responsible a mother is: “I have to see that he goes to school on time,” the later he is, the slower he is, the more he loiters. In order to be effective in the morning, you have to send mother to the kitchen or the basement. But this is horrible; I am responsible to see that he goes to school. This is the assumption on which she operates, not knowing that the more she is responsible, the more she tries to get him to school, the less he is interested in caring for himself. The mother feels she is obliged to see that the child should have a well balanced meal. So the child finds out if I don’t eat vegetables, if I don’t eat meat, if I don’t eat food which touches each other, all kinds of tricks which the children have, then mother is occupied, she will cook something special, she will arrange everything for me, and the natural urge to eat, which all creatures on this earth possess, is stifled in children who prefer to keep mother busy and defeat her. He won’t eat. The more responsible mother feels, the more she feels the child should eat, the less he will eat and even if he starves himself to death. That sense of responsibility which our parents have, or our mothers have, which deprives them of their success with their children, we have to counteract constantly in every mother this image of a good mother before we can help her to become effective with her children.

We found out one means by which every mother could establish harmony with her family when the little ones have tantrums or the children fight and all this commotion which grows

more and more in the American home, there is one thing she can do which will restore peace in the shortest period of time and it has proven to be correct, but how can we sell it to our mothers with their sense of responsibility? What she has to do is very simple. She has to, when a commotion starts, to retreat into the bathroom. In order to do this, she needs an easy chair there, she needs a shelf with some magazines and if the children are all the noisier, she needs a radio, and there she sits until everything is quiet. Now, mothers won't do it because they say I have to stop them from beating each other. I have to stop them from having a temper. I have to teach them that they can't do it, and so she continues to take care of them and to teach them and they get worse and worse. You have to realize that by withdrawing from them, you throw the responsibility to them. If you don't dress them in the morning, they have to take care of themselves and be on time for school. If you don't force them to eat and they don't want to eat, they will be hungry and come to eat. But all this effective method in a democratic society, it is necessary in a democracy that children have to share responsibility, is stifled by our present concept of what a good member is and should be. We find it time and again in almost every single case that we are called to help to counsel, to help the child and adult. I hope you get the general idea. We need a new concept of what a good mother is. And when I thought through "How do I visualize the mother of the future, how can I imagine a woman being a good mother, and I come to a rather startling conclusion—A woman will only be an effective mother if she stops being a mother. Now, what do I mean by that? You see in the autocratic society you had different patterns for man, a different set for females, different pattern set for females, different patterns for mothers. As we become democratic, the sexual difference will disappear.

Notwithstanding the little story in the French Parliament when one of the officers got up and said, "There are as little differences between the poor and the rich, there is little differences

between one party and another, there are as little differences between man and women. Another deputy shouted “viva la difference.” There is a difference but this difference is not expressed by physiological or psychological, moral and personal qualities. Fundamentally, we are the same human beings. We have a distinction between male and female today still because we haven’t yet reached equality. We haven’t yet reached democracy. The pendulum has swung from a masculine superiority to a feminine superiority. But it can’t last either. It will have to come where we will all just become human beings regardless of whether they are male or female. There will be no special function for mother except they will have to give birth and they may have to nurse the baby, but that is done less and less. Can man and woman really become alike in dealing with children? They can and fortunately we have proof of it. We know very little about any society or community which has really established human equalities. It has never existed in the past except in the very short period in Palestine among the Jews that laid foundation for human equality in the early Christian concept. It didn’t last long: it disappeared. The Romans put equality into law. The Stoics had the philosophy of equality but it was short lived.

They are moving now toward an equality which we can only visualize, not experience. However, Margaret Mead in her book on the South Sea Islands described one primitive group source, the Arapesh. The only description I have ever seen of a community under complete equality. Margaret Mead significantly doesn’t understand what she describes. She has attributed this peaceful living to the fact that the children can suck as long as they like—four or five years—and are permitted sexual play. She doesn’t realize this permissiveness for children reflects equality for all; there is no inequality between ages. You can call your child “grandfather”; you can call your grandfather “little child”, because child, father, grandfather doesn’t imply any status difference. Men and women share everything and they all share equally

in the training of the children. There is no distinction in the function of the mother and father whatsoever. Every adult has the same way of treating children. This then, is my vision for the future. Raising children, working with children, presupposes a realization of a basic human equality, and the realization of the method by which we can maintain respect for others and respect for ourselves. All of the methods we suggest for raising children are an expression of this mutual respect. The ability to reach agreement instead of impose on each other; neither parents can impose on children nor let children impose on them. All of these things that go on today—the parents try to dominate the children when in actuality they are dominated by them. This then is the future: a relationship where we will trust in each other, believe in each other, and realize what we want to be without dominating, without succumbing, without superiority, without inferiority, In such a society, in such a family, there is no separate function for mother and father. There is no need for it. Then there will come the time when we need neither glorify mother nor criticize her. You must keep in mind that somebody refers “Oh he’s a Jew, he is a Negro, and so on,” that in this statement there is always prejudice because fundamentally no one is a Jew or Negro; everybody is a human being. Any particular emphasis on one aspect of the human being is degrading. We are simply human beings who happen to have a color, a sex, a relation whatever have you. As long as we speak of mothers as a special category, we put women in a special place. I have a sneaking suspicion that the glorification of motherhood in the past was a slight compensation for the disrespect in which women are held in general. Women were inferior. They were not equal to men, but since every man had a mother, he couldn’t put mother in the same inferior role in which he put all other women. So he exempted mother from the general degradation of women in that she is something special, is something wonderful. And I have a sneaking suspicion that today men do the same to women by showing that even as

mothers they are no good. Mothers, in turn, say, “You are just a father, what do you know; I, as a mother, know more and am superior.” Any reference to mothers as a special group of people will have to disappear when we realize that all are only human beings who happen to be a father, mother, single, married, this or that. I hope that there comes a time that we don’t need mother’s days, we don’t need father’s days, but we need human’s days.

Thank you.