

# S is for Shame

F Is for Fury, M is for Mothering

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As a well-educated woman who had elected to be a stay-at-home mother, I was an enigma. I wasn't into Jesus, ironing male garments, or particularly indolent. Yet my choice was perceived to reveal a flaw of character, a weakness. I was supposed to buck up and go back to work. But I just couldn't do it. That made a lot of people uncomfortable, and most of my critics wore heels. I endured, from liberals and self-identified feminists, endless variations of the question "What is a bright woman like you doing at home?" They were platitudes, ironically, meant to compliment, but shocking insofar as they implied the judgment that mothering and child rearing were occupations reserved for stupid, unambitious women.

I didn't respond well to the encouragement that I could mother at a distance or to the idea that I could trust my left hemisphere and popular culture to direct my life. I wasn't conforming to their formula for a successful life and they rewarded me by demoting me from their social tier. That stung, but when I looked at my infant son, my heart sang and I was among the Queens in the Universe.

The "suits" made me miserable—not because their agendas tempted me, but because I couldn't get them to understand where I was. How complete, correct, and natural it felt to have a baby with you all day long. In the company of the career-minded, the explanations of love and attachment I offered fell on deaf ears. I may as well have had the flu rather than a baby. "I would get over it," they said. In their company, I found myself gripped with shame and a quiet fury.

I took some solace in the fact that non-parents were simply ignorant. But others did have children—some with nannies, others who were tucked away in "great" childcare facilities. "Facilities", I would think ungraciously, their babies are in "great facilities." I hated their smiley-face callousness. I didn't understand them at all.

## The human rights of children

Being a mother at home was hard at first. I had not expected to be so reproached or to feel so isolated. At that time, I was living in New York City where the pressure to be economically competitive was particularly intense. Sheer loneliness forced me to get over the reservations I had about meeting women whose commonality revolved around a book whose title I could barely pronounce without blushing: *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*. The word I kept stumbling on was not "breastfeeding"—although that was bad enough, but the word "womanly."

All of my misgivings, however, crashed at my first La Leche League meeting. Encountering this extended tribe of caring women marked the beginning of one of the most significant chapters of my life. Over the course of a few years, these women helped me to claim a language that dignified my life as a mother, and eventually my life as a parent of school-free children.

Just as any new language broadens meaning, this maternal one too, was altering my perception of myself my work, and society. It was a troubling lens. So many parenting practices and child-rearing conventions struck me as

absurd. For example, although having pretty things to keep baby “safe” and “entertained” was prescriptive, all that hardware: bassinets, cribs, swings, play-pens, and strollers spoke to me of deprivation, of an irrevocable loss of human touch and warmth that babies require to grow best in health and happiness. It agonized me to see so many parents preoccupied with baby stuff, with their baby’s “look,” and to see them become increasingly detached from the feelings and responsibilities I was trying to uphold and to honor.

In the conversations I had with these parents who had delegated the primary task of child rearing to strangers, words like “nurturing,” “protection,” “conscientiousness,” and “perseverance” that described my daily life in the deepest ways couldn’t seem to scratch the veneer of ambition that cloaked their desire for self-importance. What they seemed to want most of all boiled down to social status and classy vacations. We full-time parents were viewed as relics, or worse, as losers. But if trying to validate the human rights of children required “losing,” then that, in fact, was what we were deliberately doing. We were walking the talk of our convictions about the emotional needs of children and modeling this simple creed of childhood: delight and liberty.

The conversations we mothers (and fathers too) had were important. Our words validated our work, and it was a constant source of delight that as our children became increasingly verbal and self-reliant, that this language, descriptive of human relationship, began to include them—so that words like: “generosity,” “responsibility,” “forgiveness,” and “freedom” were acknowledged, defined, and redefined in our households.

## **Education as a conversation**

In my own family, this conscientiousness, as well as certain lifestyle choices (e.g., no television, nothing plastic bigger than a cabbage) bound my family together and shielded us to a great degree from Logo culture. Heedful as I was, something big and incredibly invasive was coming down the road and I didn’t catch on to it until it nearly crushed my doorstep.

As the proverb “we don’t know who discovered water, but we’re certain it wasn’t a fish” reminds us, ubiquitous parts of our environment and culture can remain invisible or transparent until we are somehow jolted out of—what we will forever after see as—our selective blindness.

One day I had such an epiphany; I crossed paths with a trio of school age children. They were unusual somehow, but I couldn’t put my finger on it right away. They were lively and engaging, and had not lost that wonderful earnestness that characterizes so many preschoolers who have strong passions. Also—and this was no small thing—they looked at you when you spoke to them.

I hadn’t met children like this before, who understood the intricacies of easy dialogue—who were naturally engaged, and so, engaging individuals themselves. Most of the children I knew made me feel unintelligible or headless—like an adult in a Calvin and Hobbs cartoon. These kids were charming, sparkling with enthusiasm, and I was completely smitten.

What were they doing out of school I wanted to know? Oh, they didn’t go to school, they explained, in fact, they had never gone to school. That this information “gave me pause” was an understatement. I had stumbled—by accident—onto the best extension of the attachment style of parenting I had been practicing for years. I was as astonished by the possibilities these joyous and inquisitive children represented as I was disturbed by the fact that I had taken for granted the inevitability of schooling my own children.

I’ve preserved that moment in my mind, defeating the tendency of time to soften its edges, because it is a reminder of my hubris, of a time when my distance from the center felt so great I believed I couldn’t be reached. I had forgotten that the kind of defensive acuity you can achieve when you withdraw from centers of influence predicates that you know where those arenas are. In this case, I hadn’t questioned the assumption that school was inevitable, much less been able to think about its necessity or purpose. Those unschooled children, however, were a measure of the difference between education as something that is done to you by someone else, and education as a conversation you have with the world wherever you are and wherever you go throughout your whole life.

Why had I come so close to yielding to the state the power I had to shape my children’s lives? Blindness. Complicity to convention. Of course, I might have found out about home-schooling sooner if the fraction of families electing this alternative was larger than it is. According to most estimates it hovers around 2% of all families with

school age children. I also might have found out about it sooner if states advertised this option as a legal alternative. But our nation's policy makers are, of course, deeply committed to the treatment of children as capital, as little economic soldiers to be crammed full of facts and sent out onto the battlefield in the best interests of the American Empire. Our nation has no interest in liberating its necessary human infrastructure or "corrupting" itself with utopian dreams.

I had been so prepared to be stoic and "cheerful" about that first day of school; it bothered my conscience for a long time. Eventually, I realized that although our society will grudgingly accept the idea of a mother committed to her infants, the conventional expectation is that she will ultimately be enormously relieved to wave good-bye at the big yellow bus so she can resume her "real" life in the marketplace. All the government propaganda that sweepingly claims it takes two incomes to raise a family supports this idea. Most of the women and men I knew who received the same training I did to join the ranks of the professional class (I abandoned) support this idea. And they often support this idea despite the fact that an economically unjustifiable portion of their income simply goes back into the overhead of their jobs, and what is leftover, in millions of dollars every year, goes into the binge of irresponsibility and indulgence, raping and wasting, that is euphemistically referred to as "shopping."

Blind to the larger moral issues, their children are warehoused and socialized to accept capitalistic orthodoxy, including: the "necessity" of being taught in order to be educated; the "inevitability" of competition; that schools are equitable conveyor belts for ambition and mobility; that academic pedigrees are the locus of social status; that making money is an adequate goal for life's work; and that consuming the world will compensate for the loss of freedom and ways of living that they have left unexplored.

In the last decade that I've been unschooling my children, people—especially parents of schoolchildren—have always been interested in knowing why my husband and I have not sent our children to school. I can usually tailor a response to pique their interest and sometimes garner more than a modicum of respect. But, I rarely say what I really want to say, i.e., that the whole educational system is flawed to the core because it necessarily cripples the social consciousness of children. Indeed, the sort of persons that are socialized within the current educational establishment are often so inculcated with exaggerated competitive attitudes and with the idea that individual material gain is the best measure of "success", that they are unable to imagine a world organized much differently... I no longer ask these parents the comparable question: "Why are you sending your child to school?" because to our mutual embarrassment they so often have no idea.

## **The loss of maternal thinking and behavior**

For a long time now, the state, in collusion with corporations, has been supporting the wholesale relinquishment of child rearing to institutions and capitalistic agendas. Given that all thinking is rooted in and shaped by the activities in which people engage, I believe one thing our society is increasingly suffering from is the loss of maternal thinking and behavior—and I say "maternal" without intending to deny for one minute that mothering work, with the exception of breastfeeding, is as suitable to men as it is to women. The world could be organized for human happiness, beauty, biodiversity, community, cooperation, and freedom. But to the extent that people retain their associations and dependence on institutions and ideologies that preoccupy them with money, acquisition, and power, I worry that the entire globe will be reduced to the vocabulary and currency of economics, and that other languages with far greater altruistic content—like the maternal one I've been speaking will be increasingly demeaned as subjective opinions, "fashions," or "tastes" of no social consequence at all.

Those of us who have assumed the responsibilities of caring for children full time and live deliberately at the periphery of mainstream society know a great deal about another kind of life. That knowledge is powerful because its standing rests in the continuum of the human biological experience. We can state our position very clearly: the day-to-day raising of children, the sensitivity, flexibility, resourcefulness, and patience it entails, offers a generous blueprint for the kind of work that needs to be done to build a better world ... a world, for example, filled with many more people who can conduct their lives with love and compassion for others, and who are seriously concerned to secure for all, the necessities and advantages that they seek for themselves.

Remember what Che Guevara said: A good radical education is about loving people first and wanting for them what you want for yourself.

# fifth Estate

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