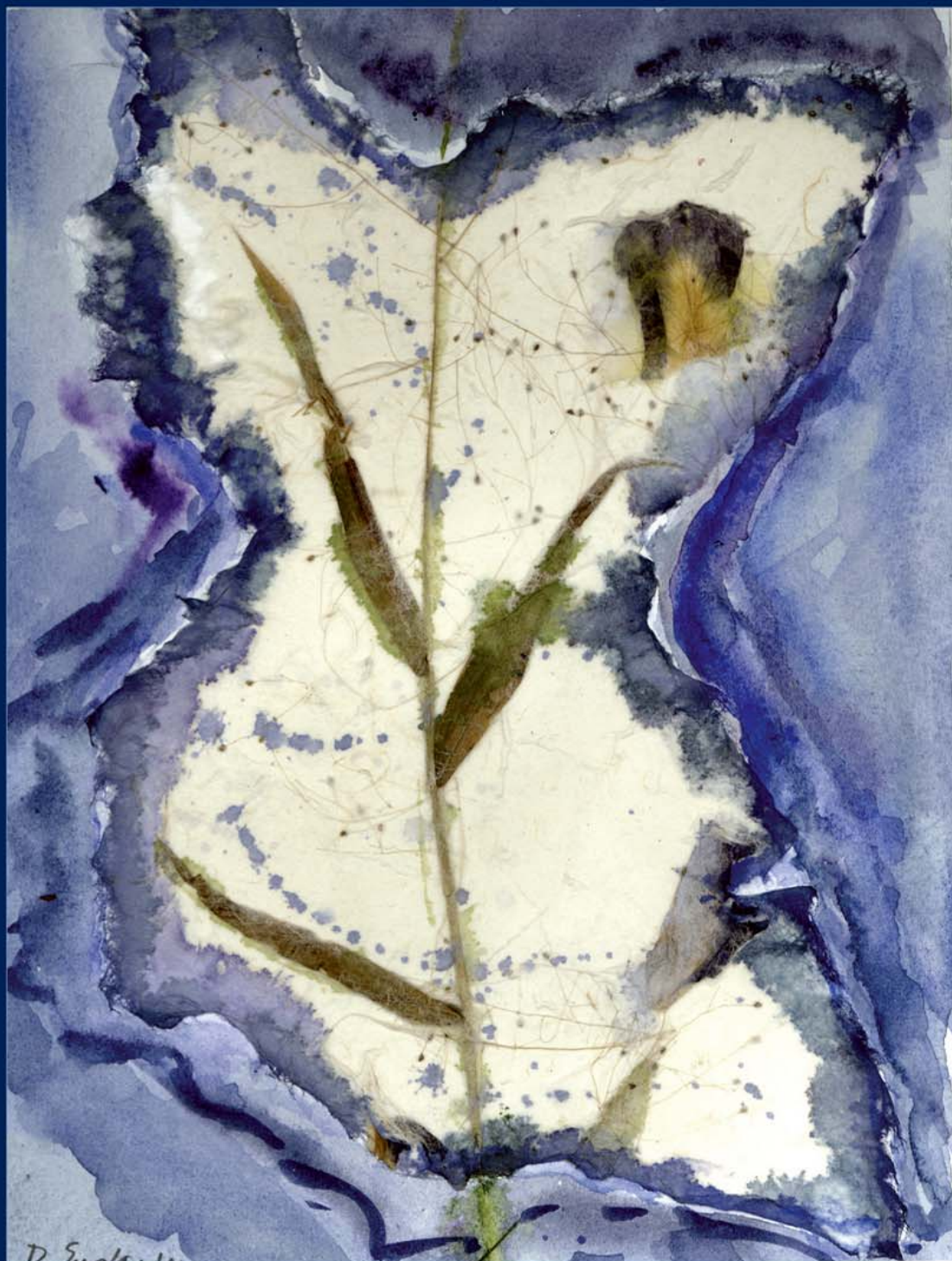


# *Maternal Thinking* Philosophy, Politics, Practice



EDITED BY ANDREA O'REILLY

*featuring a conversation with and epilogue by Sara Ruddick*

# A Conversation About Maternal Thinking

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ANDREA O'REILLY AND SARA RUDDICK

**A** word about this interview. Our initial conversation took place in my apartment in December 2006. It was organized by Andrea's questions and lasted close to two hours. We prepared a transcript, made two copies, and planned for each of us to work on our sections. Time passed; we worked at some distance. It was easy to intermix remarks on the subjects we were discussing, sometimes inserting a question to answer, sometimes exchanging comments on an issue without pretending to have supplied a question. The result cannot be passed off as an interview; it is something like a conversation. I liked doing this project and hope that the reader will add, amend and erase, making a version of "maternal thinking" that serves her purposes. —Sara Ruddick

**Andrea:** The aim of this collection is to explore the various ways your work has been used and developed over the past 20 years in maternal scholarship. Demeter Press is publishing the collection to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of *Maternal Thinking*. The questions I ask will be drawn from my own teaching, thinking and research on *Maternal Thinking* over the last twenty years as well as by comments and questions received by the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) members. Before beginning I would like to express my complete honour and pleasure at being here in your home on this December day. I first read *Maternal Thinking* when I was preparing for my comprehensive exams in Women's Studies in Literature in the summer of 1990 when my children were one, three and a half, and six, and I would have been 29. I have a very clear memory of reading this book on the beach as my children played on the shore. In particular, I remember reading about the concept of "scrutinizing" as I was actually "scrutinizing" my children: watching them swim and play as I was trying to read the book. I still work from the original copy; it is watermarked and soiled by sand.

I enjoy going back to that original text and reading what I was thinking about as a young mother now twenty years ago. My own text has layers of meaning for me. I have reread *Maternal Thinking*—I don't think I exaggerate—probably fifteen to twenty times. I have taught it every year since 1990 and I have



*Sara Ruddick and Andrea O'Reilly*

used it in my dissertation and, as you know, in my book on Toni Morrison. I can not imagine having done the research I have done on mothering without this book. I said to my partner today when I emailed him about our upcoming interview that I felt like I was a teenager finally meeting my favorite rock star. I am humbled and indeed, my colleagues are most envious that I am the person who gets to sit on your couch to talk about *Maternal Thinking*.

I have a list of questions that will guide our conversation. First there are general questions about how you came to write the book, who influenced you, and other general questions. Then we will turn to more controversial topics: gender and mothering, “essentialist” universal claims about mothers and “intensive mothering.” We will give our opinions, and stake out a place in regard to these issues.

**Sara:** Before we begin I too would like to say something. I am deeply, warmly gratified by the efforts you have made to bring readers and writers together to celebrate the publication of *Maternal Thinking*. I now feel as if I share your memory of reading on the beach as your children acted out in front of you some of the “demands” which provoked an attitude of “scrutinizing” which I had described as a metaphysical attitude and cognitive capacity of “maternal thinking.” My words sound heavy; I often find them so. In contrast, there is something direct, real, wholly present about your “readings and rereading fifteen to twenty times.” You bring words onto the page, into the room, where they spread and survive.

I have talked publicly and written behind the scenes about the challenges, opportunity, and comfort that you in your great abundant energy have created

for many members of ARM, including me. I hope that this interview reveals something of the strength of our personal connection which survives, and is enlivened by, differences of age, nation, class, personal temperament, intellectual style and now, perhaps, by disagreements about some basic understandings of mothering and motherhood.

**Andrea:** Now to my first question. What brought you to write this book? What got you thinking about maternal thought and practice? Was it something in your private life, your professional life, or something going on in the world?

**Sara:** It was all of these I suppose. I will start with “the world” as I remember it during the years just before and after I wrote the essay “Maternal Thinking” which was published in *Feminist Studies* in 1980. I was forty-five; my children were fifteen and seventeen. I had been married to their father for twenty-one years and had lived for the previous thirteen years in the same apartment building, subsidized by NYU, which we still live in now. Although I had gone through a period in which I was entirely unable to write, and indeed could hardly read, by 1980 I was writing and have been ever since. In short, when I wrote the essay “Maternal Thinking,” I was living a fortunate, stable life.

In the late 1970s there was a vibrant feminist movement in the U.S. Within that movement some of us allied ourselves with what we called “difference feminism.” To clarify the meaning of “difference” I quoted Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* many times, including in the first chapter of *Maternal Thinking*:

“We”—meaning by “we” a whole made up of body, brain and spirit, influenced by memory and tradition—must ... differ in some essential respects from “you,” whose body, brain and spirit have been so differently trained and are so differently influenced by memory and tradition. Though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes.” (22)

In the spirit of “difference feminism,” Adrienne Rich asked: “Could it be that women are even now thinking in ways which traditional intellection denies, decries or is unable to grasp.” In the spirit of that question I answered, “Yes, we are, even now, thinking differently” in ways that “traditional intellection” is unable to grasp, and may even deny and decry. And that became “maternal thinking.”

**Andrea:** Did you have such grand ambitions for maternal thinking from the start? Something that traditional intellection was unable to grasp, might even deny?

**Sara:** Initially? No. Maternal Thinking was the name I gave to one way women were thinking differently and also the name I gave to an *explanation* of this different thinking that accorded limited importance to “the body”—Mater-

nal thinking was an expression of a whole made up of body, brain, and spirit influenced by memory and tradition.

**Andrea:** Then later you made strong claims—even mentioning Foucault and Hegel etc.—that maternal thinking was a “subjugated knowledge ... regarded with disdain by intellectuals...” etc. (130). How does that stand now?

**Sara:** Well, briefly, I would no longer say “we” and mean all women, or all mothers. Nor do I look for or believe in ways that “we women” see the same world but see it differently. On the other hand, *what* is seen, said, heard, by some though not all mothers—how it is heard—that seems worth excavating and attending to.

**Andrea:** So let’s return to the beginning and see what emerges.

**Sara:** I started to outline “maternal thinking” with what I called a practicalist view of reason. “All reason arises from practices, informs, tests and is tested by practices.” Practices are socially organized activities identified by their constitutive aims. The aim of horse racing is to run across the finish line first. Someone who pauses to do a figure eight is not horse racing although she may be doing something much more beautiful and respectful of horses. The aim of maternal practices is to meet the demands of vulnerable “children” for safety and well-being. Someone who absent-mindedly walks ahead of a young child in the midst of a busy highway is not meeting that demand. Some practices are recognizable in some but not all or even most cultures. Horse racing is such a practice. There is nothing odd about a society without horse racing. By contrast, some practices are virtually ubiquitous; there is something suspicious about their apparent absence. Mothering is such a practice. This is not because adult humans are inherently motherly but because human children are inherently vulnerable in ways that demand what we call “mothering.”

Horse racing and mothering may seem ludicrously incomparable, the one so simple, the other almost too various and complex to call a “practice.” But the comparison did its work. Once I grasped the idea of a practice and then began remembering, listening to, looking at, reading about practices of mothering, I found myself identifying the cognitive capacities, metaphysical attitudes, criteria of truth and conceptions of virtue that I said made up “maternal thinking.” I also became enthralled with the phenomena of mothering as I had not been before.

**Andrea:** In my first question I asked what brought you to writing about mothering and I mentioned your professional life, your personal life and “something in the world.” I don’t believe that I have ever heard you talk about philosophy. But someone emailed to ask how your “home discipline,” philosophy, responded to the idea of maternal thinking?

**Sara:** Well, my first thought is that I didn't expect the attention of philosophers, didn't get it and wasn't bothered by its absence. By the late '70s the force of feminism and my husband's tenure had freed me from the anxieties of a possible professional career. You might say I "opted out" though I had little to opt out of—two or three adjunct courses a semester. Or I might say, given the importance of teaching in my life, that I opted into an untenured unranked interdisciplinary faculty where I was asked to teach only what and how I desired to teach. In these circumstances I could give philosophy a pass and philosophy could pass me by.

But this is too simple. I didn't pass philosophy by. I took great pleasure in "introducing" philosophers, especially Plato and Spinoza, to young students. More to the point, I depended on philosophy to work out the idea of "Maternal Thinking." The "conceptual framework" I provided was not merely a flourishing touch. I thought within the framework I created and was entirely dependent on it and on the philosophers I turned to for help in formulating it—Wittgenstein especially, the subject of my dissertation, Habermas, whose *Knowledge and Human Interests* I had recently reviewed, and Peter Winch, whose *Understanding a Primitive Society* I read many times over on the afternoons we had a baby sitter. I was also getting to know several feminist philosophers, most notably Sandra Bartky, whose essay, "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," I copied and handed about as if I were distributing a religious pamphlet. For their part, several philosophers took a generous interest in my work and saw that others did too.

**Andrea:** I asked what brought you to the idea of maternal thought and practice and you tell me that philosophy was of use to you. Did mothering itself inspire philosophical reflection?

**Sara:** The idea of "maternal thinking" posed questions about social construction, relativism, pragmatism, pluralism—but these are not questions posed by mothering. This is philosophy talking to itself. When you ask about mothering or motherhood inspiring philosophical reflection I think of issues of death, time passing, individuation and connection, love and the sorrow it includes ... subjects that I talk about in the writing I am doing now. But neither the thinking that mothers engaged in or the thinking about maternal thinking that I was doing twenty years ago were, in my view, philosophical. I was quite insistent on this point. I suspect now that I was afraid of appearing fraudulent or foolish if I pretended that I was doing philosophy. I published "Maternal Thinking" in *Feminist Studies*. I was enormously pleased that it was accepted there. That was my chosen audience.

**Andrea:** Did anything in your personal life draw you to thoughts about mothering at this time? For example, did you read Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*?



**Sara:** Yes, I certainly read *Of Woman Born*. I also spoke with Adrienne Rich about a draft of the article “Maternal Thinking.” I read Rich’s poetry as it came out—as I do now. Adrienne Rich also wrote the preface to *Working It Out* (Ruddick and Daniels), a collection of personal essays by women intellectuals and artists about their struggles to do work of their own despite external barriers and internal prejudices against themselves. I put *Working It Out* together with Pamela Daniels. Pamela was Erik Erickson’s teaching assistant and research associate, a next door neighbour when our children were small, and a friend ever since. That friendship drew me into a deep interest in mothering as no book could.

**Andrea:** Adrienne Rich says in *Of Woman Born* that she was able to write the book only after her children were grown. Did you have to be at a particular point in your life in order to write *Maternal Thinking*?

**Sara:** Perhaps, but the point in my life didn’t have to do primarily with the age of my children. It had to do with the political spirit of the time and most importantly with the particular freedom to write that my job allowed. In working out the idea of *Maternal Thinking* I may have profited from having older children. But this was not because I could take a greater distance from them, which I don’t think I did or could. It was because older children had more complicated, enveloping life issues, not fewer; and because I had a rich store of memories from our lives together and from the lives of many friends who were parents.

**Andrea:** Actually, in *Maternal Thinking*—the book—there is no mention made of your own children. You do not, for example, use an experience from raising your children to illustrate the demands of maternal practice as I do in my chapter in this collection. Was this a conscious choice?

**Sara:** Well, when I talk about the generic “child” I may have been talking about my children but you wouldn’t know it. You are right though. I don’t talk about my children—didn’t then and wouldn’t now. I didn’t talk about myself either. Why? Any reason I give will be mostly a cover for temperamental characteristics. I want to tell the stories of my life. I will be their author. I assume others, perhaps especially my children, feel the same way.

**Andrea:** There is something I want to talk about. Our writing changes and develops as we work through things. You remember that Rich made the distinction between motherhood as experience and as institution. You say, and I agree, that she makes this distinction too sharply; that, in fact, the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering do inform each other. However, until the publication of your work on maternal thinking, motherhood scholarship had been largely limited to research on the institution and ideology

of motherhood exploring how and why they are oppressive to mothers. Few had examined or taken seriously the work that mothers do: the experiences, the feelings and so forth that are part of that work of mothering. In other words little, if anything, had been written on mothering as experience. When I first read your book I thought “somebody is finally talking about mothering.” And that is why I think the book *Maternal Thinking* is so groundbreaking: it cleared a space for theorizing on mothering as experience, as distinct from motherhood as an institution.

**Sara:** Yet I have come to believe that we should see certain institutions as inseparable from the experiences—or more precisely the practices—of mothering. Schools, clinics, welfare offices, dentists, public libraries—these are some of the institutions of *motherhood* on which mothers depend. In your forthcoming book on *Motherhood at the Twenty-First Century*, you introduced a section on *policies* within the institutions. Policies may determine when and under what conditions a child will travel, be expelled, asked to join a dance program, be anaesthetized, and serve as an intern. Policies determine where and when a mother can leave her child safely while she works for wages or rehearses for a choir.

Adrienne Rich, and I believe you, too, see institutions negatively, as patriarchal constraints on a freer mothering experience. It is these institutions that deny women the potential power and pleasure of mothering. Now I realize that often institutions, and the people who staff them, can humiliate a mother in front of her children, or her children in front of her. But institutional policies and staff are also often helpful and kind. The ability to survive in institutions, to negotiate a place within them, is an aspect of maternal practice.

Starting from the time that children are of a post-toddler age—four or five—a mother in my social circles will almost certainly find herself involved in negotiations with the many adults who come into children’s lives: teachers, policemen, doctors, social service workers, priests. A mother’s relationships with these authorities, who exert considerable power in her children’s lives, will likely require of her psychological strength and social skill. Ideally, a mother complies with rules that are harmless, resists those that harm, and learns to tell the difference. She remains loyal to her child but listens to the teacher, therapist, or doctor who sees her child clearly and kindly. Most important, she learns to fight productively on her child’s behalf despite the temptation to walk away or scream and curse. People who smile warmly at mothers playing with “toddlers” pass this mother by. Her ongoing efforts to create or preserve relationships outside the family are not seen as mothering, though they may be as necessary for a struggling older child as food is for a hungry infant.

**Andrea:** As I see it, you work both with institutions and importantly with the experience, and what you call the phenomena, of mothering. Were you aware



of doing that—of coming at mothering in a different way? Of talking about the experience?

**Sara:** Well, now I will issue a warning. You shouldn't trust my account. I said a moment ago that you and Adrienne Rich construe institutions negatively. Then I read (39) my own words in praise of writers who "distinguish the experience of mothering from the oppressive, confining isolating institutions of motherhood that spoil that experience for so many women." I sound like Rich, as you do too, and I would guess her influence on my thinking was enormous.

That said, I believe you are onto something. Just now when I began to speak about mothers negotiating with teachers, doctors, priests ... I felt a marked shift in my mood from abstraction to recognition. I had fallen back into a situation that was often fraught and in which both a child and her mother could be judged, and treated kindly or contemptuously. Perhaps when I write in such a mood, others too see and remember, that is they "experience," what it is like to be a mother at a teacher's conference, in a doctor's waiting room, or cheering at a soccer game. Of course "being a mother" in a doctors' waiting room, in school rooms, or on a soccer field means waiting for a long or short time in some part of a hospital in some part of a city. To be a mother is to be a mother of a certain class and status. As a mother negotiates with authorities in her children's lives she will reveal a history and future crafted within—perhaps despite—her class.

**Andrea:** There is something else I want to talk about. Over the last two decades in teaching your work and that of Rich, I have heard many students say that they found Rich too angry, her text too dark. But many said that your book was empowering in its affirmation and validation of motherhood work.

**Sara:** I don't find *Of Woman Born* too dark and angry. I believe that "raising children righteously up"—to borrow a phrase from Grace Paley—is scary, unpredictable, often terribly sad. This would be true even if mothers had the resources they need and deserve which they don't in many countries, including in many states and communities of this one. However I do identify resilient cheerfulness as a virtue of maternal practices. Resilient cheerfulness resists despair and courts hope. It is also clear sighted, not to be confused with cheery denial. I quote Spinoza: "...Cheerfulness is always a good thing and never excessive ... It increases and assists the power of action." I was identifying a virtue not claiming to have it. I now find it as relevant for old age as I did for mothering. But when Adrienne Rich read a draft of "maternal thinking" she suggested that resilient cheerfulness was not a virtue she wanted to recognize. Or so I remember from a brief discussion with her. Don't trust me.

**Andrea:** This is a connected thought. In *Maternal Thinking* you say that "overwhelmed with greeting card sentiment, we have no realistic language in

which to capture the ordinary and extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work." I adore that quote.

**Sara:** Here is another. "It is difficult when writing about mothering—or when experiencing it—to be balanced about its grim or satisfying aspects."

**Andrea:** Do you think that it is easier now, twenty years on, to capture the pleasures and the sorrows of daily relations with children? Has the enormous amount of writing about mothers made it easier to speak?

**Sara:** I would guess that it is easier to write about ambivalent feelings about children and about the unhappiness of lives with children. It may be more difficult to write about the delight, the pleasures. It occurs to me, as I pick up the trail here, that I do not write with lively pleasure and delight about children or their parents. But I did and do experience such pleasure and delight.

**Andrea:** What sorts of personal writing about mothering have made a difference? What stories have you read or heard others tell? One reason I ask is because I am currently writing on the contemporary motherhood memoir.

**Sara:** I would expect that the motherhood memoirs, starting with Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*, would have made the expression of maternal feelings easier. Jane Lazarre seems distinctive. Her writing is humorous, she is fully a mother and yet also fully not only a mother; She is a friend of many, a writer, and poignantly a daughter who remembers her mother. She is importantly "the white mother of Black sons" as she later put it in the subtitle of *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*. Although she does not consider race as fully as in other of her works, *The Mother Knot* is an anti-racist book. Mothers who are Black, or who are of other non-white, non-supremacist groups, can share the pains and pleasures of her story; they will not find themselves in a strange, ignorant land.

**Andrea:** In the late 1970s, when *you* were writing the articles on Maternal Thinking, not a lot had been written on motherhood. What mother writers were you reading? In which ways did they influence or enable your work?

**Sara:** Oddly I find it very difficult to answer this question, that is, to find "mother writers" who seriously "influenced" me in the late 1970s. Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch had as much effect on my thinking as anyone. But neither was in any sense a "mother writer." Jane Lazarre's words run throughout *Maternal Thinking* starting with words from *The Mother Knot*. However I remember hearing about her work after I had finished "Maternal Thinking" in 1979. Similarly, I read Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, the women who wrote *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al.) after I had written "Maternal Thinking." Then, for ten years or more it seemed as if I was in constant conversation with these

and other “feminist writer mothers,” philosophers, poets, novelists. I followed Virginia Held’s work on the ethics of care as she produced it. Then a little later I was struck with gratitude for Eva Kittay’s *Love’s Labor*. But when you asked who had influenced me before 1979, I scrambled through my endnotes, flipped through the pages, as if I were reading a stranger’s book. Then I remembered in a flash three women who had made a distinct and formative impression on me when I was writing the article. and who reappeared in *Maternal Thinking* ten years later: Tillie Olsen, Jean Baker Miller, and Audre Lorde.

Pamela Daniels and I had asked Tillie Olsen to let us use her essay, “One out of Twelve: Women who are Writers in our Century” as “a concrete representation” of our ideals in *Working It Out* (Ruddick, Daniels and Rich). Tillie Olsen later sent me a story by her daughter Julie Olsen Edwards that now stands at the beginning of the chapter on “preservative love” in *Maternal Thinking*. In the next chapter on “Fostering Growth” I retell at some length Tillie Olsen’s story, “I Stand Here Ironing.” In the story, as a mother stands ironing, she imagines herself responding to a visiting social worker who wants to help her nineteen-year-old daughter:

I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.... You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key?... And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped.

I believe that it was Evelyn Fox Keller who introduced me to Jean Baker Miller and to her book *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. However it came to me, I remember vividly those moments when I realized that Jean Baker Miller had identified one element of what I was experimentally calling “maternal thinking”: the “cognitive capacity” to welcome change and to change with change. “Maternal Thinking” began to seem more than an interesting idea.

The example itself had several virtues. Those who change with change and welcome its challenges acquire a special kind of learning. Miller contrasts that learning with scientific experimental thinking, simply understood. According to Miller, maternal experience with change and the kind of learning it provokes will help us to understand the changing natures of all peoples and communities. “It is not only children who change, grow, and need help in growing. We all might grow—as opposed to simply growing older—if we could learn how.” “Women must now face the task of putting “their vast unrecognized experience with change into a new and broader level of operation.”

In my 1980 article I referred to Audre Lorde’s “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist Response” as an excellent example of what I call “maternal thinking transformed by feminist consciousness.” It is also—though I didn’t say so

then—an example of changing with change. The story seems simple. Lorde's adolescent son is being bullied. He runs home in fear and tears. Lorde forgets everything she knows about "violence and fear and blaming the victim" and starts "hissing" at her son: "The next time you come in here crying!..." She hears herself and draws back in horror.

This is the way we allow the destruction of our sons to begin, in the name of protection, and to ease our own pain. *My son get beaten up?* I was about to demand that he buy that first lesson in the corruption of power, that might makes right. I could hear myself beginning the age-old distortion and misinformation about what strength and bravery really were. (106)

Lorde changed when "a very wise woman" asked "Have you ever told Jonathon that once you used to be afraid too?" The next time Jonathon came home she held him in her lap on the hallway steps, asked whether he had ever told her about the times she was afraid and then told him about her broken glasses and after school fights. As Jonathon listened his mother saw on his face a look of relief and total disbelief all rolled into one.

**Andrea:** Is there any writer you have forgotten to mention?

**Sara:** If there was a writer who "changed my life" it was Virginia Woolf; if there was a book it was *To The Lighthouse*; if there was a character in that book it was Mrs. Ramsay. If behind the lines of *Maternal Thinking* I was living out an unspoken relationship it was with my mother. In the original uncut version of the essay I spoke of an "ongoing shared feminist project: the construction of an image of maternal power that is benign, accurate, sturdy and sane." I then claimed that "loving, competent well-being is an important element in our (my) memories of our mothers and mothering." In my acknowledgments I wrote: "I speak as a mother but *what I say and my desire to say* reflects my experience as a daughter." I didn't believe or mean to suggest that my mother was a model of mothering (as she largely is of old age). Some of what I desired to say was critical of my mother and I welcomed the opportunity to criticize.

**Andrea:** *Maternal Thinking* is thought to be groundbreaking because it assumes the mother's point of view, rather than the child's. Most works on motherhood in the late 1970s, were, to use Daly and Reddy's term, "daughter-centric." Do you agree?

**Sara:** I am not familiar with Maureen Reddy's use of the term. But I would agree that in many discussions of motherhood, narrators saw mothers as children would see them. In the late '70s several theorists were developing a feminist psychoanalytic account of gender relations. Psychoanalysis seemed

to assume “the child’s” point of view. “The mother” is present—even excessively present—but we see her as the child and the analyst/author see her, not as she sees herself. In the *Mother Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch says of the mother’s story, “even if we were to try to write it, it does not begin with the mother, does not grant her agency, initiative and subjectivity” (see the final chapter, “Feminist Discourse, Maternal Discourse, which seems excellent still today). Feminists were also often said to erase “the mother’s” voice. Adrienne Rich spoke of matrophobia, a fear of becoming your mother. Ynestra King allowed that “feminists, even those who were mothers, spoke in the voice of angry rebel daughters who rejected the self-sacrificing, altruistic, infinitely forgiving, martyred unconditionally loving mother, [that is] rejected that mother in ourselves as the part of ourselves complicit in our own oppression” (qtd. in Ruddick 1989: 38-39). An Australian writer, Julie Stephens, argues “that there has been an active forgetting of the ‘nurturing mother’ in feminist recall” and that this has had considerable cultural consequences for our understanding of mothering.

But the story isn’t seamless. In the U.S., from the mid-1970s on into the ’90s, African American daughter-writers developed a distinctly passionate feminist literary tradition that acknowledged indebtedness to mothers. Alice Walker published *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* in 1974; Pamela and I reprinted it in *Working It Out. Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters*, “dedicated to the women who mothered us,” was published in 1991. In her collection *Invented Lives* (1987), Mary Helen Washington spoke of a “wide diverse” group of African American women who found “in their mothers’ legacies the key to the release of their creative powers.” In the words of Dorothy West: “All my mother’s blood came out in me. I was my mother talking” (351). Elsa Barkley Brown described a dual maternal role. Her mother warned her daughter against letting her writing jeopardize her primary obligations to her family and children. Simultaneously she provided her daughter with the material and psychological goods that would enable her to write. (*Mother Minds*) Paule Marshall spoke of “the poets in the kitchen,” her mother and her friends who bequeathed to Paule Marshall and *her* friends the African Caribbean language in which they could speak. In an interesting twist, Mary Helen Washington urged African American women writers *to free the mother from the domination of the daughter, representing her more honestly as a separate individuated being, whose daughters cannot even begin to imagine the mysteries of her life* (352). We have had a daughter-centric, child-focused understanding of mothers, Washington seems to say. Now we will understand mothers’ stories as mothers might tell them.

**Andrea:** There’s something I think we need to talk about, that comes up in the mother memoirs that I am working on and that is the relation between mothering and gender. As I read these motherhood memoirs I believe that while mothers have acquired more public space to talk about mothering, there

is more cultural censoring of what can be said about this mothering. The contemporary discourses of good motherhood, what has been called intensive mothering and the new momism, gives women permission to write about mothering in its valorization, and I would add naturalization, of mothering as essential and integral to female identity but in so doing it scripts the narrative of motherhood in quite conventional and patriarchal terms.

Intensive mothering gives women permission to write about motherhood and enables publishers the ability to sell books on the topic, but this discourse of good motherhood simultaneously curtails what can be said about motherhood. In my current study of the motherhood memoir I see a disturbing reification of gender difference in childrearing; what your work challenges in its concept of mothering as practice (see O'Reilly 2009, Podnieks and O'Reilly). In most motherhood memoirs there is an underwritten script that mothers are, or should be, the primary caretakers of children, at least in the first five years of the child's life. The fathers are all but absent in the mother's story and in the children's lives.

**Sara:** I don't know the memoirs you are working on but what you say sounds familiar to me from a time I lived as a wife among wives because I had chosen to live with my husband when he had a job and I did not. I wrote about this in *Working It Out*, which was published over thirty years ago. I told a story very much like the story you tell today. Most women as well as most men assumed that women would and should be the primary parents of children and also the primary managers of households and extended families. Some women complained about doing more than their "share" of the work. I suspected at the time that the complaining was a way of making the work visible. But few if any "ranted" about this "gender inequity." On the other hand they didn't step back and ask your obvious question: "why is it assumed, expected, required that the biological mother functions as the primary parent even in households when she is a wage earner?" And even if there were some biological connection between giving birth and mothering, there was surely no such connection between birth giving and the assumption of family responsibilities.

**Andrea:** This unexamined gender essentialism deeply troubles me and is a topic I am currently writing on (O'Reilly 2010).

**Sara:** I grew up with what you are calling "gender essentialism." This was an aspect of my mother's mothering which I criticized from a fairly young age. My mother believed that mothers were women. This is not the same as believing that mothering is "essential and integral to female identity" as you put it. My mother was easy enough about women not having children. But if she had ever wondered why mothers were women while men were not, she would have searched for words to express a life-shaping belief. She did not complain, let alone "rant," about a difference she did not think of as an inequity. Had I not

pushed the question I doubt that she ever would have asked why it was women who cared for children—or for any members of the extended family who were in need. She wanted to mother children and was grateful that she was able to do so. She loved children and loved herself loving children, though she could be sharply critical of children and mothers, of her own children and of herself.

As you know, I myself gave a resounding *easy* answer to puzzles about the relation between gender and mothering. Men, I announced, could be mothers. A mother was someone who made the work of mothering an important aspect of her or his life. Then I underlined *her* or *his*. But there were several problems with my proclamation. Among the “problems” were the men who were and meant to be primary parents yet rejected entirely the status of mother.

**Andrea:** After the article on maternal thinking, bell hooks discouraged you from speaking of men as mothers. She said that the language of motherhood and maternity is indelibly associated with women and therefore will not attract men.

**Sara:** Yes—And it seems she was right. Neither men nor women understood the idea of male mothers. What was I trying to prove?

**Andrea:** However, and here I quote from you: “Until we truly have shared parenting we use the word mothering because women are the ones who are mothering and they are the ones who paid a huge cultural price for that.”

In most households today mothers are doing the bulk of childrearing and domestic labour. *For fathers who insist that they are as involved in childrearing as mothers, I offer ten questions* to assess this involvement: What is your children’s shoe size? When was their last immunization shot? Who is their child’s best friend? What food don’t they like? What is their teacher’s name? I believe that if fathers can not answer these questions, and most can’t, they are not truly engaged as equal partners in shared parenting. I have written and spoken extensively on how mothers, even with involved partners, are the ones who do the maternal thinking: the remembering, worrying, planning, anticipating, orchestrating, arranging and coordinating of and for the household. It is mothers who remember to buy the milk, plan the birthday party, and worry that the daughter’s recent loss of appetite may be indicative of anorexia. And while the father may sign the field trip permission form, or buy the diapers, it is the mother, in most households, who reminds him to do so. And delegation does not equality make. However, as this gender inequity may be commonplace what must be remembered and emphasized is that it is neither natural nor inevitable.

**Sara:** This is great! And it is not at all what I meant by an easy answer. It is a confrontational *and* conversational way of getting people to *ask* and then look to see what is really going on. I am still tempted to follow your way. Women



historically and currently do the work, pay the price. They should set ten questions, judge the answers, name the mothers.

But one thing in your account puzzles me. You seem to assume throughout that men *want* to do well in the mother rankings. You speak of "fathers who insist that they are as involved in childrearing as mothers." Where are the fathers who insist on being childrearsers, who claim to do as much mothering as women and to do it as well? The fathers I knew, including my own, were for the most part entirely happy to have women take on women's work. My father would participate in serious talks about serious matters concerning his children but he did not share my mother's work. That required *feminist* change.

This is a difference between your memoirs and both my mother's and mine. Fathers were not only present for both my mother and me, they were the principal parent in the daughter's story.

**Andrea:** This leads me to my next topic. The following line from *Maternal Thinking* has always resonated with my students: "a man who wants to share mothering can be seen as usurping or overriding women's autonomy and power." Many of my students are mothers in their 30s, 40s, and 50s who have returned to school as mature students and they agree that in their households where there is little or no gender equity, shared parenting really means and results in men assuming more power and control over mothers and children. Until there is real equality a fathers' involvement can be seen as control or credit that is not deserved.

**Sara:** When I was writing the essay "Maternal Thinking," many feminists argued that "shared parenting" could change the lives of heterosexual parents and their children. Like your students, I was afraid of "bringing the power of Symbolic Father into the nursery" unless mothers were privately self-respecting and publicly respected. I think of the "Moms and Tots" in Andrea Doucet's book *Do Men Mother?* who treat fathers who join in play groups as if they were intruders. Do the women feel as if they have lost their power and now must placate the men?

**Andrea:** This is my question: if you were starting now to write about practices of caring for children would you speak of mothers, fathers, parents, child carer? What?

**Sara:** There are two matters I must take up before I can answer your question. In the U.S. it is impossible now to speak neutrally of sexual difference among parents. Heterosexual bullying and superstition, denial of rights and rituals to gay and lesbian people, hassling of gay and lesbian parents when they want to adopt children—these and other injustices, superstitions, and cruelties, require all of us to use the language of heterosexual difference with care.

Then I must set right some confusion I have sown. I have often said that

mothering is something someone does, not an identity, or a legal or biological relation. But mothering has both of these aspects—what you do in mothering and what legal and/or biological and/or biographical relation you have to the children you mother. Without both of these—work and relationship—you could not make sense of Glenda Tibe Bonifacio’s paper in this volume or Patricia Hill Collins’ discussion of an African American tradition of “other mothers” in *Black Feminist Thought*, or of any of our histories and genealogies as scripted by our cultures. When I wrote *Maternal Thinking* I was into what psychologists call word magic—trying to settle matters with the wave of a phrase. Men can be mothers—well, yes and no. Mothering is something you do, not a relationship. Well, it’s both.

So, to answer your question: I would speak of mothers and fathers, aunts and gramps, “others” and “bios,”—I would recruit the kind, delighted, inventive, responsible “parent” or “child minder,” exclude the cruel or dangerously distracted minder whatever her “genes.” I would pay every employed child minder a good salary, with decent hours, a reliable job description, and time of her own. I would represent men’s bodies as procreative—they are procreative. It is not seeing men through a maternal lens to say and see this. Close to my current heart and mind, I listen for the sounds of a paternal identity ready to protect, nurture, and restrain. From Antonio Espera, a thirty-year-old Marine Sergeant from California:

Before we crossed into Iraq, I fucking hated Arabs (sic) ... I don’t know why ... But as soon as we got here, it’s just gone. I just feel sorry for them. I miss my little girl. Dog, I don’t want to kill nobody’s children.

In this utopian place and moment I would listen for the language—the words, symbols, colours—that might richly represent embodiment—a fundamental maternal/paternal element of a metaphysics as well as a politics of health, grounded in maternal reflections on death and age as well as birth.

**Andrea:** Now I want to ask you about what I believe is a central theme of your work and one that the scholars have followed; it is the difficulty if not impossibility of talking about motherhood without falling prey to essentialism and romanticism.

**Sara:** Well, I was thinking as I was running on that I would have to cross off these romantic, high-rising thoughts .

**Andrea:** I know that in my own work I am always having to defend myself from charges of essentialism or romanticizing and you mention that was true of your book and the articles that preceded it. Is that something that came up a lot when you talked. Does it still?

**Sara:** The short answer is, yes. Romanticizing and idealizing are seen as dangers; praise songs to mothers are rare. Shortly after I wrote the essay "Maternal Thinking," Elisabeth Badinter, a French feminist philosopher, wrote about the practice of sending infants out to wet nurse at the risk of their health, even their lives. This was shocking. Today, Sara Hrdy, an anthropologist, calmly reports that, "Human mothers have been known to abandon children, sell them, foster them out, give them to the church as oblates, drown them, strangle them, even eat them" and no one gasps.

The fundamental framework of maternal thinking may itself essentialize. Although the *vulnerability of children* takes many forms it apparently has a biosocial aspect. *All* children are vulnerable. No matter how privileged their social circumstances and blessed by their natural surroundings, children are small, powerless, imperfectly made, subject to illness and abuse. They demand protection. No matter how perspicuous their social circumstances and neurobiological origins and condition, children's development is complex and subject to many kinds of distortion and inhibition. It demands nurturance.

Jane Taylor McDonnell, the mother of an autistic son, takes issue with my apparent universalism. I write, she says, as if all children are "intact," assured of normal growth, development, and minimal acceptability, "not handicapped in some way, not blind, deaf, autistic, retarded, paraplegic, dyslexic, etc." This tacit assumption of "normality" reinforces a conception of nature as intrinsically beneficent and benign. Everything I write, she says, suggests that a "normal" mother merely guides her child gently as he moves through his "natural" development. This is far from the human nature that expresses itself in her son's "bizarrely different" behaviour.

I had *not meant* to suggest that all children were intact. On the contrary. The development of *all* children is subject to chance, distortion and disorder. Children's minds and spirit grow in complex ways, undergoing radical qualitative as well as quantitative change from childhood to adulthood. No child can count on being or remaining intact. That is *why* I say that *children* demand that their growth be fostered. But I can see how this inclusion clouds over an autistic child's distinctive behavior and fails both the child and the parent who are dealing with frightening, incomprehensible experiences. The question then becomes, how do we include without losing autistic children among "children"? Or as McDonnell asks, how do we respect differences without condescension?

In her extraordinary book, *Death Without Weeping*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes creates a context in which it is necessary to discuss differences among mothers in regard to the first demand of maternal practice, that a child's life be preserved. Scheper-Hughes compares modes of maternal preservative love among impoverished women who live in villages where infant and child mortality rates are very high with modes of preservative love that I described in *Maternal Thinking*. She makes the general point that emotions, even the most fundamental mother love, are culturally created within economic circumstances. Specifically,

in villages where infants die early and often, there is a practice of child death *a mingu*, child death accompanied by maternal indifference and neglect. Instead of the “holding” that I said characterizes preservative love, these mothers of infants “meant to die” learn how to let go, turn away, let children die.

*Death Without Weeping* is an enormous as well as an enormously rewarding book. We are fortunate to have two papers that deal explicitly with mother love and make direct comparisons, as Scheper-Hughes does, to *Maternal Thinking*. Susan Schalge writes about the “family planning” and maternal attachments of women in Tanzania. Patrice Di Quinzio reflects at length on maternal interpretations of life and death. She also offers a wide ranging philosophical reflection on the meanings and motives of “essentialism.” I will let readers meet these strong papers on their own.

**Andrea:** You say that practices of mothering are defined by children’s needs or “demands.” But I wonder if what we do “as mothers” is always defined or determined by children’s needs. Children “need” to go out to play. Their mothers take them out, meeting their need. But as they do this they do a lot of other things too—gossip, grade their papers, show off their designer stroller—all “as a mother.” Moreover, even when we focus on children, I would suggest that today, a lot of what we do “as mothers” has little to do with children’s needs and more to do with the ideology of intensive mothering. Yes, children have needs but how we interpret those needs and respond to them is shaped, if not determined, by ideology.

**Sara:** I think this is an excellent point. And not just a matter of “today.” And not just a matter of ideologies of good motherhood. Mothers and mothering people will do a lot of things in the context of protecting, nurturing and training. They can for example write in their journal at the beach, gossip with friends while children build sand castles, bake a cake while the children play with tin pans and spatulas and lick the icing; canvas for votes, or read their student papers. They may play games with children that they themselves enjoy, go to The Beatles, read them favorite poets. There may be nothing maternal—or paternal—about most of the activities that parents engage in “as parents.” And there is nothing wrong with having a good time while being a mother or father.

**Andrea:** Another question: You say at one point that maternal thinking is one kind of disciplined reflection among others. Then you say “a mother who is also a critic may learn something about reading a child from reading a text.”

**Sara:** Yes. Or about planning a party from running an experiment (though I don’t know how really).

**Andrea:** Today there seems to be a reverse emphasis: a focus upon how the skills we learn in mothering are transferable to the workplace. The many cognitive

skills learned in mothering may be regarded as transferable skills that mothers can bring to the workplace. Thoughts on this?

**Sara:** It seems likely that someone who engages steadily and seriously in maternal practices will acquire distinctive skills. And I am glad that the skills of mothering are being recognized. But I don't want to see mothering praised for its market value. The market is not the judge of maternal usefulness.

**Andrea:** In *Maternal Thinking* you argue that the demands of maternal practice—preservation, nurturance, training—are universal but the manner in which mothers respond to these demands, the experience of them, is culturally variable. My idea of preservation would be different from another woman's idea of preservation elsewhere. Scholars have used your model of the three demands of maternal practice to study motherhood in a wide variety of contexts.

**Sara:** I think this is your idea Andrea, but I am glad to have it. I like your idea of a model that is then applied with very different results in different social, economic and cultural circumstances.

**Andrea:** We have not talked about the details of your theory of maternal practice and thoughts. For me that is what I found most useful about your theory. I love scrutinizing, I love holding, I love concrete thinking, welcoming change, humility and so forth.

**Sara:** Yes, I love the details too. It's the details that start us looking, thinking, talking with each other, remembering. I said in another paper I wrote recently that I love you for loving the details.

**Andrea:** A concept of maternal thought that I find very compelling is your concept of authenticity and the gaze of the other. I certainly can recall many times changing my behavior as a mother under the gaze of the other. Interestingly when I teach this concept what the students appreciate is that they now have language for this surveillance of mothers that we all, mothers included, engage in. You mention briefly that it came from your personal experience; could you elaborate?

**Sara:** Yes. I saw mothers made objects of a many layered gaze, sometimes issued from their own families, and in my case from the super judges that my own family—my father especially—admired. Then there is the gaze of people who control resources and opportunities, who exclude some, include others, often openly enforcing racial and social arrogance. I remember too being inhibited by my own gaze, then trying to learn how to see myself and my children in a way that could become mine.

Should we end by saying something about the “intensive mothering” which

started us quarrelling about two years ago? I now rue the day I ever uttered this phrase. At the time I felt that many features of intensive mothering as you and Sharon Hays described it overlapped with what I call “fostering growth.” I also felt that critiques of intensive mothering “blamed the mother” for something rotten in culture and state. You write tellingly about mother blaming. This passage comes from the transcript of our interview:

I think what most shocks me is that what we say publicly about mothers we would not dare say about any other group of people. Too many times to mention I have been at a checkout line in a store with a mother who is trying to cope with a crying child and after she leaves the cashier, who no doubt is a mother herself, will then proceed to bad mouth mothers to all within hearing range. In our culture there is public permission, and I say encouragement, to trash mothers.

When you recommend a book that calls intensive mothering the “New Momism” I am inclined to trust your censure. But I can’t forget the first misogynists who called mothers “Momists.” These mothers were not so unlike intensive mothers as you have described them. They too spent too much time with their children, loved them too much, paid them too much attention, and made the unfit for killing. The men who excoriated these mothers were true misogynists, and you are absolutely not. But wouldn’t someone so thoroughly a feminist as you, and such an advocate of mothers, avoid the language of Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* and his misogynist collaborators.

**Andrea:** In my above comments that you cite from our original transcript I do not want to be interpreted as blaming mothers but rather pointing out the bashing of mothers that we all, mothers included, engage in.

**Sara:** I thought that was what you meant. I am also thinking of conversations I have had, which sometimes rail nastily against competitive mothers, while hardly noticing competitive academics, women or men.

**Andrea:** I do agree with you that I could be seen as bashing mothers in my criticism of intensive mothering. Given this I need to be more careful with my language. What I critique is the practice of intensive mothering and the manner in which mothers are bullied or brainwashed to believe that this is the only good way to mother.

**Sara:** This “good way” involves gender essentialism—mothers are women and, to a lesser extent, women are mothers—and excessive attention paid to children.

**Andrea:** Yes. And also today for many mothers, children have become the

new fashion accessory and the way to mark affluence. From designer nurseries to designer clothes to designer carriages, children have become signifiers of class privilege.

And there is more. Scholarship on social reproduction shows that class is reproduced through mothering. Thus with intensive mothering, performed largely by middle class and upper middle class women, mothers reproduce class privilege: their children do pass the tests, go to the “best” schools, make the connections that their parents want for them and which keep them in their social class.

I am not advocating the more traditional model that “children should be seen and not heard” but I think the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. We are rearranging our lives too much around children under this excessively child-focused mandate of intensive mothering. Overnight it seems we have become our children’s entertainer; our children’s best friend. As I child I would rarely go to my mother and say that I was bored as I knew she would find chores for me to do. My mom loved me and read to me and I had a good childhood but my mother’s life did not revolve around her children even though she was a stay-at-home. Her role and identity in the 1950s was organized around the wife role and not the mother one. Today our roles as parents have changed: we have become micromanager of our children’s lives; we don’t just let children be children.

The literature suggests that poor or immigrant mothers do not engage in intensive mothering as middle class mothers do. This is not necessarily because they can not do so because of restricted finances but often because they view the excessive child-focus of this style of mothering as foreign to their cultural customs, views, and so forth on parenting. I have been talking about intensive mothering in Europe for about ten years now and for the first while the concept did not resonate with most of the mothers in the audience. However, this seems to be changing over the last several years. Two weeks ago (December 2006), I returned from Lisbon where I presented a paper on Intensive Mothering and from the discussions that followed it seems that the Now Momism style of mothering has become normative throughout Europe. This normative practice of mothering does now seem to be transcending geographical and class boundaries.

**Sara:** Let’s go back a minute. This has come up a few times. You seem to me to underestimate the psychological and practical role of fathers. Your mother—and mine, too, probably—put the wife role ahead of the mother’s. But I wanted for my mother, and for myself, work and friendships of my own—and I got them. I believe though that I would be more disturbed by a wife catering to her husband, half afraid of him, than for a mother caring even excessively for her children.

In a recent *New Yorker* there is a review of books on “over parenting” (see Acocella) which puts your point but also highlights my uneasiness. According



to the reviewer, all of the books at some point suggest that the parents and children are, “frankly, immoral.” They lament “the *sheer selfishness* of these parents and of *the children they produce...*” Doesn’t it bother them that “the extra help they can buy for their children ... is tilting the playing field?” “These people want their children to prosper as they did, fairness be damned...”

I don’t doubt that this selfishness exists. Everyone I speak to of your generation—roughly thirty to fifty—confirms your report. At least among middle- and upper middle-class mothers, especially but not only in regard to school entrance, this is what mothering and attitudes toward it look like. Who would be surprised? Voters who will not pay a tax to insure another mother’s child’s medical treatment will not concern themselves with a testing system that treats children fairly, let alone with efforts to devise an education beyond tests which attends in principle to multiple ways in which children might thrive.

But I would be remiss and dishonest if I did not mention the very great pleasure I take in watching the child/parent generation thoughtfully and lovingly care for their children. I also notice that many of these child parents—and certainly you—are determined to secure reliable justice, freedom and economic security for coming generations of children.

**Andrea:** For me the challenge is to validate the important work of mothering while at the same time show that maternal work, *as it is currently defined under intensive mothering*, is not necessary or required. Yes, children need to have their self esteem nurtured but that does not mean they need to take piano on Tuesday, French immersion on Wednesday, or are never told to go out to the back yard and play.

I use two different terms to signify this important difference. For me *responsive* mothering is what children need and what is described in *Maternal Thinking*. “Intensive” mothering refers to the designer, excessive, mania, overly child-centered mothering that I feel is not only not necessary but indeed harmful to both mothers and children. This is the struggle of my work. I want to acknowledge and validate the absolute importance of maternal thought and practice. Indeed, reflecting upon my years of mothering I remember fondly the times my partner and I would engage in maternal thinking as we lied in bed at night or sat at the kitchen table in the morning. When we or I would do this “checking in and on our children” I would think, this is what Sara Rudick was talking about: to take seriously the work of raising children and to reflect upon it. The struggle for me is to validate the importance of maternal practice and work and the reflectiveness that comes out of it but at the same time challenge what I see as the oppressive consequences—the isolation, the aloneness, the exhaustion, the guilt and now more recently this competitiveness—and not necessary demands of intensive mothering.

**Sara:** Your critique of intensive mothering reminds me that maternal ideals can serve unwanted ends. The ideology of “good mothering,” or our desire

to do mothering really well, may intensify inequalities and provoke or excuse status hunger and domineering competition. There will be occasions when we—mothers and our advocates—should stop celebrating ourselves or our children and instead begin to hold each other accountable for our contribution to the spoiling of lives.

I follow you into that conversation but I want to maintain a sense of proportion. I do not doubt that the driven competition and consumer display that you describe has serious costs. But strolling to the park with your infant in his designer stroller is not the same as counting out your bonus in your private jet. Status hunger and envy may unravel the mind, but the fiercest competition for college places rarely kills. Many children suffer from their mothers' driven passion for their own and no other children. Yes, they do. And also every day many children die because they are hungry, cannot learn because they are without teachers, supplies, or a school, are subject to insult and shame on the streets, and when they make it home suffer assault from those they trust. Finally, when well-fed, well-taught, well-protected, and well-loved they find themselves looking up at the bombers and out at the missiles and drones that are targeted against them and ask us "Why?"

So we are not as good as we should be, not as good as we could be. We will try to extend our graps of "other" mothers' lives. And perhaps when we do, we will find that some mothers, acting together and deliberately on behalf of all their children, can weaken just a little the forces of violence that are aimed against us and the forces of destruction that are sometimes aimed by us.

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