

OPINION

Motherhood Isn't Sacrifice, It's Selfishness

By Karen Rinaldi

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I was taking a few weeks' break from work over the summer. My family and I — my husband and my sons, then 9 and 7 — planned to spend the time at our house on the New Jersey shore. When my mother asked what we would be doing on our vacation, I told her we would be together — going to the beach and the nearby amusement park, cooking, playing in the yard.

In response, my mother said: “Oh, that's not much of a vacation for you. I'll bet you can't wait to get back to work. Motherhood, it's the hardest job in the world. All sacrifice!”

“Really?” was all I could say in response.

I was looking forward to uninterrupted time with my boys. We would spend days by the ocean and take trips to the boardwalk, where they would scream with delight while riding the roller coaster — the same one I'd ridden when I was their age, then ridden alongside them until Hurricane Sandy deposited it into the Atlantic. We'd ram one another with bumper cars; we'd ride the old-fashioned merry-go-round, waiting until my youngest son's favorite horse, bright-blue Freddy, became available. Some days were sure to end in tears of exhaustion, but the tears didn't outweigh the joy. Even on the bad days.

My mother was only trying to be sympathetic to my life as a working mother, but the self-satisfied way she proclaimed the sacrificial nature of motherhood grated. I don't believe for one second that motherhood is the hardest job in the world nor that it is all sacrifice. Still, it wasn't fair to blame her; she was merely parroting a common refrain. Once my annoyance lifted, in its place spread a kind of clarity that helped me to understand how these linguistic tropes reinforce the disempowerment of mothers and women.

The assertion of motherhood as sacrifice comes with a perceived glorification. A woman is expected to sacrifice her time, ambition and sense of self to a higher purpose, one more worthy than her own individual identity. This leaves a vacuum in the place of her value, one that others rush to fill.

When a woman becomes pregnant, she seems to become public property. Perhaps because bearing children ensures the continuation of the species, it is often prioritized as part of a larger social contract. Not only does this logic lead to an attempt to legislate women's bodies, but also in smaller, everyday gestures, boundaries get crossed. Many friends tell stories about being touched by strangers during pregnancy, as if a woman's maternal status turns her into a vessel to handle.

Written more than 30 years ago, Margaret Atwood's “The Handmaid's Tale” offers a cautionary tale of womanhood as sacrifice. In this dystopic novel, women are grouped according to the uses men determine for them: namely, sterile wives married for appearance or fertile “handmaids,” who are raped routinely for procreation. One male character declares that the woman must “learn in silence

with all subjection” and that “she shall be saved by childbearing.” In this scenario, the act of motherhood is subverted for the benefit of those in power, and they get away with it because of the concept of motherhood as sacrifice.

When we cling to the idea of motherhood as sacrifice, what we really sacrifice is our sense of self, as if it is the price we pay for having children.

Motherhood is not a sacrifice, but a privilege — one that many of us choose selfishly. At its most atavistic, procreating ensures that our genes survive into the next generation. You could call this selfishness as biological imperative. On a personal level, when we bring into the world a being that is of us, someone we will protect and love and for whom we will do everything we can to help thrive and flourish, it begets the question, How is this selfless? Selflessness implies that we have no skin in the game. In motherhood, we’re all in.

By reframing motherhood as a privilege, we redirect agency back to the mother, empowering her, celebrating her autonomy instead of her sacrifice. Granted, some of us have more autonomy than others. There are many mothers who would not have chosen motherhood, for financial or personal reasons. Still, by owning our roles as mothers and refusing the false accolades of martyrdom, we do more to empower all women.

In my experience, when women talk among women, our ambivalence or frustration is rarely about our roles as mothers. (That doesn’t mean our kids don’t drive us crazy sometimes.) Rather, conversations turn to questions of how to manage the best part of our lives (those very kids who are driving us crazy) with our partners, careers and other responsibilities. And while many women derive their deepest fulfillment as mothers, it doesn’t preclude their ambition or fly in the face of leaning in or out or sideways.

Calling motherhood “the hardest job in the world” misses the point completely because having and raising children is not a “job.” No one will deny that there is exhaustion, fear and tedium. Raising a family is hard work, but so is every other meaningful aspect of our lives.

The language surrounding child rearing as a job surely derived from caregivers’ and homemakers’ efforts to be acknowledged as fulfilling an important role. And clearly raising children is one of the most important things we do — for both women and men — but that does not make it a job. In a job, an employer pays for services an employee agrees to perform. And there is a boss to whom the employee reports. In the case of parenting, who would that be?

That doesn’t mean we don’t want support — paid parental leave, more flexible working hours, publicly funded day care. But the cultural shift has to happen for the policies to follow. Martyrs, after all, don’t need or expect public services.

Fathers are rarely, if ever, spoken about in the same way that mothers are. It’s culturally acceptable for men to have children *and* professional identities without having to choose between the two. These unspoken biases run deep.

It reminds me of a friend whose husband complained about having to “babysit” the children while she went to dinner with friends. Has a woman ever “babysat” her own children? Things are changing, but the insidious inferences persist.

Further, with “women” and “family” as go-to cultural corollaries, studies show, terrifyingly, that these biases are being adopted by artificial intelligence, too. Calling motherhood a woman’s “job” only serves to keep a woman in her place. The priorities of mothers who work outside the home are often questioned. It’s as if women are forced to choose between ambition (or simply earning a living wage) and family.

If we start referring to motherhood as the beautiful, messy privilege that it is, and to tending to our children as the most loving yet selfish thing we do, perhaps we can change the biased language my mother used. Only when we stop talking about motherhood as sacrifice can we start talking about mothers the way that we deserve.

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