

## **The Changing Shape of Motherhood**

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**I have a credibility problem, a man giving a talk about motherhood on mother's day! I do have some experience with mothering children. As some of you know I cared for my first wife for several years before she entered a nursing home. At the same time I raised my children by myself. Fortunately, Pat came along and rescued me from single parenthood, much to the delight of my daughters. Dad is a poor substitute for a woman's ear when discussing the trials and tribulations of being a teenage girl. So thank you Pat for being a good mom to my kids and showing me how it's properly done.**

**Despite this disclaimer, I am still a man talking about motherhood. However, I am a resourceful lad, so I did what any good professor would do, I consulted the experts. I will start by briefly summarizing what I have learned about the history of motherhood. Then I will have some real mothers help me.**

### **Mother: Origins of the word**

**"Ma", the sound suggested by the burbling of sucking babies led to the ancient Indo-European word "Mater". It also led to the words "mama, mamma, mammal, mammalian, and mammalian gland. In Latin the word "Mater" evolved into the English words "matter, material, matrimony, matron, and, of course, mother." In German it became "mothar" and eventually "mutter." In Greek it led to "meter", the source of the word metropolis".**

**It is especially interesting to note that the words material, matter, matrimony, and metropolis evolved from the original baby sounds for the source of an infant's nourishment. The material that matters most to infants is food, so it is no wonder that the most basic element of nature, matter, is linguistically related to mother.**

### **Prehistoric Relationships:**

**The word matrimony is related to mother because historically marriage was a maternal organization. Paleontological evidence suggests that**

among early humans, circa 10,000 B.C., many people lived in female-centered groups made up of mothers, sisters, and their young, accompanied by temporary male companions, while younger males, left the group when they reached mating age (Coontz, 2005). Mothers were the head of the group because they could reproduce, probably developed agriculture, and passed their names on to their children. Eventually these women developed communities that grew larger and became metropolises.

Sometime along the line, men figured out that these women had a good thing going so wanted to get into the act. They spent more time with women and negotiated long term commitments to one or more women and the concept of “matrimony” evolved.

As I have mentioned in an earlier talk, “nuclear families” did not exist. No single male and female could have survived. Early humans lived in groups or clans. Division of labor between the sexes developed with men involved in hunting and women nursing children. Women were not dependent on men but provided for themselves by gathering and processing plants and shellfish, manufacturing clothing, trapping small animals and making digging or cooking implements. Men and women were interdependent although specialized in tasks undertaken to survive. Men probably did not “dominate” women in this era. Women and men needed each other. Women’s ability to bear children gave them special status in the pre-civilization era. This ability was reflected in the fact that early gods tended to be female (e.g., Gaia, The Goddess of Earth).

**Relationships during the rise of civilization:**

Marriage as an institution did not evolve until much later. Matrimonial relationships between men and women in prehistoric times were based on survival. Men and women had to cooperate on a fairly equal basis or all would have died given the difficulty of staying alive. Life was difficult and required constant attention to providing food, protection from the elements, and defense against predators, most notably other humans. Sexual unions were necessary for procreation and may have been pleasurable for both parties. Motherhood was highly valued because woman had the ability to reproduce themselves while men did not.

**As civilizations arose and the ownership of property developed, men became more dominant in male-female relationships. Unfortunately, the value of motherhood changed as humans came to understand how reproduction occurred. Once men became aware of their role in reproduction, they used this knowledge as part of their drive to become the dominant sex.**

**Gradually societies moved from being matriarchal to patriarchal. Even gods moved from primarily female to primarily male. Ultimately “God” became a single, masculine entity. A male god can be thought of as a metaphor for the emergence of male economic and political dominance.**

**Today I want to return motherhood to its rightful role; a role that gives rise to all human beings and societies.**

**The word mother evokes a multiple meanings that are constantly changed by our culture and the work of mothers themselves.**

**In the history of America, motherhood has taken different forms. Native American mothers lived very much like our ancient ancestors that I just described. Slave mothers led a disjointed life, their families at times torn apart by the whims of their owners. European American mothers helped build the great cities of the Eastern United States and break the prairie of the Midwest to produce the food that fed our emerging nation. In more recent times, mothers have moved out of their homes to take on the dual demands of earning money and raising children. I want to take a closer look at the changes that have occurred in motherhood in our society during the last century; a period of time that has changed the shape of motherhood dramatically.**

**Early in the history of American, how to be a good mother was defined by the emergence of a new nation, the harsh realities of staying alive, one’s social station, and religious institutions. More recently, the move from an agrarian society to an industrial society radically changed motherhood. My great-grandmother’s arranged marriage was designed to ensure that she and my great grandfather could manage their farm in Northwest Iowa. My grandmother was sent to high school so she could attract a good husband but she was still expected to pick a farmer.**

**However she was allowed to choose her mate. My mother was expected to help Dad on the farm but was also expected work in a factory because farm incomes had dropped to the point that rural families had to supplement their incomes.**

**In similar fashion women throughout the United States have seen their lives become more complex as our country has moved from the farm into cities. Fortunately technology has slowly removed some of the drudgery of managing a household, but the extra time gained is now spent pursuing out-of-home activities. I have some women here today who will help me illustrate some of these changes as they talk about their experiences of being a mother.**

**Following WWI, women were expected to stay home to raise their children even if they had worked outside their homes. However that began to change by mid century. Here today to briefly share her experience is Katherine Thompson.**

**Following WWII women felt a tension between expectations to be a stay-at-home mom and an increasing desire to have a career. Rosy the Riveter set the stage for the changing expectations of motherhood. Her to tell us about how she and her mom felt this tension is Pinky Bass.**

**Like many women of the sixties and seventies our next speaker led a traditional life of being a wife and mother who worked part-time but neglected her own personal inclinations. Pat Keoughan will tell how she viewed motherhood as part of her life goals.**

**Our last speaker is a working mother in every sense of the word. I have asked her to speak last so she continue to describe how motherhood has changed and remind the first three speakers of what they have forgotten about motherhood. Jul Roach, you get the last word.**

**Some closing facts about mothers:**

**In the United State today there are approximately 82.5 million mothers (US Census Bureau). Mother's Day is the peak day for phone calls. Mother's Day is the busiest day of the year for restaurants. Gift giving on Mother's Day is second only to Christmas. Today, 82% of women 40-44 years of age are mothers compared to 90% in 1976. About twice**

as many women today are “childfree” as compared to the 1950’s. The average number of children born to American women is two. In 2002, 55% of women with infant children were in the work force, compared to 31% in 1976 but is down from 59% in 1998. Also in 2002, 5.4 million women were stay-at-home moms.

I offer absolutely no analysis of these data. What you make of them is entirely up to you!

### References

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