

Are Women Natural Peacemakers?

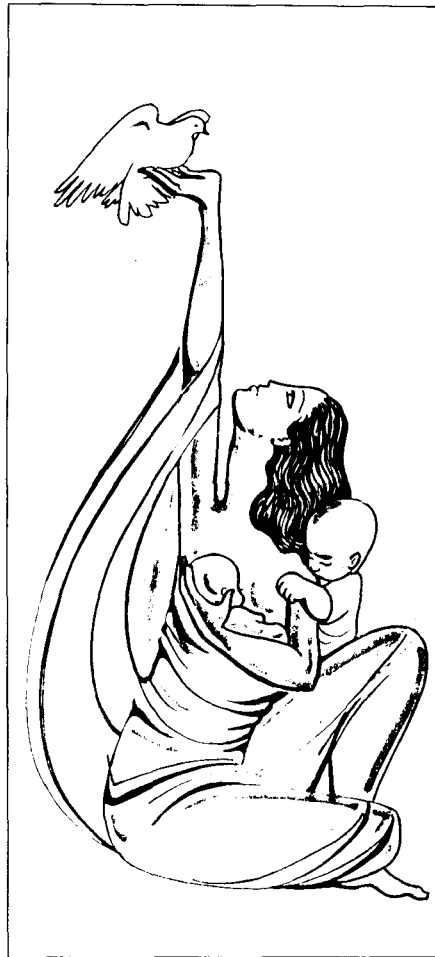
by Lanie Melamed

A few weeks ago I passed a sign on a church billboard which read, "For every complex question, there is an answer which is neat, plausible and wrong." When I began this paper I wondered how I would resolve my intuitive desire to affirm women as natural peacemakers in the face of so many examples to the contrary. It felt comforting to know there might be no neat answers. But could I hope for plausible ones?

In the past year, I have volunteered half of my working time to peace activities, believing that the world is more at risk today than ever before, due to the proliferation of nuclear arms and escalating militarization. One of my projects has been to visit local community groups in order to promote discussions about peace and social justice issues. Early on, I realized that I looked forward to meeting with all women's groups, but that I avoided talking to groups of men, especially those men outside the peace movement whose work was primarily in the world of business, numbers, and hard facts.

In preparation for these meetings, I tried to inform myself about disarmament and nuclear technology. Try as I might, I found I could never remember how many nuclear warheads our team had, or the megatonnage required to eliminate two, four or sixteen city blocks. Nor could I remember the year and the decisions around the SALT agreement, or the terms of the treaty on anti-ballistic missiles. My memory could not, or would not, harbor all the facts — especially when disassociated from feelings of rage and despair. In my heart I know that increasing violence, with its ultimate consequence, nuclear annihilation, is wrong and that reframing the argument in favour of global peace is the only viable choice we have.

When our local peace group was planning next year's agenda, (only women showed up), several good ideas were scrapped because it was felt they would not 'appeal' to the male members. "If we



don't want to alienate the men we have to have a speaker or a film, not experience-based workshops where personal feelings are examined." Here again, we were trying so hard to keep the men involved, while denying what would be of greater interest to ourselves. The masculine focus on technical and strategic questions seems to take precedence over women's concerns with the costs in human suffering. Instead of discussing modifications to Beatty's White Paper on Defence, the women in our group want to throw out the entire paper and begin to look afresh at what constitutes Canadian security and defence.

As I began to formulate my ideas about the tendency of women to be 'natural'

peacemakers (that is, committed to the production and preservation of life), my mind flashed to a film clip in the Gwynne Dyer "War" series (NFB) in which four proud women were honored after World War I for contributing a total of 28 sons to the glory of their country. Did they never once question the immorality of that sacrifice? Other images come to my mind — of women who are eager to join imperialist armies as 'equals' of men, and of angry anti-choice women screaming outside of abortion clinics. And if I dig deeply enough, memories of the angry aggressor in myself appear in bold relief. How do I allow these warlike images in, jarring as they are with the stereotypes I choose to believe of women as primarily caring, relationship-oriented and non-violent? This article grows out of my need to deal with these contradictions.

In light of the complexity of the topic, the discussion has been broken down into two sections: (1) developing the images of woman as peacemaker and as war protagonist. This will include an exploration of how women turn from concern for the peaceful preservation of human life to glory in militarism, violence and hatred against themselves and others; (2) hopeful solutions, transcending these polarities through feminism, education and personal/political change.

The word 'natural' is used in these pages to convey the idea of a propensity or inclination toward peacemaking, and not as a biologically inherent determinant. The nature/nurture debate is, in my opinion, a false dichotomy obscuring the influence of both variables on human development.

Women as Peacemakers

My experience with human nature leads me to believe that all human beings share the capacity for good as well as for evil. Creativity, wisdom and joy are part of one's inheritance, which for the major-

ity of us has been damaged, distorted, and destroyed by the society we are created by and which we, in turn, continue to shape. Affecting our development is the complex mix of biology, race, class, patterns of socialization, and our relationship to those who hold power. *The possibility of growth from dependency on others to having some control over our lives is a prime factor in determining who we are and what we become.*

Programmed to be queen of hearth and home in the private world, and interloper in the public one, most women have traditionally been relegated to keeping house, and to reproducing and caring for future generations, as well as the present one. Although many of these patterns are in flux today, the overall picture tends to remain the same with women taking on new jobs in addition to their primary one. When they enter the workplace, they extend their caretaking skills or emotional 'work' into the marketplace. By virtue of living on the outside (or the underside), many women have developed skills of empathy, connectedness to others, and caring which the world sorely needs. Distortions and dissonances tend to be more readily recognized when one is a traveler in another's land. In such cases, resilience and resourcefulness become supplementary survival skills.

According to S. Ruddick,¹ the practical and symbolic association between women and peace has a real basis in maternal practice. It is not because of innate sex differences that women possess a natural inclination toward peacemaking (the care and nurturance of others), but because it is the kind of thinking required for the work they do. Specific examples of thinking which arise from the practice of mothering are: satisfying the demands for the preservation, growth and acceptability of one's children; cheerfulness and resilient good humor; the capacity for attentive love and skill in the non-violent resolution of conflicts.² Despite the fact that, periodically, all mothers become furious at their children, they show surprising restraint in expressing the physical manifestation of that anger. Finding alternative solutions in which everybody wins is a strategy at which mothers are adept. "If you give your toy to Andrea you can play with these shiny buttons." Mothers learn to make everyone a winner, otherwise there can be no peace in the

family. Cooperation rather than competition become valued skills.

Out of maternal practice a distinctive kind of thinking arises which is incompatible with military behaviour and supportive of pacifist commitment to non-violence. Because they care so much about human life, it seems natural that women would reject violence and militaristic solutions to conflict. This makes them very poor soldiers.³

Women as Enthusiasts of Violence and War

The attributes of cooperation, conflict avoidance, care, and concern for others, regarded as strengths in the private sphere, are paradoxically viewed as weakness and ineptitude in the public one. At the workplace, women's emotionality is viewed as a limitation and our particular ways of knowing rejected or rendered invisible. This disregard makes it possible for the dominant culture to continue ignoring, managing, and/or trivializing women. Women are rarely listened to or heard, are consistently objectified and sexually harassed, and still earn only 60% of a man's wage for the same work.

The fairly systematic ignorance which patriarchy has imposed upon women also reinforces our subordinate position. With their own thoughts and feelings effectively submerged, large numbers of women begin to believe in their own inadequacy. Hence they become obedient believers and followers of systems (family, school, church and political) in which they are primarily outsiders. Consciously or otherwise, it has been an easy step for many women to exchange their potential for independent thought and action for the expectation of security within marriage and the family. By denying women the right to express anger, patriarchy has further enforced our compliance. The result is anger turned inward against themselves and their families. We have even learned to blame ourselves for being victims!

Women who have been silenced are the most powerless, susceptible as they are to truths generated by the authorities in their lives. When we do not trust ourselves to make sense of things, it is easy to give ourselves up to experts, fathers, teachers, or ideologues, those people who tell us what is right and what is wrong. Molded by a school system which transmits knowl-

edge formulated by others as truth and which discourages critical thinking, it is not surprising that women, as well as many men, dutifully assume the stance of non-questioning, passive learners. It is a matter of small steps between their early silencing to forfeiting one's thoughts entirely, and having them substituted by socially 'correct' ideas perpetrated by the media and/or the state.

Compounded by poverty (over 20% of women in Canada live below the poverty line), ill-health and overwork, women's energy is additionally drained from reflection and analysis, precursors for making changes in our lives. Isolated in their homes, or in need of well-paying jobs, many have welcomed the opportunities created by patriotism and mobilization for war. Militants anxious to conscript women for the war system are likely to find them poor, insecure and subservient; eager to be included.

In the process of being trained to fight the army has to objectify and dehumanize people, to remove the capacity for feeling, and to "knock the woman out of men."² In order to think and act violently, one must distance facts from feelings. Rape and battering at home and violence against humanity are all part of the same process. Wars can only be fought if the connection remains an abstraction and warriors are willing to become loyal to abstract causes. The language of war separates and deforms the details of human suffering. Killing is o.k. when it is carried out by 'freedom-fighters' against enemy 'gooks' and 'cunts.' The Hiroshima bomb can't be all bad when named 'Little Boy,' nor Ballistic Antibalistic Missile Boost Interceptors when pleasantly entitled 'BAMBI.' When MX-missiles are called 'peace-keepers,' the truth is further distanced. The tyranny of the abstract enables those in power to maintain control over those who are distanced, separate, objects and enemies. At any point in time, women and other oppressed groups fit into these categories.³

Hopeful Connections

Despite the fact that the natural inclinations of maternal thinking may have been toward preservative love and non-violence, why is it that some women internalize and embrace the patriarchal system, while others liberate themselves

from it? Fortunately, people are not permanently frozen into categories of obedience or powerlessness. Movement from passive voicelessness to becoming an agent of change in the world is possible, even probable, once an individual is presented with more reliable information and is encouraged to sort out the contradictions in her world together with others.

Peace and non-violence are not goals to be found in distant places; they must be present in day-to-day living. There is more truth to the statement, "We have met the enemy and s/he is us" than most of us care to admit. Developing the capacities to move beyond separate, self-righteous, power-over thinking is the only viable path. Refusing to subsidize the status quo and repudiating the preparation of our children and colleagues for lifelong combat — whether in the occupational sphere, in politics or on the battlefield — are steps lovers, wives and mothers can take.

Education and feminism give us hope, as well as a liberating set of filters for making sense of the world. Women have had long experience at the receiving end of threat systems which drain their resources without their consent. It should not surprise us that the most penetrating attacks on the roots of militarism and the most creative approaches to alternative structures have come out of feminist

analysis.⁴ According to the contradictions listed in these pages, peacefulness may not be a natural by-product of women's lives. If it is to be realized, it must be worked for and affirmed, consciously articulated and 'named.' A feminist politics can be a principal agent of transformation. This involves a commitment to eliminate restrictions of power, pleasure and mastery arising from biological, sex or social constructions of gender.

What is needed is a synthesis which transcends the masculinist social order of distancing, objectivity and power-over others and replaces it with a society organized around human needs, a society in which wisdom about daily life is not defined by experts, but is drawn from the experience of all people and is freely shared among them. The right to participate freely in public life must be affirmed at the same time that we challenge the shape of the world and its underlying logic.⁵ Once having accomplished this, women can begin to forge a new politic, and transcend the old. If there is to be any hope of continuation of life on earth, let alone a good life for all, all people must be educated to move beyond separate power-over thinking to an ethics of care and a politics of equality. Both women and men have the capacity to be peacemakers and warmongers. Which will it be? And how can we help?

¹S. Ruddick. "Preservative Love and Military Destruction: Some Reflections on Mothering and Peace," in J. Trebilcot, (ed.) *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (New Jersey: Rowman and Allanhead, 1982).

²S. Ruddick. "Maternal Thinking." in B. Thorne and M. Yalom (eds.) *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions* (New York: Longman Press, 1982). Chapter 5.

³B. Reardon. *Sexism and the War System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁴U. Franklin. "Will Women Change Technology or Will Technology Change Women?," in *Knowledge Reconsidered: A Feminist Overview* (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1984).

⁵A. Miles. *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1982).

Lanie Melamed is a consultant in education innovation in Montréal, specializing in peace, play, women and learning. She also co-coordinates Peace Education Network (Québec).

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