

A Critique of Sarah Ruddick's Maternal Thinking; Towards a Politics of Peace

In *Maternal Thinking, Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989), Sarah Ruddick uses her considerable experience and skill as a philosopher to explicate an analysis of mothering as a practice. Ruddick then proposes, using far more passion than reason, that mothering be seen as correlative to Gandhian-style peacemaking. Though I agree wholeheartedly with Ruddick's vision that there ought to be made a delineated connection between mothering and peacemaking, I do not believe that Ruddick has drawn those connections. This paper will examine Ruddick's theoretical position, how my personal experience corresponds to her theories and finally, an examination of Ruddick's assumptions.

Taking Responsibility: An Overview of Ruddick's Theoretical Position

Ruddick divides her book into three parts: Part I, "Thinking About Mothers Thinking," Part II, "Protection, Nurturance and Training," and Part III, "Maternal Thinking and Peace Politics."

In Part I, "Thinking About Mothers Thinking," Ruddick describes her thorough training in rational discourse. She says that, since becoming a mother, she has come to disapprove of pure rationality because of its close association with militarism and the fact that it is so often used to justify violence.

Ruddick goes on to explain that she now belongs to a school of philosophy called "practicalism." Ruddick defines practicalism as the belief that "thinking arises from and is tested against practices" (p. 13). Practicalism asserts that "there is no truth to be apprehended from a transcendental perspective, that is, from no perspective at all" (p. 15). Ruddick is suggesting that her theories are grounded in practice, and arise from a particular perspective.

Ruddick believes that we become what we are by what we do. Ruddick identifies mothering as one type of caretaking activity. She believes that participation in mothering creates aspects of identity that would not be developed without participation in the activity.

Ruddick's theory is that maternal work consists of three activities: preserving the life of the child, promoting the growth of the child, and training the child towards the goal of social acceptability (p. 17). Ruddick is aware that many types of people take on the work of mothering but she believes that mothers are the primary caretakers of children.

Ruddick believes that mothering is worthy of serious examination. Ruddick believes that this examination will identify a correlation between the localized practices of mothering and the globally-impacting practices that could promote worldwide peacemaking activities.

In Part II, "Protection, Nurturance and Training," Ruddick goes into detail elucidating the three skills she considers the essence of mothering: protection, nurturance and training. Ruddick states that protection requires that mothers not only protect children from outside forces, but also from their own murderousness. She believes that mothers are often ambivalent and yet manage to act within a relativistic framework: "Rather than separating reason from feeling, mothering makes reflective feeling one of the most difficult attainments of reason" (p. 70). Ruddick praises highly the resistance that mothers put up against their own wish to do violence to their children.

Ruddick aligns nurturance with thought, insisting that the promotion of a child's health requires constant dialogue with others and analytical ability. Ruddick states that the practices of nurturing are thoughtful activities in "that a commitment to fostering growth expands a mother's intellectual life" (p. 89).

In the chapter called "Training," Ruddick addresses issues of powerlessness that can undercut the actions and choices required to train children. Ruddick believes that authenticity is necessary for thinking. "Fear of the gaze of others can be expressed intellectually as "inauthenticity," a repudiation of one's own perceptions and values" (p. 112).

Ruddick puts the responsibility for independent ethical decision making directly on the shoulders of individuals, regardless of gender. Ruddick believes that mothering requires judgment. When a woman is caught in the familiar bind (oft described by feminist writers) of relinquishing her authority to experts, neighbors, relatives and/or men, Ruddick defines this abdication of personal authority as inauthenticity: “When she thinks inauthentically a mother valorizes the judgment of others” (p. 113).

In Part III, “Maternal Thinking and Peace Politics,” Ruddick moves from an analysis of mothering to a recipe for peace action. Here, her careful delineations dissipate into mere opinion. Ruddick is a proponent of Gandhi’s philosophy. She states that “the four ideals of [Gandhi’s philosophy of] nonviolence - renunciation, resistance, reconciliation, and peacekeeping” are essential elements to thoughtful mothering.

Ruddick acknowledges that these activities (renunciation, resistance, reconciliation, and peacekeeping) “govern only some maternal practices of some members” (p. 176); but she reserves her right to put forth Gandhi’s value system and interpret mothers, mothering and political action through these values.

“Finally,” she states, “I am one reader, observer, mother. When I speak of what mothers do, say or think, I am still making it up” (p. 64). This is a surprisingly cowardly stance for a trained intellectual to take.

If Ruddick had chosen to write a book of qualitative research based on her experiences and those of her friends, the reader might be in a better position to criticize her work. Once Ruddick takes the stance that her book is essentially fiction, not only does she escape the need to exercise intellectual rigor, but educational researchers must back away from any attempt serious critique: one can hardly deny a writer their chance to make up a fiction.

Many of the points Ruddick makes about the practices of mothering are valid, interesting and worthy of becoming part of the general discourse of adult educators but

Ruddick's choice to call her technique, "Making It Up" (p. 61) is an unfortunate avoidance of accountability. The vagueness and sentimentality that permeates Part III could have been avoided if Ruddick had used her skill at delineation to parallel her descriptions of mothering with an original concept of peacemaking. Instead, Ruddick acts as a spokesperson for an eastern philosophy, aiming to convince the reader that maternal practices should be organized according to Gandhian philosophy.

Plunged into the Void: Parallels to Personal Practice

Perhaps because I began teaching at the age of fourteen and have never attempted a teaching certificate, teaching, learning and life-skilling have never become separate in my consciousness. I have always worked as a lay teacher, a person with enough knowledge about a subject (generally a subject less well-known to certified teachers) and enough competence to be allowed to teach within legitimate educational frameworks. When I discuss my practice or my experience as an educator, I include my practice as an artist, a woman and a mother.

When I became pregnant with my first child, I was operating as a writer/director/producer of plays in Manhattan. I was ambitious, male-identified, highly articulate and competitive. Just like Ruddick, I was overtrained in traditionally male-identified types of analysis and much less capable of comprehending experiences that are traditionally female. Though I am convinced that practice reinforces habits which can both determine and control personality, I do not subscribe to the practicalism thesis that we are entirely made by our practices.

Unlike Ruddick, even before I became a mother, I had begun to question the validity of the way my worlds were structured. I had become a writer of scripts because, as an actress I could not find plays without women characters saying things like, “Would you like some _____ ?” (fill in the blank with anything you like from coffee to sex). Women characters were wordless, flirtatious and far less intelligent or lovable than the women who populated my life. Reflecting on the women in my life, I wrote plays in which the women were heroes, embattled but courageously struggling to create meaning and influence events.

When I became pregnant with my first child, I was plunged into a painful void. My connection to those parts of my life that were male-determined, my family and the theater, dissolved. My family disowned me. My unwed status offended the patriarchs. The father of my child was too ambitious to allow a new life to change his plans for personal glory.

Although Ruddick states that she wishes that both genders would learn to take care of children, she believes that fathers have a different role to play than mothers. Curiously, in the section entitled “Where Are the Fathers?” (pp. 42-46), although “mother” is never capitalized - not in this section, nor in any other section of the book - “Father” is continuously capitalized. This representation of heightened respect for the title father is extremely odd in a book that purports to respect mothers and their activities. Ruddick states that she capitalizes Father in order to distinguish it from mother (p. 42) but the entire exercise seems woefully reminiscent of patriarchal standards.

Ruddick's belief in practicalism seems to lead her to her perspective that fathers are a result of their not-caring practices: "The point about - or against - Fathers is that their authority is not earned by care... Fatherhood is more a role determined by cultural demands rather than a kind of work determined by children's needs" (p. 42). Are not children's needs a cultural demand? Although I understand what Ruddick believes that she is saying here, I think she is unconsciously not only implying a hierarchy of values but maintaining that same hierarchy. Her framing of the conceptual relationship between the demands of the marketplace and the demands of the familial, place the familial as the less important.

Although I continued to write, direct and produce throughout my pregnancy, I also began to create new relationships with women specifically engaged in experiences of childbirthing and mothering. What struck me forcibly was the difference between my groups of friends in the theater, who could speak articulately about everything from feelings to politics, and my new mother-friends, who seemed to have no coherent language with which to articulate the issues that most concerned them.

When I accepted that I was going to become a mother, I assumed that I would become part of a new world. And this was true. But I had also assumed that my new mothering world would have philosophies, theories and creative ways of analyzing my new concerns; and in this I was completely wrong. I had a hard time understanding why this prehistoric practice (mothering) seemed to have left no epistemological traces. Ruddick does not appear to have been troubled by this; instead she apparently brought her male-

defined epistemological systems to bear on a wholly different reality. I say “apparently” because, since Ruddick wrote this book years after her immersion in mothering, her theories may not have sustained her so well then as she remembers now. And, since she is making this up and is not under any obligation to report her research methodology, we cannot but guess.

At first I really hated being with women who had no way to speak about our greatest passions; we only seemed to refer to love, sex, birthing and nurturing obliquely. We talked *around* issues. Well, I listened as platitudes were traded and I felt silenced. Unwilling to speak in such general terms about the miracles I was experiencing, I said nothing and felt I was drowning in loneliness and despair. And this time even art was no relief because art was not about this. Art was about heroes and social struggles. Art was not about breastfeeding, nor about cunts stretching to give the world a new person. At this time, my still male-determined framing could not perceive the acts of mothering as the acts of heroes.

I was horrified at myself because I did not respect inarticulated realities. I was terrified because I was scared to live without intellectual communicative structures that would support my understanding of things. I do not sense in Ruddick any of the struggles that I went through trying to reconcile my male-trained mind with my new female-determined experiences. I resist Ruddick’s wholehearted adoption of a male icon, Gandhi, and her wholesale promotion of his philosophy. I would have wished her to struggle to find

her own philosophy of peace, carving it out of a sense of the intellectual validity of her own authenticity.

It was a long road for me to come to accept and work between my two worlds, but I did not wait, as Ruddick did, until my children were grown to bring my worlds together. Ruddick accepted the traditional ghettoized existence of motherhood, I did not. I dove in immediately, trying to reconcile the gender war that was taking place inside myself. I transferred my work about the silence engendered by abuse, neglect and violence, to the larger issue of the generally unexpressed, incredibly vivid life-as-woman.

Ruddick herself states that, “to be sure, women’s or mothers’ voices have been silenced, their thinking distorted and sentimentalized. Hence it will take sustained political and intellectual effort before maternal thinking is truly heard” (p. 127). But does she give women and mothers’ voices? When she insists that she made all this up (in the section, entitled, “Making it Up” (pp. 61-64), she denies women, not only our voices but our actuality. Apparently the only woman who Ruddick allows to speak is herself.

From the beginning of my work to resolve the polarity of my internal gender war, there seemed to be two critical issues: 1) mothers’ experience lacks a language appropriate to the profundities of its meanings and purposes 2) and, because of this lack of appropriate symbols for communication, only proximity can penetrate the meanings inherent in the lives of mothers. A mother’s life can be witnessed, and in that way, “shared.” But a mother’s life is essentially not yet interpretable linguistically.

If mothers could not work to understand each other using a communicative medium with some staying power, how could we hope to have our deepest concerns (the health and welfare of our lovers, children and world) heard in the larger society? It seems to me that being heard in the larger society would indeed be a step towards global peacemaking but Ruddick only makes this point in relation to anti-war demonstrations (p. 234). Anti-war activities are important but they are reactions to war, not creations of peace.

Being by nature an activist, I wanted to focus my art and teaching on issues of women's communication. I began by experimenting with ways to communicate from our mute world. My first child was born in 1981. I often consider my second child to be the women's poetry journal I founded in 1983. I felt that by supporting women's words and women's ways of expressing their perceptions, I might learn more about myself and be able to access what I believe to be my internal, non-verbal comprehensions. I believe that this has been the case. By listening, I have been able to gradually build the courage necessary to speak.

Ruddick states that "the primary social groups with which a mother is identified.. demand that she raise her children in a manner acceptable to them" (p. 17). I think I was hanging out with a lower middle class than Ruddick was. We didn't analyze our childrearing as carefully or as intellectually, or as consistently, as Ruddick describes; but perhaps she is making it up. In our world, tradition played a repressive role yet often was a necessary foundation of information for survival. What had always been done in terms of taking care

of children and husbands was knowledge passed along through generations of women. The clearly patriarchal tradition that was passed on by the women, was enforced (often with force) by men. Perhaps this use of force is what Ruddick means by “demand” in the quote above.

Many mothers took on the role of a single parent in response to the severity of the imposition of patriarchal traditions and our feeling of the inappropriateness of their traditions for the raising of the children. When asked how I know this, unlike Ruddick, I will not say “I made it up.” I say, “I saw it, I know it, I lived it, I shared it with many, many other women, friends, acquaintances and even an occasional enemy.”

Women who felt that they might have some new knowledge to bring to the raising of their children or the caretaking of their households were routinely brutalized psychologically and physically. A small percentage of women were themselves domineering bullies in their homes. Very few homes were peaceful. Instead of looking towards a man like Gandhi, who associated women and sexuality with all that is evil, why not look towards single mothers and alternative households? Perhaps new forms of childrearing are emerging that abandon a dependence on the status quo. Perhaps there are parents who are creating alternative lifestyles which will support a conscientious science of peacemaking far more effectively than Gandhi’s rituals of self-denial.

As my commitment to women’s issues has deepened, my understanding of women’s issues has become more subtle and more complex. I used to think that women

needed a different scale of values about everything, that we were almost a different race than men. I no longer believe this. Even though, in my experience, women are more often the beaten, when they come to learn, their minds are as fully capable as men's minds; their personalities are as varied as men's personalities; their violence, wretched indifference and capacity for love are just as intense as men's.

Most importantly, I have seen that women embody and perpetuate the same culture as men do. When a student comes to me, having been raped by a man using a chair leg for a dildo, her face a blotch of blue, her story is not much different than her rapist's. She believes as he believes. It is this commonality of belief and values that determines the horrifying repetitiveness of our societal violences.

Ruddick tries to make the point that mothering is a skill that requires cognition. She states that, "mothers meeting together ... can be heard thinking" (p. 25). Immediately after that, she says that, "this does not mean that they can be heard being good" (p. 25). I agree with these statements but they contradict Ruddick's general argument that the acts of mothering will create peaceful action, which Ruddick defines as a general good.

I agree that mothers think, and that they think about mothering; and that thinking about mothering can often be a great deal like thinking about making peace. I suggest that the case that taking-care-of-children is a version of taking care-of-the-world, can be argued legitimately; not from the highly abstract, male-defined sense of rationalism Ruddick calls practicalism, but from the heart of women's words, lives and experiences.

In my experience, I have seen and understood that women must begin to articulate their experiences, not because they will be speaking goodness or rightness or anything better than what men are currently speaking; but because if we do not speak and share our attitudes, beliefs and conceptual structures, those schema cannot evolve and grow. By hiding behind generalities and male theories, Ruddick is silencing herself. If women's schema do not evolve, we will continue to perpetrate the mindless violence that is currently poisoning the planet.

When a female student is able to articulate her dreams for herself, in the context of a supportive environment, she can begin to actualize those dreams. As she takes steps towards realizing her dream, she encounters all sorts of resistance, but from my practice, I know that if the external resistance a woman encounters succeeds in halting her progress, that opposition has met an internal ally: there is something in her that corresponds to the objections she is hearing from the "outside." A woman's educational process, like anyone else's, can only be completely annihilated by her own guilt or fear of change.

I think that together, men and women built a world, this world. We found a way to create equilibrium. The inertia of that equilibrium is a stumbling block for educators, like myself, who wish to influence women's education. But that inertia is not external to women, it is carried within us, justified by us, maintained and promoted by us.

I trust stasis. I also trust progress. We must balance the forces that move within us as well as those forces that operate in the culture. Learning to find the balance in ourselves,

I believe, will slowly bring the culture into balance. In the past, traditionally, we have balanced human systems by allocating discreet roles to genders. Today we are experimenting with increasing personal responsibility. When my students, male or female, cease to see themselves as types, as role functions, they become more able to negotiate the challenges that life presents to them. They become more able to think clearly, learn, choose and achieve goals, identify what brings them joy and maintain a dynamic balance that brings them their dignity and pride. Ruddick does not address the concept of balance, neither internal nor external. I think that attempts to create concepts of peace that are not overtly concerned with issues of balance are impractical. Because they are fundamentally partisan and not inclusive, theories of action that do not reconcile opposition, cannot be fundamental to a sustainable peace.

Making Connections: An Examination of Ruddick's Assumptions

In *Maternal Thinking, Towards a Politics of Peace*, Sarah Ruddick makes two main assumptions: The first of these assumption is that mothering consists of systematic and essential practices. That is, she assumes that it is possible to analyze motherhood in terms of the activities that comprise it and that those activities can be assumed to be both systematically organized (interpretable as elements in a system called mothering) and essential (i.e. without these activities motherhood would be essentially altered).

The second basic assumption that Ruddick makes is that the practices of mothering can be defined as the same as the practices required for peacemaking. That is, she assumes that resistance, renunciation, reconciliation and peacekeeping can be equated with nurturing, protecting and training.

Ruddick states that “the four ideals of nonviolence - renunciation, resistance, reconciliation, and peacekeeping - govern only some maternal practices of some mothers. Yet it is also true that to elucidate these ideal is to describe, from a particular perspective, maternal practice itself. Peacemaking mothers create arrangements that enable their children to live safely, develop happily, and act conscientiously; that is, they preserve, nurture, and train, exemplifying the commitments of maternal work” (p. 176).

Ruddick asserts that there are three categories which define the practices of mothering: preservative love which consists of protecting the child, fostering growth which she characterizes as an administrative function and training which is often referred to in other texts as socialization.

I think it would have helped her argument if Ruddick had made more of a distinction between thinking and acting. Although Ruddick states that “maternal peacefulness is a myth” (p. 217), she insists that there is a correlation between mothering and non-violent action. But, because she has not clearly distinguished between the ideas that guide behavior and the actions that make up behavior, Ruddick’s parallelism leaps from a list of concrete skills (protect, nurture, train) to a list of conceptual abstractions (renunciation, resistance, reconciliation, and peacekeeping). Ruddick is confusing categories of experience with categories of abstractions.

This forced marriage between mothering and Gandhian philosophy is particularly ironic since Gandhi is noted for his negative feelings towards and horrific relations with women. Ruddick is trying to put a stepsister’s foot (Gandhi’s philosophy) into a glass slipper (the practice of mothering).

Ruddick’s assumption that she has done no research but has merely invented her concepts, blinds her to the weakness of her argument. If she had assumed instead the role of qualitative anthropological researcher, this book might have provided the reader with useful

data from which responsible peace theory could emerge. Ruddick has put the cart before the horse.

If, as Ruddick herself says, she is making all this up, does this book merely portray a fantasy of what mothering might be? Hardly. Some observations, though they may not be universally applicable, certainly ring true. For instance, in chapter three, “Preservative Love” (p. 65), Ruddick discusses the fact that many mothers desire to murder their children yet somehow resist this urge.

If she had admitted to the fact that she was doing research, I think she would have given her own arguments a more rigorous examination. Even though Ruddick chose to ignore the actions, and perhaps even the existence, of those mothers who do not resist their desire to damage their children, she is clearly on the right track in thinking that the discipline that a mother exerts against her own primal passion to destroy has some applicability to the skills needed to control the primal passions which lead us to participate in war.

Ruddick’s assumption that a practice of mothering exists is an extremely potent and valuable insight. Adult educators would do well to note the fact that the values and thought processes associated with and inherent in the set of social actions called mothering, play an important role in society.

Ruddick’s assumption that, from the roots of caretaking principles applicable to the care of specific persons, we can construct a larger conception of how we might wish to take care of people, communities, nations and our planet, is a vision worthy of serious research.

In Ruddick’s delight to see a connection between two social processes - mothering and peacemaking - for which she has a great deal of respect and emotional commitment, she forgets altogether the issue of self-defense. Ruddick assumes that the Gandhian model of peace action (non-violent resistance) is the only type of peace action. This passive type of peacemaking - “A feminist maternal politics of peace: peacemakers create a communal suspicion of violence, a climate in which peace is desired, a way of living in which it is

possible to learn and to practice non-violent resistance and strategies of reconciliation” (p. 244) - is in sharp contrast to her delineation of proactive mothering.

An omission can be an assumption, an assumption of irrelevance. Ruddick neglects to mention any sort of training that mothers provide for their children in the realm of self-protection. Issues of self-defense are not irrelevant either to concepts of peacemaking or practices of mothering. It is unlikely that Ruddick taught her children to wait out severe aggression perpetrated upon them. Granted, if aggression is mild, for instance, mean words and humiliating actions, we often do ask our children to withstand the urge to bludgeon their foes. However, when it is a question of kill or be killed, rape or fight back, I hope mothers teach their children to survive.

As Ruddick states, “there is no simple way to unravel the destructiveness we have created, to dismantle its weapons, tease apart the allure of its concepts, and cure ourselves of its fearful romance” (p. 251). Ruddick’s is definitely a worthy endeavor.

I hope adult educators choose to embark on the path of inquiry that Ruddick has illuminated because I believe that here we will find fertile ground for research. I would wish for us to carefully document mothering activities within cultures and subcultures. I would wish for us to carefully examine cross-cultural implications of the variations in mothering techniques. I wish for us to have the courage to face what mothering is and has been. I hope we can form analyses of mothering that will lead us both to healthier habits of mothering as well as toP effective modes of peacemaking.