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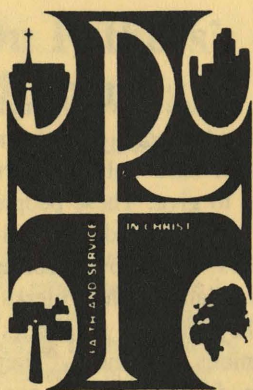
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Diaconalogue

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE LUTHERAN DEACONESS ASSOCIATION, INC., TO ENHANCE THE DIALOGUE AND EXCHANGE AMONG PEOPLE WITH DIACONAL HEARTS

Number 16 Spring, 1988

Foundations

MOTHERING...FOR MOTHERS ONLY?

The ministry of mothering is a matter to which the Lutheran Deaconess Association has dedicated a considerable amount of time, money, and staff resources over the past few years. Yet, we have focused our efforts, quite naturally, toward the women in our society who are responsible for raising children—either those children to whom they gave biological birth or those children they chose to adopt as their own. In this issue we have chosen to explore further the meaning of the concept we call “mothering.” Is it for mothers only? Can fathers do it too? What about friends and co-workers? Who gives us life and new birth as we grow and change in our everyday worlds? Who are you “mothering” in your life right now? Do you feel comfortable calling this “mothering?” Why? Why not?

In “I Wish You Were My Mother,” Venice Williams shares two of her experiences with “mothering.” Burton Everist continues the subject as he asks what it means for fathers to be “mothering” their children. Through a reprint from *Weavings*, you will benefit from Wendy Wright’s reflections on being a mothered child of God. Mothering is surely a way of serving as Christ served, of serving as we have been served, of knowing the tender touch and loving embrace of our God. Mothering is diaconal ministry. And, perhaps, it isn’t for mothers only!

Blessings on your mothering!

Diane Greve, Editor

“I Wish You Were My Mother”

by Venice R. Williams

“I wish you were my mother.”

The first time I heard those words confessed to me I was ten years old and at a crowded crosswalk. I was on my way home from school, just trying to get to the other side of the street, when I felt a tug at my sleeve.

When I looked down I saw a weeping, vaguely familiar, pastey-looking face. As he continued to pull on me, he knocked my lunchbox out of my hand, spilling its contents all over the ground. The boy had just watched his mother quarrel with some strange woman in the middle of the street. It seemed she had forgotten about him. He wanted to know just one thing: “Girl can you take me home? My name is Michael.”

I recognized him as a child who lived in one of the basement apartments in the alley behind my house. I took his hand, assuring him I would get him home. He looked



over to where his mother was and then back up to me. “I wish you were my mother,” Michael said as he wiped his eyes.

We finally crossed the street, leaving the lunchbox behind. I led him home, relieved to find his grandmother there. I will never forget the joy that brightened his face when I leaned over and whispered in his ear, “I wish I were your mother too.”

I went back to the corner to retrieve my lunchbox and saw Michael’s mother. She was calling out for him. I made my way over to where she was standing and told her I had taken him home. An expression of relief came over her face but it quickly turned to resentment. “You should have checked with me first. I’m his mother, you’re not.”

(cont'd on page2)

I Wish (cont'd from page 1)

For a long time, I really did wish Michael were my child. I felt a desire to nurture this boy who was only six years younger than I. We spent time together in his home; we had adventures in a nearby playground; we enjoyed numerous walks to the dime store; and I read him every picture book I could get my hands on. One day I went for him and he was gone. He moved away with his mother and I never saw him again.

Michael was the first in a long line of people who became my "children," if only for a little while. There were troubled girls and vulnerable boys. There were women in transition and men "in search of." There were newborn babies whose delicate smiles will always be remembered but who will never know I was there. None of them ever developed inside of me for nine months. Not one was sustained in my womb by means of a complex system of nature. Yet we shared umbilical cords of telephone wires, first class mail, and prayers during sleepless nights. The birth canals through which they emerged into my life were city busways, camp gates, and corporate boardrooms.

Sometimes, I recognized their need from the beginning; at other times, I was already caught-up in a person's life before I realized what was taking place. That is how it was with Lisa and me.

We met eleven years after Michael had passed through my life. She was the cashier at my favorite bookstore. I spent hours sorting through used and new books, and Lisa would ring them up. She always told me, "Don't forget to come back and tell me about all of these. After I get off work, I don't want to see another book, let alone read one!"

I spent many lunch hours giving Lisa all the details of the latest novels. It took me almost two months to realize Lisa could not read beyond the numbers she punched in on the cash register. She admitted that until she began working at the bookstore, reading was not important and now she felt it was too late to learn.

I convinced her to at least try. We met twice a week at a nearby library and I began to teach Lisa to read. After four months, of what seemed to Lisa very little progress, she quit. She told me she was tired and frustrated and just didn't want to learn anymore.

As any mother would do, I told her I could not let her give up. "You can't go through life not knowing how to read," I said. She retaliated, "I've made it through the past thirty-six years!"

We argued. I begged. She refused. I bargained. We cried. She walked away. I let her go....I avoided the bookstore for awhile, but eventually began to shop there again. There were no more stories.

Nine months after our lessons had stopped, Lisa came to see me. It was two days before Christmas and she had a gift for me. She pulled out a book and began to read: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed..."

"My mother used to read this story to my brothers and me each Christmas Eve," she said, as tears filled her eyes, "This year, I can read it to my own kids. I finished learning what you started teaching me."

Michaels and Lisas weave through our lives; they need special care from us. It's the kind of care only mothers are reputedly able to give. These people come to us as clients, students, colleagues, parishioners. We know them as secretaries, beauticians, sales clerks, mail carriers. They can be neighbors, parents, companions, friends. They teach us that we do not have to conceive a child biologically to produce trust and create hope. It is not necessary to have nursed an infant to sustain a soul or nourish a dream. We need not guide their first steps to assist in setting a pace for them later in life.

I thank God for Michael and Lisa and the many others. If I never have children of my own, I have experienced what it is like to foster another being and share in the daily triumphs and disappointments.

I lost track of Lisa a few years ago and only a miracle could bring Michael back into my life; but, a part of them will always be with me and the loving never stops.

Venice R. Williams recently completed her deaconess internship in St. Louis. She is a member of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Diaconalogue

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From its beginning in 1919, the Lutheran Deaconess Association has been dedicated to a three-fold task: recruiting and educating women for the diaconate, supporting deaconesses in their ministries, and serving the church in its diaconal mission.

This newsletter is designed to affirm and encourage laity who do "diakonia" so that we can learn from, encourage, and support each other in our Christian service. In this way, we hope to serve the church in a new way.

We are always seeking resources for our publication. If you know of an individual whose life is an example of diaconal service or if you are interested in writing such an article, please write or call Diane Greve, Editor.

Next Issue: Risk Taking

We would like to invite our readers to share experiences from their own lives by reflecting on the following question: Can you identify a time when you took a risk that didn't fit your life style or life pattern? What made it possible for you to take that risk? What was the result?

Please send your thoughts by
August 1, 1988 to:

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A modest writer's fee will be offered upon publication.

On Fathers' Mothering

by **Burton Everist**



Some years ago I interviewed a young man whose wife was fully employed while he stayed at home with the household and the children. At that time I was also at home while my wife was teaching at the seminary. I called myself a "househusband"; he preferred "housewife." Both uses are oddities and highlight ways in which our language lags behind our social practices.

Some fathers speak of their care for their children as mothering. Their approach is often discounted or ridiculed. Of course even the word "mothering" has been laden with negative overtones. People speak of being smothered with mother love. Perhaps the temporary oddity of fathers claiming a kind of motherhood may evoke a new look at this old and often pejoratively used expression.

I am ambivalent about claiming this word for my care for my children...less because I fear the hovering image and more because it seems arrogant of me. After all, I did not have to carry within my body the children I care for. I did not feel the bone-wearying weight, the back-straining constant burden of a stirring child reshaping my abdomen. I did not feel the breaking of the water and shed my blood as my children were born. How can I dare suggest that my caring approaches in kind the body-born care which women alone can know?

And then there is the danger of reinforcing stereotypes about a mother's love—how natural it is and what it is like. ("What every good mother should feel and do.") Should I claim that all the good caring I do for my children is the mothering part of me?

Why, then, speak this way at all? Perhaps because the struggle is a cultural one, and language mirrors cultural expectations. In our society we have expected fathers to be tough, rough, a bit distant, especially with their sons. Because men don't cry, fathers certainly dare not express tender emotion too freely. Fathers have to be powerful, in charge, always competent, and always (publicly) right in their decisions.

Blondie and Dagwood, Father Knows Best, and other media images play their humor on fathers who have to be propped up by wives and families when they bumble. They must be made to believe that final decisions are theirs and that the family (which has just successfully manipulated Dad into doing what Mom knows best) are following their unfailingly wise leadership.

If understanding our care is helped by claiming the role of mothering, if it can help shatter stereotypes of both fathers and mothers, then this is the claim to make.

But it is not without the peril of underscoring stereotypes. Perhaps the best way to begin is to share a few personal occasions and leave them open for disagreement or affirmation.

My father had a fierce temper, and my brothers would often run from him in fear of it (as one of my own sons once did from me.) Yet I recall being held on his lap, cuddled next to his rough cheeks, and listening to him read the comics to me. I would not want to claim the former was father-behavior, but the latter had a tenderness our culture would assign to mothers only. Was he mothering me? When later I held each of our children on my lap and read the Narnia Chronicles and Dr. Seuss to them, was I mothering them? (And when I deeply regreted that our youngest learned to read too soon and I was not permitted to read all the Chronicles to him, was this a mother-like disappointment. He said, "Dad, I'd rather do it myself.")

On the long nights when our children were sick with a cold and had difficulty breathing I stayed up with them, sometimes lying on the floor by their bed or sitting beside them in the recliner, keeping the steamer going. Both my brothers and sisters-in-law had lost babies to crib death, and I feared we would, too. Was that ache in the core of my stomach in some way akin to that feeling place of women and mothers?

Is that distress which wells up in my being when one of the no-longer-children struggles with his feelings about his girlfriend a motherly emotion?

In the long run the nouns we put to these feelings are less important than the barriers these nouns may present to claiming the wholeness of life in all the ways of caring and the feelings that accompany them. Perhaps some men have been able not to cry because they have never allowed themselves to invest in other tendernesses. Instead they have chosen to relegate such emotions to trivialized women's roles, and diminished the gifts of women, of mothering, of tenderness.

This is written in the context of a Mother's Day on which the Gospel spoke of making our home in Christ's love as Christ was at home in his Father's love. Such were the cultural bonds that limited Jesus' own language.

It is written in the context of Ascension-tide and the post-partem trauma which the disciples faced as Jesus parted from them.

It is written in the context of the linguistic oddity of the Pentecost Gospel where Jesus says: "Let whoever trusts in me come and drink, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his womb shall flow rivers of living water.'" This last playful refusal to be bound by cultural chains which the new wine of the Gospel enables.

Our mothering God stretches our horizons and pushes us forth, enabling fathers and mothers to claim new, rich, wholesome possibilities as they are at home in the Father and Her rich love.

Burton Everist, pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, East Dubuque, Iowa, is a father of three sons.

OUR GOD IS LIKE AN EAGLE

When Israel camped in Sinai, then Moses heard from God.
This message tell the people, and give them this my word.
From Egypt I was with you and carried on my wing.
The whole of your great nation from slav'ry I did bring.

Just as a mother eagle who helps her young to fly.
I am a mother to you; your needs I will supply.
And you are as my children, my own who hear my voice.
I am a mother to you, the people of my choice.

If God is like an eagle who helps her young be free
And God is also father, then what of you and me?
We have no fear of labels; we have no fear of roles,
If God's own being blends them, we seek the selfsame goal.

Our God is not a woman; our God is not a man.
Our God is both and neither; our God is I who am.
From all the roles that bind us, our God has set us free.
What freedom does God give us? The freedom just to be.

This hymn verse can be sung to "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus."

Words by Laurence G. Bernier, 1974. "Our God Is Like An Eagle" appears in the UFMCC Trial Hymnal, UFMCC, 5300 Santa Monica

In the Circle of a Mother's Arm

By Wendy M. Wright

As my children grow and I have seen the art of child rearing expand beyond the warm circle of my arms, I have begun to feel that my most pressing concern must be to move more deeply into the arms of the "real" mother. I suppose it is not accidental that it has been my own sense of limitations as a parent that has compelled me to this realization, for it is precisely the frightening experience of needfulness, vulnerability, and lack that startles one out of the illusion of self-sufficiency and allows one to open to greater sources of strength and grace. We need to discover ourselves as children to discover our need for loving arms.

It is only recently that I have begun to have my real intimation of what it might mean to be a child of God. Certainly there are many ways of understanding this idea that are central to our Christian faith. For many years it was an image of my eldest at about one year of age that spoke to me of a quality of childhood that was also a capacity one would want to cultivate in relation to God. When we lived in California I used to go for about a two-mile-long jog every morning just before my husband left for work. I would

leave him and my toddler daughter busily engaged in washing the breakfast dishes. Soon, though, she would begin to miss her mom, and her daddy would pack up his things for work and carry her out to the end of the driveway to wait for my reappearance. As I rounded the corner of our block, I would see the two of them searching anxiously in my direction for the first sign of me. When she saw me, my daughter would squeal, scramble down from her daddy's arms, and begin to run toward me. Her running was utterly wholehearted and unselfconscious. She flew, breathless, into the open arms of the person she loved so much. Never mind that there were cracks in the sidewalk, that her shoelace might be untied, that her running steps were not yet sure enough to prevent a fall. She ran with the joy of pure love compelling her. I, on the other hand, was very aware of all the possible obstacles between us and our open-armed embrace. Yet I loved the abandon of her running, loved it and wanted to live that way, wanted to fling myself unguardedly into the arms of the God that creates and sustains our lives.

More recently, I have come to appreciate other qualities of childhood that we can claim as qualities that dispose us to go to God. In experiencing God as source of welcome and nurture, I have come to a new awareness of the heart of the child that seeks sustenance and rest near the heart of God. My imaginative mediation on my grown and world-weary daughter's return to me has prompted reflection not only on the nature of divine love but on the nature

of human response to that love. The meditation is, of course, a variant of the story of the prodigal son, and like the errant boy my daughter returned to seek the shelter of home only after hitting bottom, after coming to the end not merely of physical but of personal and spiritual resources. In the Lucan narrative the son is reduced to tending pigs, animals considered unclean in the Jewish tradition, thus rendering himself a true outcast, an untouchable. It was only when he had reached that point, when he recognized his own terrible needfulness, that he discovered his need for his father's welcome embrace.

It is hard for any of us truly to accept our own vulnerability and needfulness—both for each other and for God. Parents, it seems to me, are especially prone to harbor illusions of self-sufficiency. We who care for the young, who are called to be providers, shelterers, healers, teachers, and question-answerers for our children easily forget our own needfulness. We forget that we too are children whose hearts must be open, trusting, and needful of God's deep embrace where all joy, all suffering is felt and borne. We must discover our true childhood so that we can return home, seeking those arms.

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Other Resources

A Way in the World

by Ernest Boyer Jr.

Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco

Hardcover 1984, \$12.95, 193 pages.

Drawing from various Christian traditions, the author looks at family life as spiritual discipline. His desire to "go to the desert" to pursue a spiritual life was not practical as he was married and the father of three children, a responsibility and personal commitment he did not want to take lightly. So, he embarked on a journey to bring family life and spiritual discipline together. Valuable book for those willing to reflect on a deeper, more spiritual understanding of parenting and family life.

Motherhood and God

by Margaret Hebblethwaite,

A Geoffrey Chapman book published by Cassell Ltd, 1 Vincent Square, London, England SW1P 2PN

(This is also available through distributors in the United States if ordered through a local bookstore)

Paperback, 1984, \$5.95, 147 pages.

This book attempts to find God in motherhood and motherhood in God. The author takes a very honest look at feelings and experiences of mothers while helping the reader to seek a richer understanding of God in our midst.

"The 'M' is for Me"—A Gathering for Mothers is for mothers of young children. The LDA now has a 9½ minute promotional video available which gives an overview of this weekend event. It can be used by various groups as a discussion starter on the need for mothers to be nurtured and supported.

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