

Book Reviews

Alan R. Rosenberg, Editor

EVERY CHILD'S BIRTHRIGHT: IN DEFENSE OF MOTHERHOOD.
By Selma Fraiberg. Basic Books, N.Y. Pp. 183. 1977. \$10.95.

Dr. Fraiberg, famous for her eloquent and persuasive book on early childhood *The Magic Years*, has now written a short polemic, a cry of outrage, protesting the indifference, neglect, abuse and cruelty not of individual persons but of the entire institutional fabric of our society towards the children of America. She has joined a long list of spokesmen witnessing the importance of enduring love, proclaiming it not only a miraculous gift but also a birthright for every child. She does not commit the naive error of legislating or suggesting coercion of love, but she does call attention to the disastrous effects of "devaluation of parental nurturing and commitment to babies in our society" which is a national disgrace. She makes no effort towards a rigorous scientific statement but rather summarizes popular research on attachment while sounding an alarm on the danger to our children.

In her first chapter she describes with nostalgic warmth the stereotypic wise warm loving grandmother relying on her intuition and folk wisdom and traditions that, without the benefit of scientific or medical prescription, established a biological program of mutual intimacy between mother and child protecting stable and enduring bonds of love. Dr. Fraiberg expresses her diatribe against impersonal mechanical isolating practices in obstetrics and infant care in the form of a parody of an international conference of mothers and babies of four imaginary tribes. She ends the chapter describing how the universal language of love (described in all the world's literature on romantic love) begins with the courtship between a mother and her infant in the endearments of the embrace, the expression of the eyes, the evocative smile, the murmurs of pleasure and distress, the caress of the touching hand, and the reaching out towards the beloved for a touch, a pat or a squeeze.

In the second chapter she reviews the "origins" of human bonds in evolutionary terms referring to the work of Lorenz and then to clinical studies, on the damage caused by the absence or rupture of human ties in infancy, by Anna Freud, Burlingham, Spitz, Bowlby, Goldfarb, Province and Lipton. The damage is shown by permanent impairment of intellect and language, and by disorders of impulse control. Leaning on Freud's instinctual theory she explains the failure to regulate

aggression in classical libido theory terms — “the absence of human bonds leaves a free ‘unbound’ aggression to pursue its erratic course.” Whether one formulates it this way or not, the argument is still persuasive: failure to experience human affection and relatedness early in love can rob a baby of his humanity.

The third chapter, beginning with the well-known parable of Solomon and the two mothers, takes up the issue of custody and the new prevailing guideline of best interests of the child rather than biological property rights, and refers to the influential work of Goldstein, Freud and Solnit.

The fourth chapter sensationally describes the appalling lack of trained qualified child care personnel or facilities in this country and the worst type of makeshift entrepreneurial gestures towards child care that seem nightmarish in their roadside cash-and-carry impersonal inhumanity.

In the fifth chapter she attacks child welfare law and social policy, denounces archaic principles of juvenile law, and singles out for particular attention the vicious effect of welfare policies on forcing the father out of the home. “. . . Six million children on welfare belong to families in which the mother is the head.” Here she underscores the damaging effect on children of persuading or coercing welfare mothers to go to work, placing their young children in inadequate or harmful child care facilities.

She closes her final chapter with an appeal for moral accountability and the establishment of the developmental needs of children as a top priority for all special interest groups, governmental budgets and social policy.

I keep thinking of Jonathan Swift and his fierce diatribe 200 years ago in *A Tale of A Tub* and “A Modest Proposal” in which he made parody of the cruel and inhuman treatment of children in his day by suggesting that they cease wasting this national resource and make butcher meat of babies.

The history of mankind, from the infanticide legally approved and commonly practiced in ancient Greece, to the children’s crusade of medieval Europe, and the horrors of the Industrial Revolution, is stained with the blood and tears of millions of children. The Madonna and Child symbolize the Hope of mankind rekindled at every winter solstice by the Christ-Mass, but certainly do not characterize the history of our relationships with each other or with our children through the ages. Nostalgic memories of wise loving grandmothers notwithstanding, it is a harsh, bitter record.

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