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Unmasking Ourselves: Resisting the Martha Stewart-ization of Motherhood

**A review essay of Susan Maushart,
*The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother
Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't***

To see motherhood properly, I am convinced, is to see it heroically, which means making full acknowledgement of the pain, the dangers, and the risks and taking the full measure of the glory for its exquisite rewards. (Maushart, 1999: 105)

When *The Mask of Motherhood* (Maushart, 1999) went to press, the first Martha Stewart *Baby* magazine had yet to decorate the racks of grocery stores and Gap sales counters. Yet, in Martha Stewart *Baby* lies ample evidence of Susan Maushart's thesis about the mask of motherhood. Maushart is concerned with the incongruities between women's lived experiences of mothering and our cultural representations of that experience in the media, advertising, and in public and private discourse. As a magazine dedicated entirely to feeding, clothing, and decorating for babies, Martha Stewart *Baby* embodies a culturally-dominant, but nonetheless troublesome image of motherhood. It looks like a Baby Gap advertising supplement, containing countless photos of perfect designer children. We find in its pages instructions on such things as how to make an inchworm cake for your child's first birthday—a cake that would take any normal human being days to prepare and assemble. We see neat, tidy middle-class nurseries decorated to perfection with hand-sewn quilts and pumpkin-shaped pillows. More interesting, however, is what—or whom—we do *not* see: mothers themselves. Indeed, the magazine reveals almost no traces of the work of mothering at all.

Although mothers are absent from the glossy photo spreads of *Baby* magazine, they are very much at its center. Indeed, the magazine is targeted at mothers and it is selling us a particular image of what motherhood should look like. The invisibility of mothers is a sign that the work of mothering should be

neither seen nor heard. *Martha Stewart Baby* offers us a sanitized and idealized world of motherhood in which the reality of babies, the care they demand and the mess they make is confined to lighthearted quips in the small print. This is a world of consumption in which the solution to any “problem” about parenting can be found in the product information pages. With its photos of sleeping babies, its articles on the meaning of lullabies and the creation of memory quilts, *Martha Stewart Baby* also serves to sentimentalize and romanticize motherhood. We can hardly help being drawn into Martha Stewart’s world because of its sheer beauty, but at the same time, it leaves most of us feeling inadequate. This kind of artificial beauty, this forced sentimentality, tends to inspire feelings of disappointment and guilt—disappointment that we don’t have the time or inclination to make pumpkin-shaped pillows, and guilt that we can’t make mothering look that easy or perfect.

The fundamental disjuncture between Martha Stewart’s mother-absent but perfect world and the lived experiences of mothering is exactly what Maushart (1999) wants to deconstruct. She argues that mothers themselves repress this disjuncture between illusion and reality behind the mask of motherhood, a term that Maushart borrows from Adrienne Rich. The mask of motherhood is of our own design; it conceals the ambivalence, the frustration, and the conflicted emotions that many women experience in mothering behind the façade of the competent, cheerful and even serene mother. The problem is not just that we do not see ourselves reflected in the pages of *Martha Stewart Baby*, but that, in being bombarded with these wholly unrealistic images of motherhood, we internalize them and use them as the standard against which we judge our own performances. How many of us know that Martha Stewart’s world is not our own, but continue nevertheless to flip longingly through the pages of her *Baby* magazine?

Of course, the mask of motherhood takes many different forms, and Martha Stewart’s magazine is only one of them. The mask of motherhood can also be found in the cultural discourses about pregnancy as an unequivocally joyful experience, about labour as something that can be “managed” with drugs or, if approached with the correct attitude and birth plan, done naturally. The mask of motherhood encourages us to accept the idea that motherhood is itself a manageable experience, that it is just another task to be juggled with others. We deal in the currency of “supermom” and the myth of achieving an easy balance between career and family but, as Maushart puts it, “getting the knack of combining motherhood with a career is like getting the knack of brain surgery” (1999: 7). One friend confessed to me, “There is never a day in which I feel I am both a good mother *and* a good academic; it is always one or the other.” And the older and more educated and career-oriented the new mother, the greater the “nurture shock”—or, the more dissonance she will experience between her former controlled existence and her new reality. Any woman who has become a mother knows that motherhood is not just another task—it is *the* task to end all tasks. It is life altering. Yet these kernels of insight rarely make

it into our public or private discourse about motherhood; we rarely take off the mask that Maushart has identified to reveal our true selves.

Maushart is at her most insightful, and most humorous, when she enters the fray surrounding birth and breastfeeding. The mask of motherhood, she argues, prevents us from being honest with other women about what is really involved in giving birth and in breastfeeding. Her chapter entitled, “Labouring under Delusions,” takes on contemporary prenatal discourse. Never, she argues, have women been so equipped with information about childbirth, and yet been so woefully unprepared for the actual experience of it. While in our mothers’ or grandmothers’ generation, a “good birth” meant a live birth, a good birth in the modern lexicon refers to a “meaningful birth.” As she rightly observes, “it is because we can now be so confident about a successful outcome in the form of a healthy baby that we can afford the luxury of examining birth as a process imbued with meaning in its own right” (1999: 70). Indeed, it has been invested with so much significance that we have forgotten that it is more than the *culmination* of pregnancy; it is the *commencement* of at least two new lives, that of baby and mother. In focussing most of its attention on strategies for the “good birth” rather than on coping methods for new motherhood, prenatal education ultimately fails us. After all, “[c]hildbirth is one day, more or less, in a woman’s life; motherhood is forever” (1999: 71). It is not that Maushart denies the power of birthing experiences, she is merely questioning the relative weight prenatal education assigns to it.

Moreover, the obsessive preparation for birth, with the creation of the right birth plan, deludes women into believing that they can control and manage their own births. Yet my own obstetrician put it best when he stated plainly, “The thing about birth is, you can’t plan it.” Having the information is still better than ignorance, but having information in abundance “may produce its own brand of folly” (1999: 75). Indeed, Maushart points out that women are “encouraged to regard childbirth as a performance, a testing of their maternal mettle” (1999: 75). Unfortunately, statistical evidence shows that most women come away from the experience reporting they did not feel in control, that they were taken aback by the unmanageability of the pain, and that they did not “perform” well.

The woman who has given birth with an epidural or via cesarean section will worry that she has somehow cheated. By contrast, her sister who endures the full nine yards of biblical travail—having bought into the mythology that all you really need for the pain is breath control, a sincere partner, and batteries for the Discman—will feel that she has *been* cheated. (“How could they have told such lies?” ...) (1999:79)

As long as birth is judged as a performance, it will be difficult to avoid the competition that currently surrounds it (“My birth was great; I just squatted to

deliver the baby..." vs. "I was in agony for 36 hours..."). In this competition, the "good birth" advocates are challenged by those who, at the drop of a hat, will reveal their most horrific birth stories to the yet uninitiated. While this latter discourse of complaint and negativity may be more honest than contemporary prenatal education, it does more to inspire fear than to actually prepare women for the experience of giving birth.

In perhaps her most courageous insight, Maushart suggests that women's "success" (however it is defined) at childbirth is largely determined by luck. The extent of both our suffering and our ability to withstand the pain comes down to pure chance—a lottery. Recognizing that "it is pure heresy to say so" Maushart contends that everything depends on the baby's positioning, timing, and "the woman's innate physical endowments" (1999: 88). This is a liberating revelation! Recognizing the lottery of childbirth might be scary for some simply because it means we have to admit to ourselves that we do not control it, but at the same time it also frees us from the trap of seeing childbirth as a test or performance.

In her chapter on breastfeeding, "Lactation Intolerant: The Worst of Breast Is Best," the author is similarly insightful and heretical. If the child-feeding pendulum has swung from pro-infant formula in the 1950s and 1960s to a strong "breast is best" ethic from the 1970s through the 1990s, *The Mask of Motherhood* is evidence that the pendulum is once again in motion. While acknowledging that breast is indeed best, Maushart rails against the breastfeeding lobby for their self-righteousness. She takes exception to the judgemental language with which breastfeeding advocates dismiss bottle-feeding ("artificial feeding") just as she calls into question the notion that breastfeeding comes easily and naturally to all women. She is most concerned with the unwritten terms of what I call the breastfeeding contract. Yes, on the surface, everybody gains: baby gets the best nourishment; mother does not have to prepare bottles; and both enjoy the unique bonding experience. But breastfed babies also tend to sleep for shorter durations, increasing their mothers' fatigue, and breastfeeding is, for a significant number of women, a very painful experience. Furthermore, "every woman who attempts to breast feed will discover what the mask of motherhood never reveals: breastfeeding is not merely an 'option' but a way of life" (1999: 151). And as a way of life, it is radically out of sync with "the expectations of everyday adult life that today's women increasingly share with men" (1999: 169). "Don't expect to be able to do anything else," a doctor friend advised me about breastfeeding. She was right—for most women new to breastfeeding, a shower is an accomplishment. Women deserve to know this when they embark on the experience. Many will choose to breastfeed anyway—and they will surrender control over their lives to do it—but how much "undue frustration and self-blame" (1999: 169) could be avoided if they entered into this contract with their eyes open?

Both our prenatal and child-rearing discourses are fraught with a primary inconsistency that exacerbates the confusion and uncertainty of new mothers.

On the one hand, we are bombarded with advice books and manuals that give us (often conflicting) technical advice on what to do for our babies. But on the other hand, this technical advice is punctuated with affirmations that we will somehow know what is best because mothering is instinctual and intuitive. Maushart observes that “the very existence of these texts implicitly (and often explicitly as well) undermines the new mother’s confidence not only in her own judgment but in the accumulated wisdom of her own peers and elders” (1999: 141). As children of the information age, we have come to trust apparently objective and scientific knowledge over the experience of our mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers, and this, for Maushart, represents an “incalculable loss.” As she puts it, “what we don’t know about motherhood is what we refuse to hear and refuse to see in the lives of women around us, in the arrogant presumption that we are unique, that we will be different. Ultimately, we will pay dearly for our hubris” (1999: 144).

To a new mother, Maushart’s (1999) revelations are epiphanic. And I suspect for many mothers with more experience, reading *The Mask of Motherhood* will confirm much of what they already know. Maushart articulates a whole range of contradictory experiences and emotions that otherwise go unexplained in mothering. What is missing, in her view, is a vibrant, open, and honest public conversation about both the challenges *and* the unparalleled joys of becoming a mother in late modern Western culture. This is a conversation that needs to take place between mothers themselves, and it ought to extend into the medical establishment, to prenatal classes, and perhaps especially to places like La Leche League, where one most expects an honest discourse but often comes away frustrated and even downright annoyed. Such a conversation would prevent each of us from having to “laboriously [reinvent] the wheel of motherhood”; it would prevent motherhood from being what Phyllis Chesler has called a wilderness experience. In our society, Chesler argues, pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood “are savage tests of your ability to survive the wilderness alone. And to keep quiet about what you’ve seen” (cited in Maushart, 1999: 12).

To alter the current situation, however, we need more than a *conversation* about motherhood, and we need to do more than change the ideals of mothering. In effect, we need to change the social and economic conditions of mothering. While Maushart (1999) recognizes the incompatibility between the tempo and expectations of everyday life in late modern Western societies and the demands of motherhood, she does not extend her recommendations to include changes to the economic organization of our society. She is right to point out that one of the fundamental challenges for women is to negotiate a “balance” between mothering and outside employment. But as long as we are governed by a market system, and as long as the structures of the market determine the arrangements of the remainder of our lives, any sort of “balance” will remain elusive. Women’s places in a market economy are already precarious, and becoming a mother only increases our economic risk and heightens the

tension between public and private roles and obligations. In a sense, our failure to articulate the realities of motherhood to each other is related to our reluctance to address the indisputable contradictions of our current economic system.

Conversely, perhaps initiating a discussion about the problems with the mask of motherhood and the disjunctures between the illusions and realities of mothering will also lead us into a conversation about the need to address the larger, systemic obstacles to a more meaningful and rewarding mothering experience. As it stands, *The Mask of Motherhood* presents a rather bleak picture. But it is bleak not because it is “down on motherhood,” as my doula warned me it might be when she read its suggestive subtitle, but because it exposes the faultlines in our culturally-accepted conspiracy of silence. At one and the same time, it is affirming because it identifies motherhood as something *other* than—and something far *more* than—what Martha Stewart depicts.

References

- Maushart, Susan. (1999). *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't*. New York: The New Press.