

father john catoir

Children and Women's Lib



The New York Times printed a little gem of an article a while back. I cut it out and saved it. It was a commentary on women's lib by a female journalist named Shelley List. The piece brought a sparkle of understanding to a serious human question: "What does women's lib mean for a mother?"

Perhaps the author never intended to answer such a sweeping question, but I think she touched on an important aspect of the answer. And her answer is all the more intriguing because she is a liberated woman — a divorcee, a journalist, a mother — reflecting on her own liberation. The conflict between her instincts for career fulfillment and her role as a mother came into sharp relief one day when she had one of those private moments with one of her daughters. It was not a theoretical discussion, as you will see; it was a moment of truth. I thought you might enjoy reading it.

FROM WESTPORT, Connecticut, Ms. List writes to her two daughters, Julie and Abigail:

"As you know, I'm 41, divorced. Of course you know that. And I am fairly well 'liberated,' for the most part, having worked as a journalist for the last eight years — as soon as one of you left for nursery school and the other to first or second grade . . . For (the last) five years you have watched me become rather self-sufficient, independent . . . But what concerns me now, with your young womanhood approaching, and me 'fulfilling' myself as a writer; more and more, is . . . priorities.

"In other words, when you say to me, as one of you did recently after sharing an intimate confidence, your arm covering your eyes so I wouldn't see your pain, the tears escaping under your elbow, down your cheeks, when you said, 'Do you know this is the first time you have really talked to me in a long time, and I feel so much better just for that' — I am taken aback."

Here is a mother who admires the wisdom of the oracles of women's lib, but who has stopped to think about the consequences of being "fulfilled." She goes on: "I wonder who will dry the eyes of the children of the Women's Caucus . . . I wonder if there is a way to be all things to all people, especially your own children, and be 'liberated' at the same time?"

I WONDER about it too. This is not to say women's lib is not good. It has a lot to say, especially to men, but it raises an important question: How does the liberation movement relate to the rights of children — not only the right to be born, but the right to be protected, comforted, cared for, by loving parents? How many sacrifices must be made by a good woman for her children?

I hope Shelley List succeeds in finding the necessary balance to her life. She is certainly on the right track.

I think there's a message here for fathers as well. Fathers are supposed to work together with their wives to provide an atmosphere of emotional comfort for the children. Career fulfillment cannot supersede the basic human needs of his loved ones. He too must learn to listen to the children, and touch them with his love. Think about it . . .