

Meaning is a Feminist Issue

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Throughout years of activism and scholarship feminism has criticized and deconstructed almost every institution, concept, theory, politics, identity one can think of.

A student of mine asked me the other day: "Feminist theory deconstructs my identity and dismantles my world. What alternative does it offer me?" "Liberation and autonomy," I replied. "And then what?" she questioned. And she was right: on the whole, feminism has left women with no spiritual attachment, with no alternative, with no meaning.

No wonder that so many women, facing the growing hardships of modern life, turn to religion which offers them community, respect and self-esteem. Others adopt New Age beliefs and rituals. Many make mothering constructed by patriarchal capitalism the center of their lives. Still others view career or shopping as sources of pleasure and sense of worth. These structures and constructs are oppressive and deceiving; yet, women have been tempted to believe in them and they give women hope and some comfort. Women, already informed by feminism, search for new meaning to inspire

their lot and guide them towards a different reality, yet are unable to find it within today's feminism.

Take capitalism and the exchange economy for example: It makes us blind to the needs of the other and turns us inward, towards our own needs and individuality, constantly engaged in an endless competition over career, success and capital, expecting that our value will be judged, usually in money terms and thus will make our lives meaningful. It is as if we are always waiting for someone to recognize us and give us our just worth, so we can have an identity and meaning.

Feminism's ambition to liberate women – economic independence, control over their bodies, the freedom to choose – not only has hardly succeeded in face of the many backlashes but in fact has offered women non-feminist meanings: work as liberation (that is, adopting the capitalistic structure) or personal freedom (that is, adopting the liberal philosophy). Moreover, by harshly criticizing motherhood, feminism has left women with no maternal? meaning at all.

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No wonder so many women are not drawn to feminism. They sense that feminism does not offer them escape and recovery, and not salvation.

The concept of meaning for me does not refer to the worth of life, as I believe that all lives, all of Mother Nature's creatures, human and not human, are worthy. For me, like for existentialists, meaning is a personal matter and does not need to be justified. As Viktor Frankel, the Holocaust survivor wrote, our main motivation for living is not the will for power, as Nietzsche thought, nor the will for pleasure, as Freud suggested, but our will to find meaning in life, and we have an inalienable freedom to find meaning. As a feminist and a mother, I will add that I derive a sense of meaning through my activism, through bonding and belonging, caring and nurturing. Communities are an important source of meaning, as the indigenous conception of Ubuntu – I am because I belong – tells us. As Mother Nature's children, meaning is also derived from our attachment to her and understanding her.

Meaning can become a danger and limitation if it comes from an external worldview – like capitalism, consumerism or religion. Life exists for itself and not for a duty or being external to it, and as such only we may accord it meaning.

Motherhood and motherliness are a major source of meaning to both mothers and mothered [children](#), women and men, when it does not stem from an oppressive and

compulsory patriarchal or messianic need but evolves from our own experience as mothers and being mothered.

If we strip mothering of the constructed layers religion, capitalism and patriarchy have covered it with, we arrive at what Genevieve Vaughn suggests – a child-oriented gift giving. Children have to be nurtured or they die. As we are all children of mothers, most of us have experienced this need orientation and other orientation, the giving and receiving of nurturing, this unique bonding. This free giving and receiving is emotionally invested for both, and that creates a common relation which is the basis of meaning. Thus, says Vaughn, meaning comes from doing other-oriented, "transitive" things.

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People try to make more money or to be defined as the best and in this way arrive at meaning in their lives. But this does not actually produce the feeling of meaning that comes through giving and receiving. It is just abstract meaning coming from judgments rather than from the body and bodily interactions. This can be overcome by giving to others to improve their lives, however. Bill Gates and his wife have derived meaning in their lives by giving a lot of money to charity. Having the money was not meaningful enough for them. In fact it is giving to solve social problems that brings the sense of 'greater meaning'. All kinds of activism are attempts to give social

gifts. The exchange paradigm keeps us from looking at the needs of others. Not recognizing these needs makes us turn in on ourselves and expect that the liberal ideology with its definitions and judgments of our value will make our lives meaningful.

Gift giving, as suggested and developed by Genevieve Vaughn, is the meaning feminism is wanting. It transforms the homo economicus into homo donans or perhaps to femina donans. Vaughn's gift perspective reconstructs woman's and human subjectivity by re-envisioning and re-formulating the meaning of meaning.

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The meaning feminism may offer to women and society – that is, a sense of moral value, an insight regarding our identity and human existence, a direction - is the gift giving logic. It sheds new light on women's reality and potentiality. It opens our eyes to new understanding of oppression and patriarchy and, especially, the possibility of alternative being.