

Media and Faith

Angela Shanahan
Columnist with the Canberra Times and the Sunday Telegraph
and
Dennis Shanahan Political Editor
The Australian Newspaper

Address to the St. Thomas More Forum

15 November 2006

A little while ago I found myself in one of those situations that self – help gurus like to call ‘life- changing’. I got the sack. Now I am a reasonably successful controversialist, as Jack Waterford has archly remarked, so when I got the sack a lot of people didn’t realize it. They thought that Angela had just gone on a holiday – which dovetailed into Christmas and beyond. Oh well they do say in journalism, never go on holidays.

The reason that I am talking about this is two fold. It gives me a good starting point to look back on the trajectory of my career, which over the past ten years has reflected the changing interest of the media on the effect of work outside the home on modern families, particularly on the mother. And secondly, and most importantly, it brings me to my interpretation of the title of this talk, faith and the media, as an exploration of the possibility of the dual vocation.

Vocation is, we are told, what we are put on this earth to find. To find out what God wants us to do- and do it, and like our patron, Thomas More, to be unafraid to do it. Now, the vocation of motherhood is undoubtedly my primary vocation. So I found not so much a duality of vocation, but an *extension* of that vocation as a writer on family issues.

The idea of duality of vocation, or at least a primary and secondary vocation, is not something new, but it is something that many women find to be a problem. Being mum is really such an all encompassing and self defining thing and so much of it is, for all the modern talk of choice – not a matter of choice at all. In fact my primary vocation as ‘mum’ is *who I am* being a writer is only part of what I *do*. Whether I give up writing, go back to teaching or start a business as a life coach for harassed females, I and the vast majority of women with children will always be mum, first and last. Accepting this and exploring the mechanics of how you actually go about combining motherhood and the paid career in a practical way, has really been the meat and potatoes of my writing.

In the last twelve years since I first began to write about the family, the issues associated with that much maligned institution THE FAMILY has become a staple of the media. Fertility issues, the boy problem, the growing numbers of single mothers, childcare, the older born again mums - not to mention the born again dads, the complicated business of raising a family has reached the heights of respectability as a topic of serious discussion. It means that the problems of the ME generation have been eclipsed by the problems of the generation they bred. No longer is motherhood considered a part-time sideline for smart feminists careerists or a fulltime yuk job for the poor, unreconstructed pre feminist dinosaurs – as indeed full time motherhood was regarded in the seventies and early eighties when I was producing my older kids. No demographer worth his salt is content to simply observe the birthrate – they are now all preoccupied with the business of how to push up the birthrate. No longer is it (I hope) acceptable to simply shrug say and say well you don't get rich having kids. No economist of reputation has not considered the type of incentive that will encourage and compensate mothers for the financially burdensome business of having children. I arrived on the scene and picked my topic at a time when interest in the family was high, as the baby drought began – a legacy from the days of ZPG became a stark reality.

I was peculiarly fitted to writing about this stuff, because unlike most female journalists at the time who were *thinking* of doing something reproductive around age 30 or 35, I was already well and truly mum ... and I had been mum since the age of 22. I had nine children when I started to write professionally. I had completed my honors degree in History by age 21. I had certain skills in the research area and I had had a great deal of life experience and it encompassed everything: education, (from which I also attempted to earn some extra money) the medical system, social problems galore and twenty odd years of putting the washing out to think about it all! As my eldest son has remarked in the dedication of his book my life style' had plenty of the former and not much of the latter.

But when I began to write most female journalists and commentators I encountered were Feminist warriors like Eva Cox, the policy guru Anne Summers and the SMH's dour social affairs writer Adele Horin who thought my viewpoint a living anachronism. "Just a mum", a way I often heard women describe themselves, did not fit into the world view of this small clique of powerful career centred commentators and policy makers.

This meant that there was a severe disjuncture in both policy and commentary between the feminist (who ran the show) and the normal people, the mums, who actually comprised the show that they were running. The feminists who had been interpreting women and family's needs were not representative of the viewpoint of those women and their families.

Most journalists are not nearly as clever as they think themselves. They have limited educations and are infected by ideology (a situation which has actually become worse with the advent of communications degrees) Thus they have set frames of reference, limited imaginations. So all things female have been looked at from the feminist perspective. Not simply as one way of viewing things. That WAS the only perspective.

I engendered a lot of resentment as a foot soldier from the front elbowing her way onto the scarce space of The Australian's opinion pages even being prevented from access to feminist privileges, like using the name I was born with, even though all the other married women journalists were allowed this degree of separation from their husbands. But irony of ironies, so anachronistic was I and such a terrible heretic in the eyes of the ruling female politburo that I ended up being hailed as sort of original thinker. One piece I wrote about the failure of feminism caused the biggest flood of letters the Australian has ever had. But I had walked the walk consequently; I was perfectly justified in talking the talk. Hence I was invited to become a columnist.

I was different in other ways too, I was in the second generation of women in my family to be educated at university—and my mother had a career.

She went to university in 1947. As a professional, my mother worked pretty much all through my childhood, as did most of her friends and I knew that not only were the feminists misrepresenting themselves as pioneers of women's education, but they falsely misrepresented work as Nirvana.

I had worked too. I had a job teaching the Visigoths of nine E remedial English. My peripatetic working life which I fitted in part time blocks between pregnancies was actually nearer to the experience of Mrs. Average than the career femocrats and full time working professionals fixated on their progress through the glass ceiling. But women know their own worth as mothers, it is just that society doesn't reward and value them.

My interest in what is called the work and family debate really grew out of an interest in fertility and population. I hadn't made the mistake of so many professional women who put their faith in gender equity theories, only to find as they hit forty that they were barren and miserable. I realized that the introduction of the contraceptive pill and the feminist obsession with career not motherhood as the central element of women's self definition, made fertility the enemy. That is why abortion has actually increased, especially among 20 somethings, despite efficient contraception. Babies are the enemy. Babies can really wreck your career. They consume your life and your heart and they are very unpredictable, unlike the carefully planned career path. In fact they can make you irrationally unwilling to go out and work.

The use of the contraceptive pill was encouraged everywhere except Japan as an instrument of women's liberation, but in my opinion it has been the best gift men ever invented for other men. The influence of the pill has been pernicious. The much vaunted sexual freedoms ushered in by the use of the pill allowed women the illusion that they were *controlling* their fertility. But in fact what they really did was to *abrogate* en masse their biggest bargaining chip, their fertility, to men.

The pill changed the relationship between the sexes alright – it put all the onus of responsibility onto women. Worse, it created an illusion of freedom, by repressing women’s normal biological imperatives, which encouraged them to keep delaying marriage and motherhood, until like many of the 40 somethings in journalism with the ‘I forgot to have the baby’ blues, they ended up too old to have children, even with the miracles of modern bio technology. Feminism, in combination with the pill has been the worst thing that has happened in modern history.

Now I am not the only person who thinks this. Read Francis Fukayama on The Great Disruption to get another look at the catastrophe. However, when I wrote about this stuff in the English Spectator and in The Australian, there was the definite whiff of the fagots burning. It seemed to be too close to the bone for some people. I was accused of being moralistic - and a Catholic moralist at that. Even my most innocuous remarks were ridiculed and misinterpreted. For example I quoted my sister as it happened, telling me that she felt flat and ‘bad’ on the pill. Yes she felt very bad – and ended up with health problems. But naturally the word ‘bad’ was interpreted as being moralistic.

Some people might, I think quite reasonably have claimed that I rejected feminism as an ideology and simply replaced it with another one – religion. Well to be frank, if you are going to have an ideology you might as well have a one with a deep philosophical well spring , which also shared by billions of people

I noticed that the more letters written about me to the paper which were negative- the more I received at home, often marked not for publication, which was positive. This was a bit disheartening, but not too disheartening. I quite liked the notoriety. However I began to realize, especially when lecturers at one of the children’s universities decided to take out his dislike of my writing that I was in the centre of a clash between the public and the private side of my life, which made me question the very notion of having this odd public secondary vocation. It was a St Thomas More moment! I didn’t mind putting my head on the block of public opinion – but did I have the right to do that to my children?

I always said I would give it away if it was detrimental for the children. Even as I was thinking about it, the Canberra Times sacked me. It was sheer censorship, but in a way perhaps, he might have done me a favour, because it put my dual vocation into better perspective. I began to write other types of journalism and commentary, in a variety of publications.

The vocation of motherhood is life-long, total and one cannot expect reward in the ordinary sense. However I have been rewarded with nine children, who despite their various problems are interesting, clever and basically good. As a social policy writer for The Australian, I have to struggle to make my writing and judgment objective. It is almost impossible to completely divide myself into two halves professional and public, 'mother' and private. Someone who has as much life experience as I have as background, employs it as a leveling factor to temper judgment about policy issues – many of which might have cropped up in one's own life, but as a social policy writer for The Australian. I don't see this type of writing as a mission to convert people to my way of thinking, but we journalists are charged with no less a duty than speaking the truth.

My faith is of course deeply embedded in that way of thinking. It was the foundation of my upbringing and education, so it motivates my life and my heart. It isn't just an addendum to my professional life it is the core of it, because it is the core of me, so I am reasonably transparent about it. Perhaps I am just a bit more upfront about it than others are about their motivation, but so what? As Neuhauss says Christians have a right to be heard. We have a right to be in the market place of public opinion. Christian journalists should not be ostracized or marginalised. And despite the discomfort of some, it is Christianity, no other religion or ideology, which is the core and foundation of civilisation in the west.