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Commentary

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While working on “Mobilizing Mother” with authors Ana C. Garner and Karen Slattery, my mother died. Here is an excerpt from the obituary I wrote for her local newspaper:

The Cowboys lost one of their most loyal fans when Jody Lester died November 4, 2011 of complications from pancreatitis. She was 82.

Her family and friends also lost one of their most ardent supporters who taught them all the precious gifts each new day brings. Whether giving helpful life advice, telling stories about growing up in Texas, or what you should watch on TV, her energetic personality was infectious and lasting.

Naturally, with work on the monograph and my mother’s death, I thought of how her mothering could relate to the type of mothers described in the piece. She was a “good” mother in that she was fiercely loyal and unconditionally supportive despite some questionable choices her two sons made throughout their lives. She was also a “patriotic” mother who gladly delivered with pride her youngest son to military duty after he decided to enlist in the Air Force. She also stoically accepted the flag that draped his coffin from a military official when he was buried with honor. In her way she satisfied Sara Ruddick’s notions, as reported in the monograph, of maternal work: she kept a “watchful eye” over her charges, attended to their development, and prepared them for life outside her influence.

If Garner and Slattery had discussed only the good and patriotic facets of motherhood, their work would probably not have been accepted for this publication. However, they also explored how mothers of soldiers during World War I were portrayed in “more than one thousand news stories, editorials, poems, and letters to the editor” in three newspapers during a seven-month period. (Perhaps they will continue their research to include examples of illustrations such as those published with the piece.)

The results of their content analysis did not flatter the press. Because of societal and governmental pressures, good mothers were chastised, ostracized, and condemned while patriotic mothers were lauded, praised, and rewarded by news articles. The U.S. government’s public relations campaign, endorsed by the mass media to sell its citizens not only on the need to go to war but also on their duty to deliver their sons to military officials without complaint, should stir in you memories of the complicity between many members of the press and the Bush administration preceding the war in Iraq in 2003.

Peace journalism, as introduced by the Norwegian academic Johan Galtung, is a subset of the profession that asks journalists to consider stories that emphasize context

over violent, short-term events, to conduct interviews with ordinary persons over military and governmental officials, to use balanced reports over propagandist handouts, and to find consensus in decision making with local authorities over imposed solutions from a distant body.

Although never mentioning the term, Garner and Slattery advocate a type of peace journalism when they conclude that their monograph “underscores the need for mothers to be politically engaged during peacetime” because, as they rightfully note, “once the bullets fly, it is too late to effectively argue the case against war.”

It is also the duty of journalists to report fairly those who have the courage to oppose the powerful social forces that are unleashed once any administration decides that war is necessary. Good and patriotic mothers, mine included, should be in agreement with that call to the profession.

Paul Martin Lester,
Editor-in-Chief