CENTER VALLEY – Two news events recently took place without any apparent connection. Karen Hughes, a senior advisor to President Bush, announced that she would be returning to Texas with her family. When a president’s top aide quits, pundits are quick to wonder what really motivated the change.

Ruth Handler, the creator of the Barbie Doll collection and co-founder of the Mattel toy company, died at age 85. When the inventor of an international phenomenon passes away, society marks her death with editorial accolades.

These events are not simply related in time. What makes them memorable moments is what they say to our culture about motherhood.

When Karen Hughes resigned, reporters questioned why a woman would relinquish that position so freely. After all, she was probably the most influential person in the president’s political life. Finally, it seemed, a woman had risen to the top – trusted counselor to the most powerful person in world politics. Would her quitting send a mixed signal to other women, present and future, who seek rightful equality in the workplace and social influence in our country? In none of the reports did anyone, save the president himself, admit that her “job” as mom was more important, that her choice in favor of her family was a higher priority.

When Ruth Handler died, commentators acknowledged how the creation of the Barbie doll signaled a cultural change with respect to the role of women. Barbie has become far more than a toy; it is a symbol of emancipation, a sign of progress. As The Morning Call editors noted (5/1/02), today “(a) young girl does indeed have as many career choices before her as Barbie has outfits.” But does the Barbie ensemble include the garb of motherhood? Ironically, the social
consciousness borne with Barbie may not have come to pass had a mom (Mrs. Handler) not been home watching her daughter play with paper dolls that were less realistic and meaningful.

This month we celebrate Mother’s Day. But we do so, it seems, without public support for the value of motherhood as a worthwhile career choice, and without social acknowledgment of the never-ending need for stay-at-home moms. Today, nearly 50% of mothers with children under the age of 18 work full-time; for children under the age of 6, nearly 40% of their mothers work full-time, and nearly 20% part-time. Though employment certainly does not preclude the possibility of being a good mom, these statistics (from *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators, 2001*) should cause us all to reflect upon our social priorities, particularly the value of motherhood and the family.

That value lies precisely in a humanistic vision of who a mom is and what a mom does. As Pope John Paul II noted in his 1988 letter On the Dignity and Vocation of Women: “motherhood in its personal-ethical sense expresses a very important creativity on the part of the woman, upon whom the very humanity of the new human being mainly depends.”

Moms create human beings – not just anatomically, but as a person. They mold a baby into a child, shape a child into an adolescent, and fashion an adolescent into an adult. We grown-ups owe who we are not only to the character choices we have made for ourselves, but to the maternal choices our moms made in our favor. That’s why we shower them with gratitude on Mother’s Day.

Karen Hughes knows this creative truth. Ruth Hadler created a cultural icon because of this truth. The motivation for the former, and the inspiration for the latter, both came from their “work” as moms. While both have achieved much success in the secular worlds of political power and economic industry, each of them valued the motherworld more.

Moms cook and clean. They sew and shop. They chide and they hug. None of these motherly tasks is glamorous. None guarantees fame and fortune. But without a mom’s careful attention to these details, without her parental focus on childrearing, without her primary concern for the education of her offspring, succeeding generations would not have become who they are.

A few years ago, James Q. Wilson, once touted as “the smartest man in the United States,” proposed as one solution to the problem of poverty that mothers be paid a public subsidy for discharging a vital social function. Perhaps we should take him seriously, not just for the economic advantage that motherhood provides, but for its cultural importance.

Moms being moms is what creates our world. Praising them on a special day each year is laudable. Putting faith in motherhood, and celebrating its rightful place in society, would be even better.

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