Mothering My Mother

A classic transition awaited me as my mother aged—the crossover from being the daughter of my mother, to mothering her as my daughter. As with every development in my life, this change was delayed, both because I needed space and time to experience my separateness as a person, and also because my parents had a heritage of longevity in their favor that postponed the time when my mother would become dependent upon her offspring.

For more than a quarter of a century, beginning in 1951, my parents had lived out their love story in retirement as a couple again, free of family responsibility. To Dad, retirement meant the opportunity to pursue his first love—writing. Over the next twenty years, he produced six, full-length novel manuscripts, three of which were published. He worked on numerous non-fiction pieces as well, including one on the Gospels, and another on his years in China. Intermittently, he was asked to serve as interim pastor in churches in New England. This entailed four major moves and home purchases, until they settled in Epsom, New Hampshire, the town where I was born.

It was in the Epsom church that my mother, in her sixties, inaugurated a Pioneer Girls club for pre-teenagers. My father was relieved to see her plunge in with enthusiasm, as he had worried that with her loss of role as pastor's wife, she might feel bereft of meaningful work. He knew his writing would keep him fully occupied. He needn't have worried. Mother took to club leadership readily. At the age of seventy, she signed up to become a counselor at New England Camp Cherith in Maine. She was affectionately nicknamed "Mom Mouse" in recognition of my camp moniker. The campers and staff admired her pluck and made sure she could manage the exertions of camp life.

Mother's hands were rarely quiet as she busied herself with the house, her club work, and sewing for her grandchildren. She kept a bird feeder stocked outside the kitchen window. She never failed to take her daily walk, come snow or wind. She studied healthy nutrition, and made sure Dad ate well. When his diabetes necessitated major changes in diet, she bought a scale and weighed everything he ate with exactitude, and adapted her own eating regimen to his to make things easier.

During my last season at North Star, Pioneer Girls' leadership training center in northern Michigan, my parents had come for a week. Mother sat in on the classes with great interest. In all of her contacts with Pioneer Girls, she was recognized and respected as a leader in her own right. I had to take a second look at her, not as my mother, but as another girls' club leader like the others who had traveled great distances to train at North Star. When she decided to introduce herself as "Mom Mouse" I didn't know whether to be embarrassed or pleased. I may have underestimated the degree to which she was proud of me, and sat in my shadow as well.

After Dad died, I became acutely aware of my mother's welfare. I watched from a distance of three thousand miles as she picked up the reins of her life with courage, sold their home, and moved into an apartment with the help of my brother and sister-in-law. She was in her eighties, but clearly her life was not yet finished. She sent me a picture a photographer had taken of her.

I responded with warmth:

> *I love the picture you sent. I hugged it to me and cried for pleasure. You have a beautiful face, all the lines and wrinkles that life has put there. You're a loving wonderful lady, you know, and the camera can't lie.*

On one occasion when I was in California visiting Mother after my father's death, the two of us were returning home from an errand, sitting in the car talking. Without looking at me directly, eyes fastened on the windshield, she haltingly asked me outright a question that had been under the surface ever since my changes in therapy that had made her suspicious of my spiritual condition. "Exactly what do you believe?" The words sputtered out.

As I began answering, trying both to be truthful and to reassure her of the firm foundation of my faith, she murmured, "I think I'm going to be sorry I asked."

For a moment, the old familiar panic seized me. Here I was again, hurting my mother. But I took a breath and replied softly, "Why don't you hear this as an expression of my trust in you, that I am telling you the truth?"

It was a tiny breakthrough for us both, and I wondered fleetingly if it was in part possible because my father no longer stood between us.

The conversation continued on a strong positive note, as I began encouraging her to have hope and expectancy in her future life as a widow. "Mother, you have no idea what may lie ahead of you. You may find avenues of growth beyond your imagination. You may be able to soar!"

Soon, we went into the house. The conversation had affected me deeply, but I was unsure about Mother's reaction. I went into the living room and busied myself with a puzzle. Then I heard the shuffling of Mother's feet in the hallway. She was holding a tiny booklet, which she thrust into my hands.

"Look," she said, pointing to the image of an eagle and one word splashed across the cover, "Soaring." She understood. It was a rare moment of harmony which I would treasure long after she was gone.

Taking Mother In

Six years later, Don and I began suggesting that she consider moving back East near us. Her origins were in New England, and it was still home to her. She gradually warmed up to the possibility. In the spring of 1984, my brother and his wife made a long-anticipated move from California to Oregon.

"Well," mother said to me over the phone. "I guess I had better move East now!" I told her that providentially, that very month an apartment had become available in our building.

Although my choice to invite Mother to live near us was deliberate, both Mother and I knew we were embarking on dangerous territory that would evoke our pattern of conflict. Neither of us understood why tensions inevitably arose whenever we spent time in each other's company. Marion Woodman suggests that the transition of the mother-daughter relationship that occurs when the mother reaches old age poses a challenge for the resistant daughter.

The daughter, feeling guilty because she is hostile toward her aging mother, may need to examine her own victim-tyrant complex. This old woman who once seemed omnipotent is now losing control.

The daughter can become angry and act like a tyrant, or she can become conscious and break the cycle. An uneasy truce may tremble between them. Both may mellow if they surrender to what is.1

I fervently desired the mellowing option, though our past experience was not a hopeful sign. We had a history of stubborn antagonisms that did not seem to be the exclusive fault of either of us, but the peculiar mix of the worst of each of us. We were two strong women with a natural desire to control. My mother found it difficult to let go of her deeply held convictions about matters both trivial and profound, and I could not bring myself to graciously yield even in inconsequential matters.

My Mother's God

Some of our sharpest differences centered around our preferred ways of relating to God and developing spiritually. Each of us felt strongly right in her way and inevitably judged the other as less in some way, not merely different. It seemed to me that Mother would be happier and freer if she could stop trying so hard and could relax in God's unconditional love. She, on the other hand, wished my language, dress, tastes in preachers and churches, were different. She wanted me to enjoy certain familiar books and habits. I admired the way she kept her mind sharp by reading and watching C-Span, which she followed religiously (in more than one sense) but her receptors were tuned to only one point of view—pretty far Right. Even the candidacy of born-again Jimmy Carter could not pry her loose from her Republican partisanship.

Caught between our strong differences in matters consequential and inconsequential, love was often lost, for both of us. We were busy judging each other and being harsh and critical and impatient (me) or sensitive and easily hurt (her) which effectively quenched expressions of love between us.

My mother's and father's religious experience had differed sharply. My mother's tenuous hold on faith contrasted sharply with my father's sure trust, based on a clear conversion in his twenties. Here I could identify with her, for I too had been raised in a loving Christian environment and both of us had come to identify as Christians—get baptized and join the church—as a natural part of growing up. It distressed me that Mother was wracked with doubt about her spiritual standing before God. I saw her uncertainty as reflective of her early experience of having been robbed of a strong sense of her own father's feelings for her, accentuated by his early death.

Her spiritual doubt was exacerbated by her literal interpretation of Scriptures. She would find a verse that seemed to indicate that once a decision to follow Christ had been made, no one could "pluck [her] from God's hand." Then several pages on, she would come upon remarks that seemed to indicate that persons who were "once enlightened" might fall away and find it impossible to be "renewed unto repentance." This apparent paradox tormented her. She searched endlessly for some definitive explanation which would clarify a position on which she could rest. I early observed that literalness can drive one crazy.

I knew it had helped Mother to develop spiritually when our family moved to Wheaton in the late 1930s. Suddenly, we had been inundated in a stream of evangelical fervor that swirled around the college. I remembered our first Sunday night in town, sitting in the College Church sanctuary, which was filled to overflowing with students and townspeople, their strong voices reverberating with the well-loved hymns we would come to know by heart. My parents were swept up in the warmth, the ardor of spiritual expression. My mother forever afterward marked those years as a crucible for the transformation of her sense of what it meant to be a Christian.

But the fervor could not always hold during darker times later in life. I was aware of times when my mother's tears came easily, as she struggled with a pervasive feeling of not being "right" with God. She frequently quoted the words of Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked," words which sounded an ominous knell in my hearing. Eventually, she was willing to name these times "depression," though she was opposed to seeking professional help. My naturally buoyant spirit made me impatient with any sign of Mother's sadness. After my father died, she was more open about her depression. She wrote me:

> *I have been trying to think of the many reasons I have to praise God, instead of feeling somewhat depressed. The future doesn't look as hopeful as when I was younger, but how thankful I am that God cares and that He has given me so many warm-hearted and caring friends. Also, there are always so many things to do to keep me from thinking about being lonely.*

I was startled when she once told me she had decided to join a "Self Confrontation class" at her church at the age of ninety-three! She admitted she confronted herself often—she was highly introspective—but she thought the class might help objectify the process. But she always looked solely to spiritual causes and cures; the psyche was alien territory to her.

My Mother's Legacy of Power

This mother of mine was determined to keep growing, a characteristic I proudly share with her. Ironically my mother's "towering power" was a mirror to me of my own potential. I identify with the words of Samuel Bak, the talented Jewish artist from Vilna, who, with his remarkable mother, survived the Holocaust. His life was so literally bound up with hers during the war that it made it difficult for him to make the necessary adult separation when he needed to. He wrote in his memoirs about the necessity of resisting his mother's attempts to direct his life as he grew older:

> *It was no small accomplishment for a young man to withstand the effect of my mother's towering power. I had to find ways to establish my own balance. That I succeeded at all speaks greatly in her favor. One could also argue that by letting me oppose some of her positions she forged my character and indeed endowed me with many of her own traits.*

My own mother was less willing to let me oppose her positions than Mrs. Bak, but my character was certainly affected positively by the continuing necessity to develop my own strength.

During all those past years of holiday home visits, I only knew the limited view of my relationship to my flesh and blood mother. I did not know about a "mother complex," I just knew my relationship to my mother was plenty complex. The classic Electra complex was alive and well—in love with my father, at war with my rival, my mother. We had played it out over the years with tears and tenderness. My father stood by, either unaware or helpless to intervene. Or perhaps he was reluctant to relinquish his position of adored father.

I prayed for grace and a sense of humor to move through this life passage. I knew the subtle inner pressure on me to become a kind of spiritual Super Mom caretaker, responding with loving attentiveness and total devotion. I had never been a mother, and had watched with admiration as friends of mine had taken on the selfless tasks associated with rearing children. I was not sure I was up to that sort of sacrifice. My feelings had the added complication that I was not mothering a child. I was mothering a grown adult who was to some extent under my control, but who still needed her independence, and also had demands. Now she was to live under my watchful eye. The ultimate complication for me was that this grownup was the woman who had birthed me—my mother.

Mother moved into our apartment on the first floor of the three-decker building in Dorchester in 1984, and we moved to the second floor. It boggles my mind that she was able to adjust from sunny suburban Camarillo, California, to the narrow noisy street in an area of Boston known for its poverty-stricken households and delinquent children. These were rough days for us all, but I struggled to make them as pleasant for Mother as possible. I helped her set up her furniture, find grocery stores, choose a local church, and make a home for herself.

A few months after she moved to Boston, a dam broke for both of us. I suffered a severe attack of asthma, landing in City Hospital for a five-day stay. When I returned home, I was lying on my bed resting, when I heard a slow clomp-clomp on the back staircase. I knew Mother was making her painstaking way upstairs. She entered my bedroom, sat down beside me, and with tears, said, "I'm so sorry you got sick. It's all my fault."

I briefly considered agreeing with her heartily, but refrained. She went on. "I was trying to turn you into Emmet," she confessed.

At last I felt she had insight into our dynamics. I had also failed to take sufficient notice of her adjustment to widowhood. Something melted between us.

Discovering the Mother Within

This severe asthma attack was a clue to a deeper need I was facing. In terms of psychosomatic theory, asthma is sometimes considered to be "the suppressed cry for help from the mother." When I sat down with Don to talk about this, he replied, "You don't understand The Mother."

"Mother of God?" I asked, mystified.

He explained that I needed to encounter the mother principle at a deeper level. Carl Jung attributed "only a limited etiological significance" to the personal mother. He contended that the strongest influences do not come from the mother herself, "but rather from the archetype projected upon her [which] invests her with authority and numinosity."3

I had no concept of the Mother as an archetype. Jung elucidates:

> *Archetypes are those primordial images in the unconscious common to people in every culture and time and which exert a strong influence on our conscious lives.*

The mother archetype is perhaps the most common example, and contains opposing elements: the loving nurturant mother, and the "terrible mother." Since archetypes usually appear as projections on another person, I had to face the way I had imprisoned myself by my powerful negative projection on my own mother. By devaluing her maternal solicitude, I had contributed to the inevitable provoking of misunderstanding and quarrels. I slowly came to admit I was guilty of this projection, and I also discerned that Mother's mode of parenting had unwittingly invited the projection.

Now I was beginning to see my need of dealing with this because of my vocation in counseling others, which required quantities of that nurturant mother-love I had so long resisted in my mother and repressed in myself. I needed to look at the confusion in my counseling between my reaching out to help others and my need to feed myself. I often tired myself responding to others' needs. Like the infant who cannot tell where she ends and the mother begins, as she suckles at her mother's breast, I had been merged with my mother, but negatively. Jung once said:

> *Women with a negative mother complex often miss the first half of life; t hey walk past it in a dream. But they have a good chance in the second half of rediscovering life with the youthful spontaneity missed in the first half. Though a part of life has been lost, its meaning has been saved.*

This shed light on my own experience. I reasoned that in my case something might have gone awry in my separation process, making me emotionally insatiable in my younger years. I had eternally looked for The Mother everywhere—in the nurturance of my father, in emotional closeness to women friends, and even in my marriage. As this realization sank in that day talking with Don, I began to sob.

I sat quietly focusing on those insatiable needs, trying to note what I felt deep inside. Longing, yearning, hunger, an ache. Heart ache. I asked myself, "What's behind it?" The answer came: Fear of loss, fear I can't hold onto what will meet my need, so I must magnetize others which means that persons can't come freely. So I must produce a continual high energy level to be unfailingly winsome. No wonder I was often exhausted.

During the night the words of Psalm 131 came with new force:

> *I still my soul and make it quiet, like a child upon its mother's breast;*
> *my soul is quieted within me.*

I knew that a weaned child is able to get her own nourishment, fill her own hungers, and thus leaning on a mother's breast has a different meaning for such a child. I could image myself being drawn up on God's bosom, close to God's mother heart. The asthma quieted as I leaned upon El Shaddai, the Breasted One, God the Mother and Nourisher. Could I lay my needs, my gasping, my urgency at Jesus' feet?

Gradually, in the years of attending to my mother's needs, the old animosities thawed, and I gained some balance in my relationship to my mother. The work I had embarked upon in my spiritual journey and in analysis proved crucial in this regard.

The Journey Home

For the first two years, Mother stayed in the Dorchester apartment. Born and bred a country girl, she found urban life exhausting and ill-fitting her temperament and grew increasingly restive. She also knew she must prepare for a time when she might need care.

We discovered a retirement facility located in the town in Epsom, New Hampshire, the town in which she had lived when I was born, and again with Dad in retirement. On a June day in 1986, we moved her to her last home, an independent apartment in Epsom Manor.

The timing was fortunate, for eight days later a fire broke out in the building next door to the apartment on Maryland Street where she had been living. Flames leaped across the narrow, five-foot walkway between buildings and licked hungrily at the wooden structure we had once called home. It was declared a total loss. The Dorchester years were finally over for her and for us. Mother only remarked dryly, "Well, I guess I moved just in time." We fervently agreed.

In Epsom, she was delighted she could be near a lifelong family friend, Mabel, and to discover that another dear friend, Bernice, lived at the Manor as well. Bernice was legally blind, and Mother took pleasure in visiting with her often, reading books to her and chatting about common concerns. Bernice was one of those angels, like my father, who was rarely moved to criticism, and thus endeared herself to my mother, who was plagued by her own strongly planted instinct to focus on what was wrong with a situation rather than what was right.

At ninety-one, Mother was amazingly energetic and healthy. She took regular walks, followed the news on the public television channel, and participated in church activities. Slowly, she became more frail, her eyesight dimmed, and she was sometimes in pain. When Bernice and Mabel died within a year of each other, Mother's energy took a sharp downturn. The will to live was going.

Don and I drove up to Epsom often, trying to oversee her needs as well as we could. We had endlessly hashed over Mother's situation of needing more constant care, and we knew she would have preferred us to provide the care.

At that time I was attending a Wellness Group at my health center. During one session, we were given an assignment to write a letter to someone we needed to forgive. It was to be written as a spiritual practice, and not to be actually mailed. The letter I knew I needed to write was to my mother, asking her to forgive me for not being able or willing to take care of her in the way she would have liked, and in the way that daughters are often expected to do. I wrote—but did not send—these words:

> *Dear Mother,*
> *I want this letter to be a heart letter, not a form. I want to ask your forgiveness for not being able to take you in and care for you in your last years of life. The problem for me is that I do not want to do it, so maybe what I am really asking for is forgiveness for that, for my revulsion against the idea of caring for you. I know that to care for you from that place would be poison for us both.*
>
> *I know you look around at someone like Mabel whose daughter Myrtle cares for her so devotedly and tirelessly, and you are envious. I could never do what she does, and when I picture myself in that situation, I can hardly fathom what would have to happen in me to be able to. My life and personality are so different from that way of life and being.*
>
> *So I am sorry I can't do what you desire, not in the sense that I wish I could, but in the sense that I can see how deeply disappointed you are that you are not able to command and control your destiny any more.*
>
> *But of course that is what we all face as we move towards dying—letting go. I would like to let go of guilt now in regard to not caring for you. Will you forgive me, Momma? (I've never called you that.) Will you? It would free me up to love you at last.*

Mother had an option at the Manor: to move into the Assisted Living Unit. Instead she made a rash decision to move into the home of a young woman in town who lived in a tiny house with two young children, and who had to work days. It was my mother's last desperate attempt to be personally cared for. The young woman may have welcomed the additional income from taking Mother in, but she was unprepared to provide the kind of care Mother was beginning to need. We went up to spend Thanksgiving Day with Mother and saw that a change would have to take place. We contacted the Manor and arranged to move Mother back into a smaller apartment.

Soon the Manor staff were contacting us, worried about leaving Mother on her own. In December, she landed in the hospital. When she returned, she was obliged to move into the Assisted Living Unit. These moves had resulted in our disposing of most of her furniture. Mother could see that we were dismantling her life. She finally turned over her financial affairs to me to handle—a major relinquishment, for figuring out her finances had kept her lucid and in charge for all these years.

In March, her weakened condition necessitated another hospital stay. This time, the doctor phoned us that the end was near. Her blood pressure was eighty and falling. I contacted the funeral home. Back by her bedside, I could say my goodbyes, and feel peace as she slowly ebbed away.

But the doctor had given her antibiotics. Strangely, she began to rally. I despaired that Mother's healthy body would ever let go. She came back to the Manor, this time to the Nursing Home Care Unit, which Mother detested. All of her Yankee pride at being self-sufficient arose within her frail frame. But there was no alternative.

She went through two more grueling months lying in her bed, feisty as ever, alternately resisting the nurses who tried to get her to eat, and docilely accepting the ministrations of those who served her and the friends from the church who visited regularly. Any residue of resentment of my mother was drained out of me as I watched her vital energy seep out. She refused food, determined now to be allowed to die.

On a Saturday afternoon in May, 1991, the nursing home called to tell me they thought she was dying. Don and I drove up right away. We remained in contact through Sunday, and on Monday morning they called again, sure she would die that day. I arrived at around 2 p.m. Mother had transferred her dependency to a young woman from the church who had visited her daily and who was devoted to her. I saw that in the last stages of dying, Jesus' remark about biological family applied. "Who is my mother and my brothers?" My Mother now had the loving attentive daughter she needed.

As dusk settled over the room, and a nurse administered another morphine injection to ease her pain, Mother raised her head and looked at us without really seeing us. In a slightly louder voice, she spoke with authority: "One last thing I want to say: I am thankful for God's love in Jesus to me." Then she resolutely turned her body over. She did not rouse again in our presence. We left in the evening. She died the next day at noon, ninety-five years old.

A memorial service was held at the church in Epsom, where I had been brought as a newborn sixty-one years previous. There were friends there from three states, as well as the church folk. We picked up the last of Mother's things from the Manor and drove back to Boston.

The Mother Archetype Lingers

Two nights later, I had this dream:

> *Mother called and we talked on the phone. Then it turned out that she is calling from within the house. I see her pulling out a chair in the garage to sit on. Don and I go downstairs to help arrange it. As we are there, I mutter sotto voce, "The Witch of Endor has come home." Mother partly overhears and says, "What?" I quickly pun and say, "Which?. . .When?" to cover.*

The dream seemed to speak of the Witch-like haunting quality of the Mother complex within me, which I distanced from by punning. The Witch was the Mother in my house, not the external mother who had died.

In June, we traveled to California to lay Mother's ashes beside my father's grave in Camarillo. On our way, we stopped in Chicago to visit with Don's family. Stepping through the metal detectors in O'Hare before taking our flight to California, the alarms went off. I looked back at the official who was fingering the small brown package containing Mother's ashes. I burst into tears. "That's my mother," I cried. Don stepped in quickly to explain, and soon a kindly assistant was reassuring me.

I told Don I couldn't believe my mother was still objecting to my treatment of her.

At a memorial service graveside in Camarillo, I felt more free to speak about my ambivalent relationship to my mother. This congregation was composed of younger persons, most of whom had known my parents in their eighties. I was able to pay honest tribute to my mother, while indicating some of the nuances of our relationship that were difficult. Her marriage to my father had been supremely happy; yet I recognized how hard it must have been for her to live in his shadow for much of their life. My father was universally accepted and adored, and he had grown up with a certain strength of ego my mother lacked. She constantly felt that people were kind to her because of him. And to be truthful, this was sometimes the case. She had many warm friends who loved her dearly, and there were also those who came athwart of her strict and unforgiving rigidities.

The other trial given my mother was to have birthed two children who spent a lot of time and energy resisting her. A line in my baby book in my mother's handwriting says, "She is strong-willed, and has a mind of her own." I used to marvel at that, having felt that I had succumbed to her will most of my childhood. Standing there in the cemetery beside the urn of her ashes, I could feel how deeply I must have disappointed her.

She has cast a long shadow. Having spent so much energy fighting her influence, I have had to spend a commensurate amount of emotional energy in connecting with the inner motherliness in myself—something I eschewed for a long time, since I had so completely rejected the idea and ideal of Mother. Her legacy to me is strong. I can be grateful now, for I realize that my best ministry to others in counseling comes out of this lifelong task: learning to live in harmonious relationship to Mother.

In modern parlance, it has been a "piece of work," but a work of peace eminently worthwhile.

Mother in the cemetery where Dad was buried in 1978;

Mom and I on a trip into places of Mother's memories of her childhood in Maine when she turned 90, overlooking Camden