

## YOUR MOTHER WAS OPPRESSED

After fifty years as a psychotherapist, I have heard a lot of opinions about mothers. I have heard that they were persnickety, mean, cruel, unloving, cold, astoundingly anxious, terribly depressed and withdrawn, punitive, selfish, unreasonably restrictive, competitive, hysterical, abusive, and also indulgent, loving, sweet, warm, outgoing, self-sacrificing, generous, helpful, and adventurous. Lots of opinions. Often delivered with either the heart-felt thunder of rage or the full-throated shriek of traumatized woundedness or the whispered hopelessness of despair or the exhausted tenor of helplessness. Of course, that is not all; there are less-frequent but equally fervent declarations of tearful gratitude or the loving satisfaction of being thoroughly loved. Mothers, like fathers and other ordinary humans, are all over the map in terms of their characteristics. The reason I hear a lot about them is two-fold—1) Mothers, for several reasons, are the primary caretakers of children and therefore the primary love object of children in almost every case, and 2) Mothers, being (world-wide) almost uniformly female, have historically and still—to this day—lived under severe constraints of their social standing, political/legal rights, and creative freedom. (I asked you all to let me know if you had observations about the constraints women had suffered in educational or occupational roles, and there will be a number of quotes from some of you included today. These are not all I have heard, and some of them were too tender to even share anonymously, but I thank everyone who shared what you could.) Here's the necessary caveat—of course, males can nurture children. Males can occupy the position of primary care-taker and primary love object in a child's life, but if they choose to do so they will suffer approximately 80% of the denigration and constraints that female mothers suffer.

Likewise, mothers tend to blame themselves for the perceived faults of their children. When a child is somehow non-standard, that is, doesn't fit the readily available three or four easily recognized ways of being in the world, mothers almost uniformly blame themselves. "What did I do wrong?" is the typical complaint or question. If I point out that mothers are unable to choose the strengths and temperament of their children and sometimes a very sensitive or conflicted or stubborn child is simply a little different, I am usually met with a

pitying stare meant to convey that I really must not know that it is the mother's responsibility to meet every child wherever they are. The issue is actually one of the "match" between a mother's temperament and her child's inborn temperament, which is due to inherited predispositions more than anything else, although I am told that there are intrauterine experiences that can influence temperament a little. But even there, mothers are not able to choose the accidents, traumas and great stressors they may experience during pregnancy. When the "match" between mother and child goes badly, say an inherently anxious child with an anxious or depressed mother or a highly gifted child with a typical mother, or a developmentally "different" child with a typical mother, the mother almost always blames herself for being unable to blunt the child's tensions. But what if this unfortunate circumstance is simply random chance? What if the child's innate endowment is very touchy? I have neighbors whose daughter has from an early age been easily frightened and emotionally fragile. In early childhood, we were sometimes awakened in early summer mornings—when our windows were open to catch the summer breeze--by the daughter's anguished screams due to nightmares she could hardly verbalize. Her parents were—and still are--remarkably generous, upbeat, and calm people; I have seen their parenting styles and admire their patience. It took many hours of attention and many thousands of dollars to nurture what is now a sweet, outgoing young woman who still struggles but can live a productive life. Too much has been made in the psychotherapy professions about the mother's actions or reactions without taking into account the whole context. For example, from the late 1940's through the sixties, the predominant theory was that schizophrenia was caused by the cold, frantically anxious, depressed "schizophrenogenic mother"—except it wasn't borne out by research that later traced schizophrenia to genetics.

The larger context is that by societal norms and mores, governmental constraints and traditional expectations women have been herded into motherhood. Not all women wanted motherhood, not all women were well-suited to motherhood, and some accidentally found themselves obligated to become mothers. Here's this summary from Josie Cox's Women Money Power: (and I quote)

[Right after World War II] Few employers had done anything to dismantle entrenched gender norms, even in the face of the rapid influx of women into the labor market over the preceding five years. In some states, a married woman could not get a job without the permission of her husband, and access to credit was a matter of gender too. Rules that allowed employers to fire or discriminate against a single woman when she married—called marriage bars—were still commonplace, particularly in jobs like teaching and clerical work. Many women concealed their marital status in a bid to stay employed, at least until they could no longer hide a pregnancy, but marriage bars were not officially outlawed in the private sector until decades later. (Josie Cox, Women Money Power, pg. 67)

I will now quote some members of FUSW who kindly shared their viewpoints about women's oppression with me, and gave me permission to share those viewpoints and their names. As John Scheuneman told me, "When I first got married "housewives" had trouble independently signing leases, getting bank accounts or credit cards or telephone service. When I married Marilee, [she] wanted to be a modern woman [and] opened our Verizon account. Then when I bought an I-phone I couldn't set it up without Marilee giving her permission."

However, once a job was secured by a woman, she was a second-class employee. Here's this from Josie Cox again:

In 1945, a comprehensive Women's Pay act was introduced to Congress but failed to pass, and when women in the 1950's started working outside the home in growing numbers, pay discrimination based on gender remained pervasive and overt. (Josie Cox, WMP, pg. 78)

However, as Adelaide DiGiorgi told me, "my request for early retirement after 18 years with Citibank led to the human resource rep stating I had a good salary—which I found upsetting since I knew the salaries of males I replaced in my promotions over the years were much higher than mine. And I told him so! He then changed the subject. It was no surprise to me that the majority of female managers were paid less than males in the same positions."

Wage discrimination has been reinforced by social discrimination through the decades. As Susan Greenberg told me, "At a recent high school reunion one of my classmates thanked me for leading him to his career as an employment

discrimination attorney. Apparently, in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade awards assembly, when I was awarded the Algebra prize, his father and uncle let him know how outraged they were that the prize had been awarded to a girl, that it was important for a boy to be the recipient and have the honor on his school record. My classmate remembers thinking 'Susan was more diligent in homework, got more right answers on quizzes, my father and uncle are wrong.'" And as Gerri Ferrara told me, her parents were unique among their ethnicity and neighborhood in valuing education highly but the larger social context of her extended family and neighborhood did not, "Boys could do what they want but after high school, girls were supposed to become secretaries while they were planning their weddings and work only until the first baby came. . . .It was during law school when my aunt went around telling people that I was studying to be a paralegal. It just didn't compute that a woman could be a lawyer. . . [when I told one aunt I had a boyfriend] I swear to God, she immediately broke into a beaming smile that would rival the sun in July and literally shouted, "YOU HAVE YOURSELF A FELLA!?"

Finally, there's this from Katherine May in her book, Wintering:

Women's voices are contested in a way that men's never are. If we speak too softly, we are treated as gentle mice; if we raise our voices to be heard, we are shrill. Margaret Thatcher [a very influential prime minister of England] famously had elocution lessons . . .and was not allowed to sound confrontational or aggressive. Instead, she had to adopt the intimate tones of the mother or nanny, gently encouraging us towards her decisions with firm certainty, or the lover, whispering her power across a pillow." (Katherine May, Wintering, pg. 226)

A colleague of mine became pregnant during her last semester of college at a very selective college where she majored in mathematics. Abortion was illegal, so she married and settled into mother and housewife roles. That, for her, was like putting a Mercedes motor in a VW beetle. Too much intellectual power in too small a setting makes the mind curdle and fold in on itself resentfully. She soon became one of the most dynamic directors of religious education Unitarian Universalism had and then entered the ministry where she served successfully for 25 years. These are honorable pursuits, just not what she was aiming for and was good at. Very nice professions, and my colleague successfully mothered three children, but what if she had been free to develop her gifts as she chose, what

might have she achieved and been happier? Birth control is an essential component of female empowerment as Josie Cox noted:

Many proponents of *Roe v. Wade* point to America's childcare crisis as one of the principle reasons a woman's right to choose should be irrevocably enshrined in law. It is a crisis that's raging across all fifty states—an epidemic that's paralyzed some regional economies entirely—and yet there's no palpable sign of a real remedy. . . . unlike every other developed country in the world, the United States has never, apart from during World War II, treated childcare as an essential service. (Cox, op. cit.pg. 259)

When someone is constrained from developing as their innate gifts would best allow, the result is frustration, helpless resentment, and depression. If your mother was so afflicted, as was my mother, the result is not pretty. Once she married, my mother was not legally allowed by her school district to continue to teach school. That was the way she was set up to succeed by temperament, training and experience. I have a picture of her taken when she was a child, playing at teaching. Obviously, standing there in her little white dress before a makeshift blackboard in the front yard of a Nebraska farmhouse, it was so clear to her parents that this should be her destiny that they spent precious film on it. Instead, all of that energy was poured into making her children succeed, which was beneficial but we all might have been more comfortable, and the world richer, if she had been allowed to develop HER gifts also.

Thank you to all of you who shared your thoughts about women being oppressed. There were other thoughts and feelings than those I spoke of here, thoughts about problems with food, sexuality, depression, and anxiety, shared confidentially. I feel honored by your sharing so freely and what you shared will not go to waste for future sermons. These ideas had the common thread of personal woundedness because of social expectations imposed simply on the basis of gender. They also carried a generational legacy of trauma, because wounded people tend to wound people. Our task henceforth is to heal the hurts, stop the generational transmission of trauma, and accept the freedom to be whomever we know we need to be.

Further, we all owe the LGBTQ+ folks a great deal of gratitude and credit. They are visibly “out there,” defiantly and rebelliously breaking down the notions of gender as absolute categories. It is often heart-breaking, hard work, confusing to the person struggling to reconcile who they feel they are with the simple categories most in use today. But they are doing women a great service because they are breaking down the stereotypes of both men and women. Alfred Kinsey summarized a lot of his research by noticing that there is more variety, a greater range of gender-related characteristics, within genders than there is between male and female genders. At the time, hardly anybody knew what to do with his observation. But now, the LGBTIQ+ folks are demonstrating for all to see and hear that gender characteristics can be various. It will be increasingly difficult for people to characterize women as necessarily wanting to have children or wanting to be a certain kind of woman or necessarily needing to be a certain size or shape or appearance. It WILL be increasingly difficult to stereotype a woman as necessarily possessing a certain skill-set or interests or strengths, or necessarily destined for matrimony and necessarily a mother of certain characteristics. I recently learned that the Boy Scouts have renamed themselves Scouting America and accepted girls at every level of participation. In 2021, 1,000 girls achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, the highest award given. The rigid gender categories are softening.

Finally, if the majority of men continue to develop into people who also take care of children, cook, and give themselves over to the tasks of playing with children and teaching them the innumerable skills of adult functioning, we will all be richer in spirit and feeling. We will be enjoying, and raising, men who can care for diversity wherever they live because they know that companies and congregations and families with a variety of people in them succeed best. Perhaps someday mothering won't just be a female job, but shared. Research indicates that men in newer generations are doing “more” childcare and homemaker than they did in my generation, but there is some distance to go. Perhaps if financial rewards are more equitably distributed over all the occupations, there will be greater opportunity for men to develop their gifts in social work, psychotherapy, and childcare, just as they have recently in nursing. Perhaps, someday we will

celebrate Nurturing Day instead of Mother's Day and Father's Day separately. And don't get me started on Grandparents' Day!

I am looking for the expressions of creativity and energy that come from true equality, regardless of gender. I am looking for something like a flowering of diverse peoples and orientations that allows for real understanding that variety is built into the human genome and celebrating that variety enriches all of us immeasurably. I am looking for that which is delightfully shocking, beneficially surprising, and helpful in human relationships to become more prevalent. I sense that it is happening, but too slowly. Let us dedicate ourselves to understanding that most of our mothers were nobly trying to be the best that they could be while burdened by legal constrictions and narrow social expectations. They struggled with their pent-up talents and narrowed perspectives to be kind, generous, and—above all— “motherly.” They, and we, deserve better and we can move toward that freedom.