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Writer in the House

Once upon an old time, women were a rarity among writers. Only men possessed authority to write; women had babies, not books. A woman who chose writing over procreating fought and paid dearly for the right; a woman who combined writing and mothering was considered an aberration of nature.

Times have changed. Many writers are women now, and many of us are mothers. Jane Smiley—a writing mother believes that "a new literature, the literature of real, live motherhood, is inserting itself in our time, into the literary stream" (Smiley, 1993: 14). I see the stream widening all around me; it rushes with women's and men's voices from minorities once overlooked as well as the voices of that once-silent female majority: mothers. I hear solo voices of mothers from previous centuries and a chorus of contemporary maternal voices. I hear my literary foremothers and I claim them all.

Earlier this century, Virginia Woolf noted that her path as a woman writer had been cut by many well-known women and even more forgotten women. In her classic book, *A Room of One's Own*, she contemplates four of her famous predecessors George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and Jane Austen—and concludes they had little in common "Save for the possibly relevant fact that not one of them had a child" (Woolf, 1929: 69). The rarity of writing mothers was a glaring fact until the latter part of this century. Now the number and diversity—of women who are both writing and mothering has put writing mothers on the literary map.

My own voice as a writer emerged during the process of mothering. My writings have grown as I've paid attention to my children, to my own experience, and to the works of Adrienne Rich, Grace Paley, Louise Erdrich, Nancy Mairs and many others whose non-fiction, fiction, and poetry have opened windows into the lived experience of mothers. I've joined others in

giving literary form to the earlier forms of *silences* articulated so clearly by Tillie Olsen—silences due to the effects of class, race, gender, and particularly due to the maintenance-of-life aspects of mothering.

Why has it taken so long for mothers to speak out? Why did it take *me* so long? Anne Bradstreet was writing poetry in the seventeenth century despite extreme strictures against female ambition in Puritan society. Settling in the wilderness of North America in 1630, Bradstreet produced a volume of poems while raising eight children. Her book was smuggled back to England where it was published in 1650 as *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America.* In a preface, her brother-in-law assured the reader that the poetry was indeed the work of a woman and that her poems were "but the fruit of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments" (cited in Gilbert and Gubar, 1985: 60); she had *not* neglected her family duties.

Despite women's advances in the last three centuries which have given me far more liberties than Bradstreet knew, I hear tones in her poetry that still resonate—the apologia in calling her book an "ill-formed offspring" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, 1985: 67); the anger in the lines "Of what I do prove well, it won't advance,/They'll say it's stolen, or else it was by chance" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, 1985: 62); the irony in the line "Men can do best, and women know it well" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, 1985: 67). I also recognize, with dismay, the guarded sanction expressed by her brother-in-law. His blend of pride and reproach are echoed daily in the mixed support and complaint I receive from the twentieth-century man to whom I am married. "Write," my husband tells me. "Write, if it's important to you." And then, when I do write, "What's for dinner?"

Daring to write ought to come more easily for a woman in this time of widespread "speaking up." In facing my particular marital and maternal and literary interests, I have a multiplicity of models all around me. Anne Bradstreet had few models and little or no company in her literary endeavors. Yet she claimed the title "author"—within a Puritan community where woman was viewed as man's helpmate. We've come a long way, we tell each other today. As we inch toward a new millennium, neither men nor women want to claim close kinship with patriarchy or Puritanism. We seek partners, not subordinates. But the phantoms of old live in our houses.

The contemporory poetry of Sharon Olds seems a far cry from Anne Bradstreet's apologia. Replete with images of sexuality and birthing, Olds' poems leap boldly off the page. In "The Language of the Brag," Olds writes: "I have done this thing,/I and the other women this exceptional/act with the exceptional heroic body,/this giving birth, this glistening verb" (1980: 45). I sing this boast along with her. But among Olds' poems is one called "Staffon" which speaks of putting a child to bed and running out to a dock to write, leaving another child with a man described as a "lord ... descended from lords." When the poet sees that she is being watched, she feels the poems "heavy as poached game hanging from my hands" (Olds, 1980: 29).

I know no mother—not Anne Bradstreet nor Sharon Olds nor myself—who has not at some time felt she was stealing time to write. Stealing from her family, her sleep, her duties, and sometimes caught with poached evidence: the poem, the essay, the chapter. Perhaps this is why a room of one's own is necessary, as proclaimed by Virginia Woolf and resounded by so many. A room *is* essential, a place to make writing *legal* to make it one's *own*. Until I had my own room I thought I could work from the family table but found instead that my space in the house was both everywhere and nowhere. The kitchen table was wonderful for the kids' homework; the kitchen table was poor as a base for my writing life.

In many ways, my writing began when I acquired a room of my own in the Alaskan house where my family and I still live. My oldest daughter, Marie, was four years old when we moved into this house. My twins, Hanna and Heather, were two years old. It was a time of active mothering and little writing, but my husband had ideas for the unfinished family room downstairs.

"It's L-shaped," Paul said. "We could add one wall and make a room for you." We imported the best carpenter I know, my father from Nebraska. "I want lots of bookshelves," I told my dad. "And I'd like one of those Dutch doors."

The room—finished and furnished with *my stuff*—has plenty of space, a large desk, a quilt, and family pictures hanging on one wall, and a window looking out upon hundreds of trees. At first I scribbled a few notes while my children napped. When they became old enough to engage in their own play, I spent bigger chunks of time in my room, keeping the bottom half of the Dutch door closed and the top half open so I could write and still see and hear my children. And they could see and hear me.

All, however, was not as smooth as Virginia Woolf had indicated. "When I came to write, the family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen," (1966: 277) she wrote. *My* family peace was turned head over heels, due to the "possibly relevant" presence of three small children as well as the complicated matter of my relationship with my husband who, I suspect, feared what might become of our family if I should place more importance on my writing than on *him*. As the wife of an ambitious man and mother of young children, I experienced exhaustion as a way of life. What I'd learned from my culture and family of origin was not how to incorporate writing into the world of my household but rather how to nurture my husband and children before attending—if any energy remained—to desires of my own.

My family was alive and well and so was the Angel in the House, that phantom described so well by Virginia Woolf in her lecture on "Professions for Women." "She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish," Woolf wrote of the nineteenth-century Angel in the House.

> She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draft she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she

> never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (Woolf, 1966: 278)

This selfless model of femininity outlasted the Victorian age to survive the modernist era and to hover in the corners of these postmodernist times. She definitely lurked in my house. Woolf reported the need to kill the Angel in her House in order to write undisturbed; she "took up the inkpot and flung it at her" (1966: 279). Killing the Angel in *my* house was not as simple as flinging a desktop monitor at her. My phantom held a semblance of my mother and beloved grandmothers; I had to come to terms with her. I have had to learn, slowly, to replace her with another reality, my reality, as I see it, piece by piece and build it word by word.

My reality involves children's needs, endless laundry, sleeplessness, and struggle. But more than these external circumstances, my reality is shaped by internal assumptions which I finally came to question: the notion that holding the family together fell entirely on me, the idea that taking time to write was a luxury. How did I ever believe that my husband's work was more important than contact with his children, when I so readily gave up my writing time to drive Marie to a friend's house or Heather and Hanna to the dentist, or the dog to the vet?

Sooner or later, a writing mother must lift the phantom of old assumptions and realize that writing is not only an acceptable occupation but an essential one. That mothering is a vital literary subject. That it is crucial to express the love and anguish she feels for her children—and for *herself.* That *if,* as Alicia Ostriker writes, she "has been trained to believe that the activities of motherhood are trivial, tangential to main issues of life, irrelevant to the great themes of literature, she should untrain herself" (1983: 131). I've been actively "untraining" myself, removing that sticky word "just" from its position in "trivial" away from "women's work."

A writing mother must "untrivialize" herself to get to the real work and play of writing, a process that takes time and faith and the help of one's friends. The either/or mentality, implicit in many descriptions of writing and mothering, affects almost all working moms, not just writing moms. Most women experience a battle between their children and their profession, a battle felt emotionally as well as economically. We've incorporated the belief that we either give it all to our job or we give it all to our children. The workplace culture that views work and family as adversarial makes everyone suffer—women, men, and children. At the core of this myth of mutually exclusive domains is the trivialization of work related to women: the persistent view that women are "helping out" rather than providing, the notion that career is not as important to a woman as to a man, the distorted perception that staying home with children is not "real" work.

As a writing mother, I actively refute—every time I sit down to write—the arbitrary belief that writing and mothering are incompatible. My choices of

profession—that of writer, that of mother—carry the mythical baggage of two misunderstood lines of work. The social conception of the writer is that of a solitary genius called for a special purpose which sets him [her] apart from society. Even in this post-modernist, post-feminist (but not yet post-patriarchal) era, our view of art is still shaped by this Romantic-Modernist image of the writer as a little bit eccentric (and possibly mad) and isolated in his [her] garret. The social conception of the mother is quite another thing. She is "everywoman," as common as bread. She is the nurturer who willingly puts her needs aside to be the invisible glue that holds everyone together. While the artist isolates himself [herself] in order to produce "pure art," the mother exists within the muck of everyday life, easily disturbed and always accessible.

Must a woman simultaneously embody the "genius" of the writer and the "ordinariness" of the mother? No. If we who combine mothering and writing have imbibed these cultural notions, then we fall into an especially vicious variation of the superwoman myth. We may find ourselves chasing two phantoms: the artist sacrificing everything to his [her] art and the mother sacrificing everything to her children. Are there other ways? Yes. As mothers become "speaking subjects" and add their perspectives to the literary stream, the limiting conceptions of a dying patriarchy begin to be replaced with the realities of women's lives. And the reality includes many writers and many mothers, in a spectrum that reaches from the kitchen and the bedroom and the writing room to the garret and the garden. The reality includes Sethe of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Lainie of Sue Miller's *Family Pictures*, the mothers of Isabel Allende's fiction and non-fiction, and the accounts of many essayist mothers. What do these perspectives reveal? There's no Ideal Mom. No Good Mother, Bad Mother. In reality we see many women in the intimate, intricate process and practice of mothering.

Revealing the intricacies of motherhood involves risks. By speaking out about their private lives, writing mothers place themselves on the dartboard of contradictory public expectations regarding many issues: work opportunities, equal pay, family flexibility in the workplace, education, childcare, maternity leave. Mothers—whether employed or working at home—are often a target of blame for the problems families suffer. The messages from society are inconsistent. Middleclass and upper-income women get the message to ease off their career interests and stay home with their children. New welfare rules tell low-income women to go to work and put their children in daycare. A writing mother, at any economic level, faces the work/family conflicts so prevalent in our culture. There's the lingering question, *can a woman work and still be a good mother?*

Speaking out also exposes our differences. Audre Lorde writes powerfully of her "sister outsiders"—those "who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older," those for whom "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1984: 112). Lorde writes that "Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women" (1984: 111). Such

writing compels me to define who I am as both writer and mother. As one of society's "acceptable" women, I am not confronted with the racism and the forms of sexism that "sister outsiders" confront on a daily basis. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman who grew up in a stable family in middle-America, I confront the patriarchal structure in other insidious ways. As I raise my daughters according to *my* traditional values—to love and work and think for themselves—patriarchy is not my source of strength. I've been haunted by the specter of *who I am supposed to be*, and I am not that someone, guarding my house at the gates. I'm building a new house that is big enough for my children to grow in, big enough for me to write in, big enough to fit many houses in. I'm building my house with many others, and we're using all sorts of tools.

What does it take for any of us to speak, to build our houses, to write? It takes claiming authority to tell our own stories, with all of their commonalities and contradictions. And what would happen if mothers seized authority and started writing in their houses, telling the truth about their lives? Selves might be remade? The world might be remade?

Seizing authority is what I'm learning to do. Widening to other mothers is what I'm learning to do. And I'm learning to see the possibilities that our foremothers imagined. Virginia Woolf understood the limitations placed on women, the choices still required of us, and the consequences of making or not making those choices. "With whom are you going to share your room," she asked? "Upon what terms?" (1966: 282).

I've shared my room with many—my daughters, my friends and their children, my colleagues near and far. My room is the center of my writing practice, a hub that has grown up with the house as we've made and remade the structure around us. No longer am I the infinitely interruptable mother. I've learned to nurture my children *and* myself and my writings. I treat my writing as my children treat their projects: as serious work and play. And my daughters view me as I view them, lovingly, supportively, with interest and esteem. I've experienced mothering as an apprenticeship for writing, and writing as an apprenticeship for mothering. Both are slow, demanding processes that gain urgency each day.

My room is a porous place, full of voices and movement. As I write I hear Marie's music and the loving, combattive conversations of Heather and Hanna at work. I also hear voices from the shelves that surround me—Helene Cixous whispering *the future would be incalculable if the stories would be retold*, Sharon Olds urging me to *know what I know, slip the leash of my mind.* My room is not a priestly cell, though I sometimes close the door—all of the door—to work undisturbed. Other times I close the bottom half, and my kids lean their elbows on the ledge when they want to talk. This is my model for creativity, not Rilke's or Kafka's or Joseph Conrad's artistic seclusion. My writing life includes my loved ones. I write amidst our unpredictable life together as my daughters are busy elsewhere in the house—Marie at 16 learning photography and writing poetry, Heather and Hanna at 14 designing Web pages and building bridges

for the engineering fair. My children seek me when they need me and leave me at peace in my room the rest of the time. They know there's a woman inside—their mom—slipping one more life into the literary stream.

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