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"Carving Tomorrow from a Tombstone"
Maternal Grief Following the Death of a Daughter

for Kristina

Modern theories of psychological development have been largely based on the male experience that emphasizes some form of autonomy or separation as the developmental path (Kaplan, 1991: 208). It has only been recently with the work at the Stone Center by Jean Baker Miller and others that feminist psychotherapists have established a new understanding of women's psychological development. Miller and Stiver (1991) believe that "an inner sense of connection to others is a central organizing feature in women's development" (1) and that women's core self-structure, or their primary motivational thrust concerns growth within relationship or what is called "the self-in-relation." As a result, the theme of connection and disconnection becomes a central guiding principle for therapists working with female clients.

Likewise, until very recently theories of grief and bereavement were also based on the belief in the similarity between men and women's ways of grieving and in a linear and progressive movement through stages of separation or detachment from the deceased. As a result, women in our society who are trying to reconstruct their lives following the death of a loved one may be extremely frustrated in their attempts to find support when the therapeutic intervention stresses separation and does not take into account their need for an ongoing psychic connection.

What special needs do women have in terms of bereavement and how may they best be supported through their mourning process? More particularly, is grief work the same for all losses or does the bereaved mother have special needs that are quite different from those of others who grieve?

Based on research and personal experience, it is my contention that women

and men do experience grief differently and that bereavement for women has unique concerns in terms of self-definition. Since a woman's sense of self is tied up with maintaining relationships, it is not surprising that disruption of that relationship through death "is perceived not just as a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self" (Miller, 1976: 83). Rubin (1985) writes, "the relationship of mother to child is so very potent, meaningful, and intense that the death of either partner uniquely affects the other" (347). When the loss is a woman's child, the grief and subsequent work of identity formation may be intensified as mother and child are both "snatched out of the context of [their] development" (Lowinsky, 1992: 151).

Moriarty, Carroll, and Cotroneo (1996) note that in some studies mothers seem to experience more intense or problematic responses than fathers on most bereavement measures, whereas in others no significant differences—or limited differences—in bereavement responses are found (461). This inconsistency in research results may be because in the case of the death of a child, both parents experience the loss similarly: as a loss of their sense of self. Robert Jay Lifton notes that parents frequently attribute to and experience through their children a "symbolic immortality" of themselves (qtd. in Carlson, 1997: 233). Through their children and their children's children and the ensuing numinous vision of infinite generations, parents have the sense that something of themselves will live on, even after their deaths.

Might there be additional issues to the grieving process when the child who has died is the same sex as the parent? Carlson noted that for fathers, at least in our culture, this archetypal vision is often attached to the handing down of a surname to a son. But for mothers, this sense of being carried forward into infinite time attaches most often to the daughter. Adrienne Rich (1976) writes,

> the cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other. (225)

A woman's daughter takes her back to her own beginnings, her own girlhood, and beyond to an archetypal Girl through whom the mother feels revitalized, reseeded, born again (Carlson, 1997: 92). Jung wrote that:

> Every mother contains her daughter within herself, and every daughter her mother ... Every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation and intermingling gives rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards time ... the conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations. (qtd. in O'Barr, Pope and Wyer, 1990: 186)

When a child dies,

> the dialogue of development between a mother and her child [is] brutally interrupted, the looping of intergenerational connections butchered, the mother left with only grief at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. (Lowinsky, 1992: 145)

While a mother will equally grieve the loss of her male child with pain and anguish, the loss of a daughter is likely to pose additional identity questions for women beyond the grief and loss process because of the unique characteristics of the mother-daughter bond.

Chodorow and Flax (qtd. in O'Barr *et al.*, 1990: 183) found that mothers identified more strongly with their female infants, seeing them more as extensions of themselves than their sons. Ego boundaries between mothers and daughters are more fluid, more undefined. Bereaved mothers in Edelstein's study "more often noted similarities with the daughter in personality, interests and career goals" (Edelstein, 1984: 40). The daughters appear to have had closer relationships to the mother and were perceived as tied more directly to the mother's future and hopes. Kate, a mother quoted in Lowinsky's *Stories from the Motherline*, sums it up when she says:

> Maybe I'm not supposed to feel this way, but I really want Allison to have children. My son has a child, so I'm already a grandmother. And I love my granddaughter. But grandchildren from sons are just not as awe-inspiring as from a daughter: having my little girl have a child as opposed to somebody else's little girl having a child. I know my son's sperm is there, but it's not the same. The child of my daughter is my way of being eternal, I guess, of living past death. (qtd. in Lowinsky, 1992: 86)

Within her relationship with her daughter, a mother also works out her unresolved relationship to her own mother. As a result, when later confronted with the eventual loss of her maternal parent, the bereaved mother may ultimately feel trapped in terms of the continuity of life, confined to an eternal embodied present with no way out.

What models of therapy currently exist and what support is being offered to women who have lost children? What therapy is appropriate for women seeking to resolve the loss of a daughter and does the theme of connection and disconnection serve as an appropriate model for grief counselling?

Modern theories of grief and mourning have stemmed from the work of Sigmund Freud whose theory of mourning evolved from his observations of children giving up their direct attachment (or oedipal love) to the parent. As Freud saw it, grief frees the ego from the attachment to the deceased.

In my view, Freud's theoretical legacy has generated a misunderstanding of the grief process. In actual fact, Freud never applied his theory to cases of grief after a significant death. His own lived experience clearly negated his theoretical position but this was never acknowledged. Freud's daughter, Sophie, died in 1920. Nine years later, upon learning that the son of his friend, Ludwig Binswanger, had died, he wrote:

> Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not wish to relinquish. (qtd. in Klass *et al.*, 1997: 6)

Unfortunately, as a result of Freud's misapplied legacy, the view of grief most accepted in this century holds that for successful mourning to take place, the mourner must disengage from the deceased and let go of the past (Klass, 1997: 4). Parkes felt that getting through the grief meant breaking the attachment (qtd. in Klass *et al.*, 1997: 11). Worden's final task of grieving is to "withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in another relationship" (Worden, 1991: 16). Principles of grief counselling and therapy have followed the view that bereaved persons need to break their ties with the deceased, give up their attachments, form a new identity in which the departed person plays no part, and reinvest in other relationships. People who persist in retaining a bond with their deceased loved one are, apparently, most in need of counselling or therapy. The model of grief that began with Freud is based on a patriarchal view of the world that stresses how separate people are from each other. As Klass *et al.* note, experiencing a continuing bond with the deceased in the present has been thought of as symptomatic of psychological problems and is often termed "unresolved grief" (1997: 4). Coontz adds that the difficulty has been confounded because in the modern West, where autonomy for men was asserted, all dependent behaviour was ascribed to women and other lower status groups (qtd. in Klass *et al.*, 1997: 16). The pathology of grief, therefore, was associated with the stereotype of feminine behaviour. As a result, women, in their natural attempt to maintain the connection with their deceased child have more often than men been labelled "pathological grievers." While Worden acknowledges the possibility of ongoing relationship with the "thoughts and memories ... associated with the child" (1991: 17), he, too, discounts the idea that a continuous and ongoing relationship with the deceased person is feasible.

Other cultures, however, have supported the notion that the deceased continue to live in some form after death, and they provide mourners with rituals to sustain an appropriate relationship (Klass *et al.*, 1997: 19-20). Klass *et al.* note that ancestor worship in Japan is an elaborate set of rituals by which those who are living maintain personal, emotional bonds with those who have

died. The deceased remain individual spirits, available to the living for 35 or 50 years (Klass *et al.*, 1997: 59); essentially, for "the remaining lifetime of those who have known them" (Klass *et al.*, 1997: 62-63).

Kathie Carlson (1997) notes that the anthropologist Loring Danforth studied the beliefs, customs and rituals surrounding death in a rural modern day Greek village he called Potamia. Danforth found that in this society, there is a centrality, longevity and intensity of grief borne by the women. Maintaining an ongoing "conversation" with the dead becomes the central focus of each bereaved woman's life and the new definition of her social responsibilities. Likewise, Woodrick (1995) documented that the Yucatec Mayans believe that the living and the dead continue a distinctive, interpersonal relationship. The lost loved one is culturally defined as an "ideal" who never abandons the living.

Edelstein (1984) in her book, *Maternal Bereavement,* suggested that there is an ongoing interdependent developmental process inherent in mothering a child. As each maturational process is completed in the child, a concomitant development occurs in the mother as a person as she works through issues of her own. This "working through facilitates her ability to let go of the child as he or she *was* (emphasis mine) and adapt to the next phase of the relationship" (1984: 32). Edelstein states that "the relationship is severed upon death" (1984: 32). I would like to suggest that this mutuality of growth continues beyond the grave and moves, instead, into the intrapsychic dimension of the mother.

Fortunately, there has been a very recent shift in the literature of grief and bereavement. Dennis Klass *et al.* note that "the resolution of grief involves continuing bonds that survivors maintain with the deceased and that these continuing bonds can be a healthy part of the survivor's ongoing life" (1997: 22).

Memorializing, remembering, knowing the person who has died, and allowing them to influence the present are active processes that seem to continue throughout the survivor's entire life. While the intensity of the relationship may diminish with time, it does not disappear. "We are not talking about living in the past," says Klass *et al.*, "but rather recognizing how bonds formed in the past can inform our present and our future" (1997: 17). Klass *et al.* state that for the bereaved parent the end of grief is not severing the bond with the dead child, but integrating the child into the parent's life and into the parent's social networks in a different way than when the child was alive (1997: 199).

While the literature is not extensive, work with bereaved mothers has revealed a paradoxical tension between connection and disconnection in their attempts to resolve their grief. The best example of this is found in the work of Charles Brice (1991) who writes of the paradoxes of maternal mourning. He notes that:

> the death of a child intensifies the pre-existing developmental paradox with which every mother and child must contend. This involves the mother's conflicted feeling that her child is both a part of her and apart

> from her. A bereaved mother feels empty inside. Paradoxically, she also lives her emptiness as fullness; she is full of sadness, worry and grief. Moreover, she unconsciously struggles to hold onto this emptiness-fullness (for it serves a "relationship" to her child), and yet she lets go of it as she sheds tears that symbolize her child. (3-4)

The child's death transforms the mother's experience of her world. She struggles with whether the child is still with her, still a part of her, or whether the child is permanently separated from her by death. Brice notes that none of these relations to the child can be unconflictedly accepted and that the paradoxes of mourning will remain more or less intact as time moves on, though their intensity may diminish.

Alice Longman also noted that the two basic social processes of connecting and disconnecting were identified in the bereavement experiences of mothers. In her study of six mothers whose sons had died of AIDS, she validates Brice's theory of the paradoxical nature of maternal mourning. She observes that the connecting process entailed continuous efforts to remain connected to the son who had died while at the same time facing the realization that he was dead. Time was spent learning about who the child was and participating in activities related to him. For these women, activism was a manifestation of support. As one mother said, "I decided how are you going to know—if I keep my mouth shut?" (Longman, 1995: 90). This same dynamic is observed in other bereaved mothers: many will remain close to friends of their children or will perpetuate involvement in organizations in which their child was involved.

Another means of remaining connected with their child was through rituals, such as visiting the cemetery and decorating the grave with seasonal items at Christmas or Easter, or organizing special family gatherings to honour the child's memory. Planning for various rituals can be satisfying for the bereaved mother and serves the dual function of both connecting and allowing her to reach closure on the disconnection of death.

Gathering mementos provides another means of connection. Pictures of the child may be arranged in an album; special mementos may be purchased each anniversary of the death. Mothers may begin to amass collections of angels or butterflies. These serve as concrete reminders of their child's life but also help them to derive meaning in the death and provide a source of healing (Longman, 1995: 92). In her study of family responses to the death of a child, Davies (1987) discusses the meaning of mementos. Mementos are either visible or not (i.e. displayed on walls or tucked away in drawers or boxes); community or household reminders. Community reminders include memorial gifts or scholarships. The meaning of these will vary with each family member, depending on their relationship with the deceased.

Klass *et al.* (1997) refers to these methods and items of memorabilia as "linking objects" that establish a connection with the dead child. These will transmute over time, but will be long lasting (202). Klass has worked extensively

with bereaved parents through the U.S. based self-help group, "The Compassionate Friends." He notes that such groups are instrumental in the recovery of bereaved parents since "membership in a community means that the dead child is also a member of the community, that the child is valued, remembered, celebrated, and loved" (1996: 206). The children are the heart and soul of the group, for it is the shared inner representations of the dead children that bond the members to each other. The children are in the midst of the group, not simply within each of the individual parents (1996: 209). It is important for bereaved parents that their deceased child continues to live on, not just in their inner world but in their social world as well. For as the dead child is integrated into the social network, the experiences by which parents maintain contact with their children can be socially validated as well.

Margaret Stroebe outlines an alternative dichotomous process of coping with bereavement in her restoration-loss orientation to grief. According to this view, when people go through the process of grieving, they need to undertake, in varying proportions, both loss and restoration oriented coping. Loss orientation refers to the attention that a person pays to the loss itself: restoration orientation refers to the adjustments or changes that are consequential to loss. A central construct in the model is that of oscillation between the two modes of coping. As Stroebe notes, at times they will be confronted by their loss; at others they will avoid memories, be distracted or seek relief by concentrating on other things (1998: 11).

Rubin also postulates that the mother is confronted with a dual task following the death of her child. First, she must come to terms with the reality of the loss, which is accomplished during the course of the bereavement response. Second, she must evolve some ongoing relationship to the internal representation of the dead child (1985: 351-2).

Common to all of the above theories is the idea that both orientations must be permitted and experienced. The natural process of mourning may be complicated if the paradox of connection and disconnection is not allowed expression. Filling the void of loss with "images of the child they once had preserves the reality of the intrapsychic relationship between parent and child" and "maintains the intercontinuity of the parent-child relationship" (Knapp, qtd. in Savage, 1989: 10), albeit aimed toward a potentially transformative end.

Continuity of the relationship between the deceased child and their surviving parent may also be preserved by dreams. For this reason, dream therapy or analysis is, in my belief, a requisite component of grief therapy with the bereaved mother. As Savage notes,

> the frequency of these kinds of dreams may diminish in time, yet is it not unusual to dream of the lost child for a lifetime. In this sense, one remains a parent forever to the deceased child and through the psychological reality of this intrapsychic relationship, the parent is able to express the love that the death has thwarted. (1989: 72)

Often the dead child evolves in dreams: she will become older or younger within the dream landscape. For Savage, "this ever-changing development of the image of the child underscores the continuing evolution of the parent-child relationship within the psyche of the dreamer" (1989: 73).

Moreover, the lost daughter of a mother's dreams may represent an aspect of herself that, in contrast to sons, offered her the possibility of experiencing something profoundly different as a parent. Savage describes the case of the mother, Sally, for whom despite her love for her sons, the image of this lost daughter became synonymous with [her] own unfulfillment. Not having a daughter, she feared that her maternity and her womanhood was lessened. For a time she viewed her sons in stereotypical ways. She felt they needed her less as young men. To Sally, the child needing her maternal attention was her deceased infant daughter, who symbolically corresponded with her own vulnerable and feminine self (1989: 12-13).

While learning to accept the reality of their loss, the grief work for many women who have lost daughters may also reside in claiming aspects of self they have long since relinquished, denied or projected onto their daughters. The configuration of relationship between mother and child may then be reinterpreted as an illustration of self-dynamics. For the mother left with only grief at her centre, "the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home," (Morrison, 1987: 140) successful resolution of the grief process must include some examination of the internal psychic dynamics that are operational within the external grief process.

Levinson (1992) has shown the effectiveness of the use of myth with women having difficulty resolving their sense of loss. The use of goddess figures may help women understand more about their problems and enlarge their view of the roles and personality characteristics possible for women. In particular, the myth of Demeter and her daughter, Persephone, provides fertile ground for women to deal with their losses. Many writers, notes Levinson, have seen Demeter primarily as a grieving victim. But in the myth, not only is Demeter free to express her anger, she is also a woman who is able to use her anger to produce change.

Painfully, women who are grieving the loss of their daughters may also discover an awareness of an inner rage that is directed not just at their personal situation of loss but at the patriarchal structure which surrounds them. As Barbara Black Koltov has noted in her book, *Weaving Woman* (1990), when Demeter was able to use her goddess-given fiery anger and nourishing power to demand that Persephone be restored to her, the masochistic knot of traditional female behaviour was broken. This knot consists of doing for others, not being appreciated, feeling angry, depressed and full of self-pity, unloved but not loving oneself enough to do what one wants. Demeter says, "no," finally, "no, nothing for anyone," until she gets her daughter back (1990: 32). Use of this myth encourages the bereaved mother to incorporate Persephone, the symbol of her projected fertility/creativity (as represented by the daughter) into

a newly emergent sense of self. Thus, the figure of Demeter serves as a role model not just in terms of child loss, but for the mother's total role as a woman.

Will any type of therapy serve the bereaved mother? Those in Edelstein's study identified the following helpful patterns of assistance: "shared experience and mutuality; availability and not withdrawing; having been through the same experience" (1984: 131). Brice sees the position of the therapist dealing with maternal bereavement as "the recipient of a mother's cathartic needs" and notes that "mourning will not proceed unless she can mourn to someone who will listen in a nonintrusive, nonjudgmental manner" without an attempt to "resolve the unresolvable" (1991: 9). Therapists faced with the despair and pain of the bereaved mother may wonder what they can do to help. Grieving people may need assistance but more than help, they need therapists and soul companions who will listen and recognize their ongoing need for care and concern. A therapist who understands the complexities of the never-ending grief process, particularly as it applies to child loss, may become an invaluable agent of healing.

One hallmark of feminist therapy that is useful is empathy. As Edelstein notes:

> For the therapist, empathy is, in part, an identification with the mother. For the woman it provides reassurance: that someone has entered her world and respects her integrity; that her experiences can be understood; and that she is acceptable. Empathic communication teaches that she is not alone and that her thoughts and feelings, while intense, are tolerable and understandable to someone else, thereby making them more tolerable and understandable to her (1984: 132-133).

While not all therapists may be mothers, all women are part of the "motherline" and share the feminine experience of creative regeneration in some aspect of its expression. Bereaved mothers need to be supported, at times comforted, but also provided with reasonable expectations in coping and encouraged in their attempts at mastery. Many women, when faced with the destruction of their assumptive world, will regress and lose whatever strength and feeling of self-worth they once had. It is important that they are not further infantilized or made more insecure by traditional therapeutic strategies that place the therapist in a position of power over the client. The feminist therapeutic stance will encourage the client to seek out support groups, to read and educate herself about the process of bereavement. Women who are looking for new direction in their lives following the death of a child may find the goal-oriented processes of feminist therapy empowering. If they are able to stick with the process, along with their own psychological healing will come a release of "powerful, revitalizing energies"; in their journey to recreate their sense of self will come new "life reborn from the destruction" (Edelstein, 1984: 82).

How much documentation exists concerning the intrapsychic process of women who have lost daughters? Has research been conducted about the developmental process bereaved mothers must negotiate in order to restore their sense of identity? Does literature exist that studies the differences in intrapsychic adjustment between losing a son or daughter? Savage's (1989) work is groundbreaking and unique in its analysis of the maternal grief experience. Yet the field of thanatology is still quite new: in fact, Rando's (1986) equally groundbreaking work that identified the unique aspects of parental loss of a child was published just 13 years ago. It is probably too soon to expect to find long term studies of the in-depth nature proposed here, however further study must be undertaken if we are to understand the phenomenon of maternal grief in its entirety. A feminist understanding of women's psychological development and growth-in-relationship has much to offer this new field. As Klass *et al.* have so aptly stated:

> we are not sure what form a new model of the resolution of grief will take, nor can we describe the rituals and social interactions that will express the new model. We are sure, however, that any new model that emerges will understand the centrality of the connection in the human family to others, both living and dead. (1996: 355)

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