

## Transforming Loss into Action

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### Mothers from the Plaza de Mayo to Juarez, Mexico

*Determining what moves mothers to defy powerful authorities by steadfastly gathering to bear witness to the disappearance of their children or to meet to weave tapestries documenting atrocities committed against their families, or to band together to demand resolution of the brutal murders of their daughters in Juarez, Mexico is a question that demands serious study. What sustained the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo for thirty years? Where were the fathers? How does joining together to create tapestries temper grief too deep for words? From what source do mothers draw the strength to challenge the powerful and the courage to rise above fear for their own lives? This paper addresses these questions by reflecting on the importance of truth-telling as a healing practice, connection with others as the site of empowerment, and the construction of new narratives regarding loss as a pathway out of despair. Reference to Ruddick's views on the relationship between maternal thinking and peacemaking, concepts from Relational-Cultural Theory developed by Jean Baker Miller and colleagues, and ideas from the psychological literature on loss and bereavement form the theoretical backbone of this article. In affirming the courage of mothers who have suffered the disappearance of a child and by exploring how their grief can be transformed into effective political action, this paper hopes to empower women everywhere to work for justice and peace.*

There can be little doubt that the death of one's child from accident or illness brings sadness too profound to describe, but beyond the enormity of this loss is the horror of confronting the unexplained disappearance of a child. It is the experiences of mothers who have lost their children through disappearance that will be considered in this paper along with an analysis of the ways in which some mothers, who have suffered this loss, have transformed their personal despair into political actions which affirm the maternal as a source of courage

and a pathway to a world in which the lives of all children are sacred.

Surprisingly, images of women standing strong in defiance of governmental authorities or demanding an accounting of the disappearances or deaths of their children emerge quite often. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, marching for over thirty years in front of the presidential palace in Buenos Aires asking to know the fate of their missing children, the women of Santiago, Chile banding together in church basements to discuss how to design and make tapestries or *arpilleras* depicting the atrocities committed against their children, or, more recently, the mothers of Ciudad Juarez planting crosses in the desert to remind the world that no one has accounted for hundreds of missing or murdered daughters, are some of the compelling images of mothers that both haunt and inspire us. The faces of these mothers command our attention as they convey both profound sorrow and remarkable courage. It is hard to look away from such powerful images just as it is hard to hold in our mind's eye the intensity of their pain. But who are these women? From what source do they draw their strength to challenge the powerful and rise above fear for their own lives? Where are their husbands? How does joining together to create tapestries temper grief too deep for words? What sustains and nurtures their resistance, often for decades? This paper will attempt to provide some answers, by blending insights from Sara Ruddick's work on maternal thinking with the psychological literature on loss and bereavement and concepts from relational-cultural theory developed by Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues.

Ruddick, in her influential book, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, presents us with many realities associated with mothering which, while stark, may begin to provide us with some insights into how mothers find the courage to brave the wrath of the powerful when seeking the truth about their missing children. In the early part of her book she describes a quality of maternal practice that she terms "preservative love." Ruddick in defining preservative love indicates that, first and foremost, it demands that the caretaker do all in her power to sustain the life of her child, while recognizing that this mandate is not easy to achieve. Many mothers live in dangerous circumstances where her child's life can be instantly taken, and even privileged mothers never have full power over the forces of fate. Preservative love therefore requires deep humility on the part of the caretaker, a humility born of her acceptance of her inability to thwart the forces of chance which may bring harm to those in her care. Ruddick states:

Birth is a beginning whose end and shape can neither be predicted or controlled. Since the safety of human bodies, mortal and susceptible to damage, can never be secured and since humans grow variously, but always in need of help, to give birth is to commit oneself to protecting the unprotectable and nurturing the unpredictable. (209)

Perhaps the strategies mothers develop to manage the fear they feel when their

children confront the ordinary dangers of childhood prepare the heart to stand in defiance of the powerful who would deny mothers even information regarding the whereabouts of their children. Perhaps the years of learning how to control panic when a child is hurt and the psychological work we do to contend with the reality of our powerlessness to protect fully the ones we love the most are the training grounds for the courage it takes to defy powerful authorities. We have learned to contain our fear as a consequence of repeatedly facing it.

Another profound insight that Ruddick and others, such as Marguerite Bouvard in her book, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, and Diana Taylor in her book, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War,"* have about mothers who challenge those in power is that they do so by evoking the culturally accepted definitions of the maternal role, which requires the nurturance and protection of children, appeals for help from the men in control, and expressions of love and lamentation for a lost child. At the same time, however, mothers who gather to express these emotions break an important cultural mandate; they violate the rule of "separate spheres" for women and men by expressing themselves in a public space, and it is the complex twinning of resistance and compliance that intensifies the impact of women protesting in this way. To quote Ruddick once again:

Women who bring to the public plazas of a police state pictures of their loved ones, like women who put pillowcases, toys and other artifacts of attachment against barbed wire fences of missile bases, translate symbols of mothering into political speech ... They speak a "women's language" of loyalty, love and outrage; but they speak with a public anger in a public place in ways they were never meant to do. (229)

A similar thought is echoed in the work of Cynthia Bejarano as she describes a variety of mothers' movements of resistance within Latin America, including the mothers demanding action in Juarez, Mexico. She describes how the Mothers of Juarez have "transformed prior gendered notions of citizenship into the evolution of maternal citizenship" (130), by walking through the streets, hand and hand, displaying banners with photos of their beautiful but missing or murdered daughters and pleading with police to investigate more aggressively their disappearances or deaths.

This complex mixture of expected maternal behavior, proudly displaying a photo of a beloved child or seeking the aid of a powerful man to find a lost child, with behavior which violates a woman's assigned place within the private sphere of the home when she enters the public sphere of the streets, may be one explanation for why we see primarily mothers and not fathers engaged in these kinds of actions. It is possible that the evocation of the maternal protects, at least a bit, women engaged in public protest because it conjures up cultural sanctions against violence toward mothers, whereas men engaged in similar behavior might not be similarly sheltered. Diana Taylor in her article

entitled “Making a Spectacle: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” recognizes this dynamic when she states: “The junta, which legitimized its mission with the rhetoric of Christian and family values, could hardly gun down defenseless mothers in public” (100). While the sanctions mitigating against using violence against mothers protected them to some extent, it is also true that in many circumstances protesting mothers were tortured, *disappeared*, and murdered as well.

There are other factors beyond this, however, which have tended to propel women to form groups to denounce violence to a greater extent than men. In general, especially in overtly patriarchal societies, men have more of a tendency to deny or withdraw from the pain of deep loss. Catherine Rogers et al., for example, in their paper entitled “Long-Term Effects of the Death of a Child on Parents’ Adjustment in Midlife,” reported that there were significantly fewer fathers than mothers who reported to the researchers that they had lost a child and this finding was not fully accounted for by the fact that there are more single-mothers than fathers. The researchers suggest that “it is possible that men underreported child death as a way of coping with grief” (210). In another study, by Shirley Murphy et al., results showed that three times as many mothers as fathers experienced full-blown post-traumatic stress disorder subsequent to the violent deaths of their children and that fathers scored significantly higher on measures of acceptance of death. While it is not fully clear how to interpret these differences, gender socialization and the expectation that men will suppress intense emotion and simply move forward without processing their grief is a likely explanation. Participating in movements whose purpose is to bear witness and seek redress for the disappearance or murder of a child is counter-productive for those seeking to bury their pain. Men, more than women in most cultures, are encouraged to be as autonomous as possible and to disconnect in large measure from the emotional self. Presumably when overwhelmed by profound emotion, such as that related to the loss of a child, the habitual protective strategies of disconnection would be expected in men and the fear of becoming lost in the intensity of emotion great. For men it would seem that to dwell in the realm of emotion would render them even more vulnerable since stoicism and autonomy are valued within the traditional male gender prescription. But disconnection from emotion renders closeness in relationships difficult and therefore it becomes almost inevitable that feelings of isolation will follow from this protective strategy and, if it is true as Judith Jordan asserts that “isolation is a major source of human suffering and is often accompanied by immobilization which prevents movement back into relationships after disconnections” (“Mutual Empathy” 1005), then men, in their isolation, must learn to block out pain as connection is too dangerous a psychological threat. Women, however, traditionally are given more permission to experience emotion and to seek the solace of others, so they are freer to move out of isolation and into the types of supportive relationships seen among the mothers in resistance movements. In connecting with others, women find what

Jordan calls “the human community of responsiveness and love” (1008) and it is my hypothesis that re-entering this human community is one of the factors that empowers women to transcend their grief and to stare with courage into the faces of the powerful who have robbed them of their children. One of the mothers who began walking with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo after the disappearance of her own child describes well this process of moving from deep isolation to connection by saying:

That first afternoon I sat on a bench, somewhat far from the rest of the women. I wondered if those women were asking for something special. Maybe it was the situation or my sadness, but I cried and went home without getting what I wanted. The second time I couldn't do it either. The next Thursday another mother came and sat next to me. Maybe she had the same fearful sensation. We saw that group of women and the third time I couldn't hold back. I went near them. The first question they asked me, “who do you have that's disappeared?” Then I felt we were all the same person.... From that moment on, I felt I had arrived at a place where I was going to fight.... I was very moved, I cried a lot but I was in each mother's heart. (*Las Madres*)

According to Jordan, re-entering the community of responsiveness and love is empowering for women not only because it validates a grieving mother's pain, but also because it mitigates against the shame we feel at having failed in the most basic task of mothering, namely preservative love, protecting the life of our child. Jordan captures the debilitating dynamic of shame and how, in isolation we cannot move forward, when she states:

Isolation involves a sense of being cut off from connection. In a state of isolation, one feels immobilized and self-blaming. Shame often accompanies a sense of isolation; one feels unworthy of connection. In shame, one feels disconnected, that one's being is at fault, that one is unworthy of empathic response or that one is unlovable. Often in shame people move out of connection, lose their sense of efficacy, and lose their ability to authentically represent their experience. Shame is one of the major experiences of disconnection. A way of healing shame is by bringing the person back into empathic connection. (“Mutual Empathy” 1008)

As women meet with others who are suffering the same pain, offering them support and validation for the intensity of their grief, they begin to see the beauty and integrity of other mothers and in time the empathic response that can be offered to the other gradually becomes available also to the self. Much of Jordan's work describes the development of this capacity, which she terms,

self-empathy, and suggests that it is a significant factor in reclaiming hope. It involves the movement away from the illusion of what she terms “individual *control-over* dynamics” to a model of “*supported vulnerability*” (“Relational Resilience” 32).

Perhaps it is by entering the spaces where our vulnerability is supported that it becomes possible to begin the process of re-awakening hope and transforming the meaning of our loss. One of the important mothers groups addressing the murders and disappearances in Juarez, Mexico emphasizes hope and proclaims on its website: “There is something else than rage, something else than sadness, something else than terror. There is hope.” (www.casa-amigo.org) And true to its proclamation, this is an organization, like most of the mothers’ movements discussed here, that not only mobilizes people to demand an accounting for the lives of their children, but also provides important psychological, medical and social services to those in grief. Marching in solidarity is, of course, an important source of support for anyone feeling great vulnerability, but information, counseling, health care, child care, legal advice and respite from the fight heighten significantly the sense of support, and again it is women—mothers—who have worked to put these types of services in place (Ensalaco 429-430).

Those mothers who gathered together in Santiago, Chile to create a type of tapestry called an *arpillera*, depicting the atrocities committed during Pinochet’s reign of terror, also explain how working together allowed them to transform their pain into hope. In Marjorie Agosin’s book on this movement entitled, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love*, she describes how working on the tapestries transformed the mothers themselves and why it is important to continue to honor their work even now. She says:

We must rethink the legacy of the arpilleristas in the twenty-first century and the reasons why it is absolutely necessary to tell these stories. I think that talking about the arpilleras is a step toward reconnecting with faith and hope. This is a very precarious art which has stayed alive for more than thirty years, but it has also transformed and kept these women alive. (33)

Transforming grief into the hope that others may be spared the pain you have endured becomes a bond that unites and strengthens, but for many the depth of the grief also allows women to transcend their fear. One of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo says:

For the mothers, going to the Plaza meant overcoming fear. Maybe that’s why they called us crazy. Because at the moment that everyone was terrorized, we overcame this fear. It wasn’t that we weren’t afraid, we were, but we overcame it because of our obligation and our desperation. (*Las Madres*)

When one of the leaders of the movement, Azucena deVillaflores de De Vincente, was herself kidnapped, tortured, and found dead, many of the mothers became even more defiant, with one mother commenting that the authorities believed the kidnapping would quell the mothers' public protests,

But they were wrong, they couldn't measure the mothers' love nor their desperation. We continued going to the Plaza, there wasn't just one Azucena, there were hundreds and hundreds of Azucenas now.  
(*Las Madres*)

Psychologically, desperation and betrayal are crucial concepts in understanding how these mothers were able to overcome the basic instinct of terror in the face of threats to their lives. Perhaps one way to contemplate this ability to transcend fear, is to recall the powerful impact of Janis Joplin soulfully singing: "Freedom's just another word, for nothin' left to lose, nothin', that's all that Bobby left me." ("Me and Bobby Magee") No loss is more profound than the loss of a child, no betrayal more provocative of despair than one committed by those charged as our protectors, government officials, local police, and it is from this site of despair that the courage to speak truth to power wells. It is as though mothers in resistance movements everywhere are saying: "Freedom's just another name for nothin' left to lose—I have lost what has meant the most to me in my life, there is nothing else of value you can take from me, and I will stand here to bear witness to the atrocities committed and I will not be moved."

In addition to the transformative elements associated with gathering together in solidarity already described, there are several other powerful psychological processes at work in individuals moving from despair to resistance. Perhaps one of the most important ones is what Christina Robb describes in her book, *This Changes Everything*, as the process of gaining of a sense of authority and mastery over our memories (335). So often in the aftermath of trauma, survivors are plagued with recurrent and intrusive images of the horror they have suffered and these unbidden memories come to dominate their lives. The memories seem to have a life of their own beyond the control of the survivor and thus reaffirm the debilitating feeling of powerlessness. Judith Herman, in her important work, *Trauma and Recovery*, also recounts the intrusive nature of traumatic memories and how debilitating this intrusiveness is (37-42). However, to remember together, to share the universality of grief, to be held in the embrace of another who knows how overwhelmingly painful the images in our memories are, helps us to move from the position of victim to one of survivor. It allows us to create a different narrative about what our loss means and when we are able to do that, we can tame these intrusive memories and use them for our own purposes. We gain authority over the memories and they energize us to bring the reality of our losses out from the immobilizing shadows of our own individual lives and into the

public sphere to challenge others to also begin to work for justice.

Coming together to mourn, to bear witness to loss and atrocity, and to demand redress, accomplishes still another important goal. It allows us to keep connection with the child we have lost. Perhaps we see this most profoundly in the arpilleras which weave into the tapestries fragments from the actual clothing of disappeared children. Agosin movingly states:

The vitality of the arpillera is associated with bearing witness to life, but it is also connected to the Latin American tradition of maintaining a dialogue with the dead.... The body of the arpilleras commemorates the bodies of the disappeared. The process of commemorating can translate to the process of redreaming the histories of truncated lives. (33)

The name of one of the groups protesting the disappearance of their daughters in Juarez, *May Our Daughters Return Home*, also highlights how maternal protest is a way of both fostering hope and continuing connection with their daughters. One of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo echoes this same feeling of daily connection with her missing son when she says, decades after his disappearance, "I always wait for him. When I hear footsteps I think it must be my son. I haven't lost hope. I believe my son was so good and so noble, so helpful to humanity, that he has to return" (*Las Madres*), while another says, "He disappeared physically, but he is with me in all I do, all I think, all I plan" (Bouvard 8). Several other mothers also report recurrent dreams of their lost children comforting and reassuring them. One mother says: "A few months ago, I had a strange dream. The grass was sparkling like a field of mica, and my son stood before me dressed in white. He was smiling as he spoke to me, *Mother, I am happy now, why are you weeping?*" (Bouvard 18), while another recalls: "I had a dream in which I saw my son and he told me, 'Mother, don't be so sad. I am well.' His face was so soft and that dream stayed with me" (Bouvard 8).

While the mothers in the resistance groups discussed here frequently held to the hope that their children would be returned alive, for some, with the passing of years and the discovery of mass graves or mutilated body remains, another psychological transformation occurred in the behavior and rhetoric of these steadfast and courageous women. Their early strategies of supplication and appeal to powerful patriarchs for assistance in their searches for their children, which grew initially out of their acceptance of their social role as mothers and the genuine belief that authorities could help, changed into constant demands for the truth not only about the fate of the disappeared but also about the overall tactics and policies of those in control. In discussing the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Bouvard confirms this later approach well when she states: "The space that the Mothers claimed for ethics illuminated the lies in the junta's efforts to silence them..." (14) and Taylor ("Making a

Spectacle”) takes this further when she argues:

The Mothers spoiled the junta’s parade by responding to the military spectacle with a spectacle that inverted the focus. What had been invisible before—from domestic women to “subversives”—was now visible for all the world to see. Through their bodies, they wanted to show the absence/presence of all those who had disappeared without a trace, without leaving a body. Clearly, the confrontation between the Mothers and the military centered on the physical and symbolic location of the missing body—object of exchange in this battle of images. While the military attempted to make their victims invisible and anonymous by burying them in unmarked graves, dumping their bodies into the sea or cutting them up and burning them in ovens, the Mothers insisted that the disappeared had names and faces. They were people; people did not simply disappear; their bodies, dead or alive, were somewhere; someone had done something to them. (102-103)

In addition, as many mothers confronted the evidence that their children were indeed dead, they began to see themselves not only as the mothers of their own children, but also as the mothers of all the disappeared; mothers mourning for a lost generation of idealistic and socially active young people who had envisioned a different future for Argentina’s downtrodden. Taylor captures this transformation well when she states: “Over the years, the Mothers’ notion of motherhood gradually became political rather than biological” (“Making a Spectacle” 102). As critiques of policy and the tactics of the military became central parts of the movement, symbolically they could be seen as the mothers of a new form of nationhood, based on principles of justice, community, and the preservation of life.

Jean Baker Miller, in her influential book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, astutely discusses the fact that individuals and groups deemed “subordinate” by those in power often find creative ways of fighting back, as is evidenced in the mothers’ movements discussed here. While addressing in her analysis the psychological impact of being assigned an inferior status within multiple cultural contexts, Miller also describes some of the creative forms of resistance “subordinates” develop in their attempts to thwart the oppression of those with power. She begins by arguing that “subordinates” know more about the “dominants” than the dominants know about the subordinates and in fact, often the subordinates know more about the dominants than the dominants know about themselves (10-11). While the diminished status of mothers is certainly a site of their oppression, this status often allows them to develop highly refined observational abilities and renders them experts on the particular symbols of power most dear to the dominants. Finding innovative ways to undermine or co-op these symbols becomes a highly effective strategy of resistance. Even

actions as simple as marching in a circle around the Plaza de Mayo rather than in straight, orderly lines and in a counter-clockwise direction rather than clockwise, challenged the established rules of order stressed in the hierarchical and militaristic concepts of nation put forth by the patriarchs of the junta (Taylor, "Making a Spectacle" 103). By performing such acts of rebellion, as well as claiming the higher moral ground by evoking images of mother-love and devotion to family and by appealing to religious doctrine denouncing violence and murder, while also becoming the face of justice, mothers in resistance movements undermine and humiliate the powerful precisely because they are so astute at reading the controlling symbolism used by the powerful in their attempts to control. This transition to mother of a new form of nation from mother of a disappeared child, while difficult, also reflects the growing maturity and sophistication of mothers' resistance movements and, in the specific cases discussed here, surely conferred feelings of pride to those mothers able to understand and implement such a change. Accomplishing this transition can be seen as another source of nourishment for the continued ability of many mothers to stay active in protest movements for decades, even after their own child's death had been finally officially documented.

Finally, creating communities of resistance, based on the primary demand of mothering, namely to preserve life, serves the purpose of charging all human rights organizations to first recognize the strength and courage of women and then to continue to incorporate women's ways of defining reality into their work. As Ensalaco states regarding the mothers of Juarez: "The immediate objective of the mobilization is to end the violence and to achieve justice, but the larger objective is to achieve women's equality as a prerequisite of ending violence against women in its myriad of cultural manifestations" (418).

And so, we come full circle, back to Ruddick. Her 2001 essay entitled, "Making Connections Between Parenting and Peace," resonates with the idea of ending violence, not only toward women, but towards all when it speaks about the need for all human beings to embrace a "culture of peace" (8). Ruddick argues that the work of mothering prompts us to think deeply about the fragility of the bodies of those we love, requires us to develop skills effective in mediating conflict, and inspires us to allow these abilities and insights, acquired through mothering well, to reverberate beyond the confines of our parenting role. In devoting ourselves to the preservation of the lives of our children, we come to see more directly the price war and violence extract on all people. We become able to see that in political conflict violence only begets more violence, whereas patience and reconciliation often result in a de-escalation of rage; a lesson learned while mediating conflict within our own families. A culture of peace can emanate from the consciousness, developed in effective nurturers, about the magnificence of life, and from the embrace of the maternal mandates to cherish life and to foster the growth of children. Agosin concurs and also directly asks us to look toward maternal spaces as the places to find new approaches to establishing peace when she says:

The *arpillera* inspires us to live in the past, but also allows us to re-structure the ethic of our future. The *arpillera* presents a clear narrative and accuses those who have lived lives in opposition to human dignity. A denouncement of this kind speaks from the transparent spaces of life. It speaks from the garden, the living room, the dining room, the empty bed, but it also speaks from the space of terror. (35)

Mothers who have transformed their profound losses, experienced in “spaces of terror,” into pillars of resistance and symbols of justice not only inspire us, but require that we stand in solidarity with them. We must all work to end injustice and violence. By invoking the powerful images mothers create, as they stare directly into the eyes of oppression, perhaps we will succeed in overcoming our own spaces of terror and will become inspired to be accomplices in movements to create for the future a world based on an ethic of care.

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