

My Mother's Chicken Soup

Recipe for Perspective

Using the metaphor of mother's chicken soup as a symbol of elder experience, the author parallels historic events in her life with historic events in her mother's history. Writing enabled the writer to put her mother's life in perspective with her own. For example: her mother walked to a market to find a live chicken, have it slaughtered and plucked, and subsequently cooked the soup, while this writer easily drives to the supermarket for her cleaned and quartered chickens. Her mother travelled with two small children by train and boat through foreign speaking countries, never again to see her large family; eventually they were all killed in the Holocaust. This writer at a similar age, also with two small children, lost her siblings and father. More support, however, through writing and therapy was available. Such realizations through writing helped the author to mature, appreciate, and grow compassion for the elder mother.

Recently a friend's husband recalled how sadness overwhelmed me 35 years ago. I obviously had recovered from those dark times, because now I was comforting him at the loss of his wife. I expressed how his wife's frequent visits cheered me, how she respected my writings, and how she gave me space. He and his whole family loyally read a monthly column I wrote at that time.

"I wrote myself out of it, didn't I?" Unexpectedly, I blurted this out.

"You certainly did," he agreed with a pat on my back.

This essay will illustrate the benchmarks of this change. Documented by memories of past writing and family photographs from my albums, the process of transformation from anger and pain is assisted by a maturing self-search using religion, therapy, and collegial support. Beginning the tragic and successive sister, brother, both in their mid-forties, and father soon after the birth of my

third child, my sorrow turned to an emerging anger at my mother until her death 13 years later, when the anger transformed to a growing compassion. Comparing her life to mine as I aged, I slowly came to new realizations, which grew out of my writing. Memories arose unbidden and allowed me to grow an appreciation of my mother. I went from the mother-blame as an exploration in therapy to empathy that a growing meditative practice encouraged.

The first trigger memory arose recently while I was making chicken soup for a Sabbath meal, that stereotypical product of Jewish mothering. I was, as was my mother's habit, sucking the over cooked bones, when I recalled my mother's six month fall into dying from a stroke. Nostalgia unearthed the ritual we both shared even before I was enrolled in school. My pre-school learning began at the Canadian open market in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, close to the Detroit River. My mother haggled for the live chicken with a farmer, carried the fowl in a wooden basket to the kosher slaughterer, witnessed the quick death required by the rabbis to guarantee the least pain, and helped my mother's friend *Peshke* hand-pluck the feathers to stuff our pillows and blankets. The bald fowl was wrapped in newspapers for our long walk home to prepare the Sabbath meal with the other food purchases from the market.

Today, I buy kosher chickens in prepared packages from Whole Foods, and somehow miss the adventure of the open-air market full of banter, bargaining, and local character. As a teenager I was embarrassed at my mother's energy: she could fill any room with her shrieks and *geshreis* (outbursts), a habit agitated and multiplied by her constant anxiety over money. Now I miss the energy that used to make me recoil, sometimes in fright and sometimes in embarrassment. Coupled with an arising calmness, is a present urge to understand, and with that, a poignant longing to understand her more, so I can understand myself. Once damned up by the immediacy of loss, I have developed a meditation practice that can wait for the storm to clear. My mother's recipe was more than birds and vegetables, and I have developed my own. As I scrape over every vertebra of the chicken necks, I desire the bare bone of real memory and wisdom about this most important loss, my mother. Writing this will unearth what I seek. So is my ultimate faith in this process.

Her life, I now realize, was so much harder than mine. Just witness the difference in shopping for food. With this frame, I went searching in old albums to see what such comparisons could teach me, and how I could glean some insights from the process writing.

My recipe for grieving is writing, as I am doing now. I've written about it for so many years that I can't tell what is memory and what is wish and what is projection. To help I enter a search in Google for "grief and writing." I find over seven million items.¹ There are organizations like poetry therapy² and journal therapy.³ There is even art therapy;⁴ numerous ways to use artistic expres-

sion to work through emotions. As if that's not what artists and writers have been doing for centuries. I have taught these courses and even documented how artistic expression of the loss of a mother has transformed the artist.⁵

However, I have never written about my own transformation, documented or undocumented in my life over the loss of my mother. My first separation was in public school, Frank W. Begley Elementary School in Windsor, On-



tario. I had to be five when she dropped me off for grade one. I stayed at the link fence for what seemed like a day watching her disappear from sight. I must have been so happy to see her that afternoon when she came to get me. Above is a picture of that time of my life, 1942.

For years I couldn't imagine such affection especially as I grew older and became cursory in my communications with her. Writing and life experience colors our perspective of life-altering events, and so much was to happen between this dotting embrace and affection in the years to follow. My youngest grandchild is this same age and the loss of his mother's presence is quite profound; symbiosis is so natural and can be quite loving as it was here and with my grandson. Both my daughter and my mother gave such unconditional love that separation from it in the cold impersonal world is as profound a loss as any tragedy. It is more than the writing, but the maturity that evolved, the ability to look at the past and realize that, yes I have lived that age, the age my mother was when I clung to her and felt that going to school that first day was a tragic loss.

I found the oldest picture of my mother at approximately the same age as me, when we went scrambling to that Canadian farmer's market. Here is a picture of my mother's family; she is the youngest girl standing in front of her father, my grandfather whom I never met. He was probably trying to hold her

still for the photography session, which was typically long at that time. This had to be taken in the early 1900s.



Earlier in my life, I could not understand her anxiety and her hysteria at life's events. In the years that followed my mother was to lose her entire family of 83 to the Holocaust to perish by fire in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Such an event scars and tears at the heart and can turn a happy person dour. I remember the day a letter came and she just stared. That's exactly what I did following the three family deaths decades ago. However, I was unable to even speak to my mother without being curt and dismissive. It was too much for me. I couldn't even consider what these three additional deaths did to my mother, so lost was I in fear and anger.

Since then I have published numerous poems about her and each one helped to dislodge the defensive anger that protected the heartache and fear of being the next in line to go.

My sister had died suddenly when I was almost 30; her kidneys collapsed. When I also stared out the window, my children couldn't comprehend this. My sister and I shared the same bed and, because she was almost 15 years older, became a mother figure to me as well. My brother died the next year and my father followed, probably dying of a broken heart. Even though publishing this poem comforted me, I never equated my losses with her larger losses from anti-Semitism:

Family

I feed the image of a sister
Against that one bloated by despair,
Warmed double by the anger round her neck,
Jostled and strung taut by her going,
Burdened by her heartbeats,
Until they stopped.

I look for her in all the women that I meet.

I nurture a brother close by
Against that rack of bones
Sacked and sewn after a cutting,
Bagged into a bed too soon to know himself.
His young dreams blown with him
Over the hills of clouds.

I look for him in every man I know.

But I hold my father, oh my father,
Before that velvet paper box,
Lowered with a faltering crank,
Covered with these handfuls of dark soil.
I grow a memory of him that is not him.

Someone else must look for fathers,
Hear them out in old age homes,
Men who know their silence
And allow me mine....

While with my mother I listen
For the seeding of my own green time.⁶

My mother, at a similar age, did something far more courageous. She left her family with many more siblings than I, to join her husband in North America. She would never see them again, never have the warm support of her large extended family in rearing her children in a foreign atmosphere.

Now as I am over 70, I look back and see a different perspective. Loss makes one lose the present life because the feelings are so overwhelming. I neglected my life, as she sometimes did not connect with me. However, the therapy that

followed was directed by searching for the answer and had some mother-blaming in it. Unreasonably, I thought my mother's hysteria drove my siblings to distraction so that they died. I was afraid that I was next if I allowed myself too much contact with my poor mother's overwrought state of mind. My conversations with her were short and never chatty. I did her a great disservice because I was overwhelmed with the losses first of my surrogate mother and then



my brother and father. She mustered up the courage at this same age of 28, to leave her family and home, to travel over land to Gdansk, through England, and across the sea, ill at the unfamiliar food.

However, something changed in me as she lived out her next 20 years as a widow. She needed me to help her with surgery. By then I had weathered the losses with therapy and a new career. My poetry appeared in various prayer



Betsyanne Duval. "Tzivia Lipunski", 2010, encaustic 12" x 12."

books, in healing anthologies, and I was rewarded when I heard my poetry read in houses of mourning. This was now 15 years after the original three losses, and when my mother needed cataract surgery, I was very willing and eager to nurse her through her recovery. This was 1978 when recovery from the long surgery took six weeks and involved some pain. Now I was amused at her drama, and here is a picture of that time.

She's a bit older than I am now, and I have just scheduled my own cataract surgery. However, today's technology allows for fewer traumas and a shorter recovery. But once again my perspective changes as I live through the ages she has lived and through my own similar events. My eldest daughter visited her in the years that followed and her photos document her grandmother's final years ravaged with old age and loneliness that I can still feel how my chest became gripped with exhaustion and heartache.

Now I always refer to her as "my poor mother" and realize what a life of hardship and loss she endured to bring me to this country that I might have a better life.

And I have thanks to her. I also can make, because of her, a dynamite chicken soup.

Postscript

I seem to understand my mother much better through these maturing experiences in my own life. Curiously enough, my imagination becomes quite activated when I wonder what she would think of this event in the family and that event in the world. At these times, it would not be uncommon for her to materialize when I am waiting for a red light to change and I am paused in traffic. Even though I know I am conjuring up dialogue, I find it amusing that I am getting along with her so much better than at any time in my life. Strangely enough she seems to be with an escort, a young, intelligent man with glasses. I recall that her first-born died, or so the midwives told her in Poland when she was barely 20. Perhaps she has found him in this imagined afterlife, and now her first tragedy is being healed, just as I am in these later years of my life. Beyond petulance and blame, somehow purged through writing and ageing, I now remember her brave spirit as someone who had the courage to leave family and friends with her two small children to come to this continent, live in a foreign place like Windsor, Ontario, and give me a beginning to life there. On the previous page is a picture of her fresh from a painful operation in the days when the doctors held one's head down with sandbags to perform a cataract operation that would take six weeks' recuperation. It makes me want to go make a good pot of chicken soup for my family.

¹<<http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=writing+and+grief&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>>.

²<<http://poetrytherapy.org>>.

³<<http://arttherapy.org>>.

⁴<<http://journaltherapy.com/index.html>>.

⁵Rosenzweig, Rosie. "Mother Art and Maternal Health." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 11 (1) (Spring/Summer 2009): 224-238.

⁶Rosenzweig, Rosie. "A Search For Community." *Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy: A Journal of the American Academy of Psychotherapists* (Winter 1971-72): 18-21.