

A Gun Took My Child

The death of a child to gun violence is a particularly devastating loss. The reactions of mothers to this loss, described here, indicate how their experience engenders extreme distress and produces symptoms of psychological trauma. The impact of child loss is intensified for mothers due to the guilt that many feel for having failed to protect their child. Ways of healing from this trauma and the usefulness of mother-centred approaches to recovery are described, and they demonstrate that matricentric feminism is especially valuable in helping mothers move forward in their lives. Although these healing practices do not cite matricentric feminism as their source, it is clear from the descriptions of healing presented by the mothers here that they use matrifocal narratives for healing purposes; they use them as a space to speak about not only the loss of their child but also the loss of identity as competent mothers as well as their despair over never seeing their child move into the future. Matricentric feminism, therefore, can contribute a great deal to understanding and supporting mothers as they struggle to heal.

Introduction

There is no loss more devastating than the death of a child. This article, therefore, will focus on mothers who have lost a child, specifically to gun violence. It will address the enormity of the grief mothers experience at the death of a child and the ways they come together to try to move toward healing. It begins by referencing Sara Ruddick's insight that the preservation of the lives of children is the primary mandate given to mothers and that failure to meet this mandate is a source of profound trauma for all family members, but most significantly for mothers who often hold themselves responsible for this perceived failure to protect. Using both the descriptions of mothers who have lost their children to guns and the work of Judith Herman, particularly her classic text *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), I will attempt to

capture the nature of the psychological pain mothers experience in the wake of the catastrophic loss of a child and some of the ways of healing, often directed by the mother of the gun victims themselves. In analyzing their work to heal, it becomes clear that these mothers have developed ways of living with their grief that mirror the essential qualities of matricentric feminism. In working to recover, each mother “positions their needs and concerns as a starting point” (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 3) and “foregrounds maternal power, and confers value to mothering” (O’Reilly, “Feminist Mothering” 802).

In preparing this piece, I was confronted with multiple pathways of entry into this study. I began by re-reading Sara Ruddick’s important treatise, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, as well as Herman’s book mentioned above, and some of my own writing on the experience of loss for mothers. I also revisited the work of Andrea O’Reilly on matricentric feminism to bring into focus how mothers themselves, more than any other group struggling to recover from child loss, and find ways to resonate with the enormity of the pain that the loss of a child engenders. As this article demonstrates, mothers stress the view that the healing they can offer one another comes from their shared understanding of mothering as a profound and transformative experience unlike any other role women perform. Though not using the term matricentric feminism, the mothers described here clearly attribute their healing connection to one another to the shared and unique experience of birthing and raising children. Sybrina Fulton, for example, the mother of-seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, shot to death while simply walking through a neighborhood in Sanford, Florida on 26 February 2012 tells us, “who else knows what a bereft mom needs” but another grieving mother (“About”). In a very general sense, O’Reilly tells us that matricentric feminism asks the question what do mothers need not only to survive but also to thrive, and when could this question be more relevant than with a mother who has faced the death of her child?

Impact of Child Loss

In reading Ruddick, I have always been struck by her insights about the perils that come at the moment a child is conceived. “Birth” Ruddick told us, “is a beginning whose end and shape can neither be predicted nor controlled. Since the safety of bodies, mortal and susceptible to damage, can never be secured and since humans grow vicariously, but always in need of help, to give birth is to commit oneself to protecting the unprotectable and nurturing the unpredictable” (209). To my mind then, mothering is a leap into a vast unknown and into the heart of confusion, joy, exhaustion, and potential loss. For a number of years after immersing myself in Ruddick’s work, I considered elements of child loss but primarily the ordinary losses in life—children

growing and changing in ways hard to understand, the loss of some of our own freedom with the many hours we devoted to our children, and the lack of clarity on how to mother well given the contradictory demands of the role. I always loved this humorous and brilliant comment by Ruddick:

Children are not so fragile as goldfish seemed to me, nor will they flourish if they are perpetually watched and guarded. On the other hand, they are not like roaches and weeds, hardy survivors regardless of what is done to them. A mother can never stop looking, but she must not look too much. Attentiveness to a creature who perseveres in its own being and at the same time is perpetually at risk is particularly demanding. (71)

In writing this piece, however, I became overwhelmed with the fact that it was focused not on ordinary loss but on extraordinary loss, the loss of life. And while it is probably true that all of us live with some degree of fear that our child's life will be lost, this fear is kept in the background of our consciousness, until it is not. And as I contemplated the deep pain associated with the death of a child, a vivid memory of one of my daughters playing the role of a bereaved mother in Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1933) jumped into my mind, and I began to recall the powerful lines of the play as if I were actually seeing it again or even living it myself. In this play, the mother who has lost her child says the following:

My son should have been here. But now my son is an armful of withered flowers. Now my son is a dark voice behind the mountains. (Act III, Scene 2)

The months pass and pain still pricks my eyes, to the very roots of my hair. (Act I, Scene 1)

There's a cry in my heart every moment. (Act II, Scene 2)

Your tears are tears from your eyes, nothing more, but mine will flow when I'm alone, from the soles of my feet, from the root, and they'll flow hot as blood. (Act III, Scene 2)

This mother's words awaken my fear, as her pain is all too common in today's very violent USA. One statistic reveals that nearly forty thousand people died in the USA from gun related incidents in 2017 (Marche), many by their own hand, and another reveals that fatalities from firearms have become one of the leading causes of death among young people, second only to car accidents (Gander). A very disturbing study, soon to be published in *The American Journal of Medicine* but already widely reported in the mainstream media shows that more children were killed by firearms in the USA in 2017 than the number of deaths reported for on-duty police officers and active duty military

(Gander). All of this is deeply troubling and hard to process. There are the high-profile mass shootings that shock us to our very core; there were over three hundred of those in the USA in 2018. One response to the terrible toll taken by mass shootings is a beautiful project named *Since Parkland*, which engaged aspiring teen-aged journalists to write short memorials for the twelve hundred children fatally shot in the year following the rampage at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. But there have also been police-inflicted killings, gang-related gun deaths, murders within domestic violence situations, random deaths from children finding and playing with loaded weapons, and suicides. The impact of all this death is devastating for all of us. But it is more so for the families of those whose lives were lost in such violent ways, especially for mothers whose grief is compounded by the guilt and shame some feel for having failed to protect their child; for having failed at Ruddick's primary mandate of preserving life.

In a deeply moving commentary, Darshell Scott, the mother of B.J. Scott—who as a bystander was killed on 11 April 2013 during an altercation that turned violent outside of Overbrook High School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—conveys this guilt, which compounds her grief. Her son was not even supposed to be at school that day. B.J. had been suspended for the day, but since Darshell's work schedule had changed and she did not want to leave him home alone, she called the school asking for permission to allow him to attend. In granting her request, B.J. died in the line of fire. Darshell says, "I beat myself up over that one" (qtd. in Edwards and Luscombe).

There can be no doubt that the psychological trauma experienced by those who have lost a beloved child is profound, and when we listen to mothers describe their pain, we see all of the dimensions of trauma described by trauma experts, most notably Judith Herman, who says the following: "Traumatic events . . . undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (51).

Herman also says that "certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*" (Herman 1). And we hear this sentiment expressed often in the words of those who have endured the devastation of losing a child. Vernetta Burger—whose nineteen-year-old son, Solomon Maurice Montgomery, died from a bullet wound on 10 April 2010 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—movingly says the following:

[His was] a life that had purpose, a life that was inspiring, a life that had so much going for him . . . A life now that the only way that it can be heard or that it can be seen . . . I have to speak of his life.... how could I heal from something so devastating? . . . This pain that is so unspeakable that it can't even begin to be articulated in the English language.... How do I begin to survive life without my child who I had given birth

to, a life that I had nurtured, a life I had spent nineteen years with ... the pain never ceases. (“Monday Moms: Vernetta Burger”)

Clearly, this deep expression of love in the face of extraordinary loss confirms O’Reilly’s contention and a core principle of matricentric feminism: becoming a mother “changes forever and always who we are and who we become (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 12).

Often, the first response to such unspeakable horror is denial. To quote Herman again, “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (1), and this is what many mothers report doing, even without thinking about it. They keep calling their lost child to dinner or knocking on the empty bedroom door to call the child, who is not there, to hurry as the school bus is coming, only to remember their calls will not be answered. Several mothers report that even when they were told their child had been killed, everything in them conspired to refuse believing this information. A *Time Magazine* article, which focuses on the reactions of parents to child death by guns, reports that one mother of a child killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut remembers saying, “No, not my kid. Must be some kind of mistake.” Other mothers report “out of body experiences,” a very profound form of denial, where they see themselves floating above the scene, disconnected from the actual reality, “like a kite snapped at the string” (qtd. in. Edwards and Luscombe). Trauma experts call this form of escape from horror dissociation.

But Herman goes on to tell us that “atrocities ... refuse to be buried” (1), so reports of nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, hypervigilance, and a reliving of the intense emotions felt at hearing of the loss are so common as to be seen as normative.

Trauma also produces additional and very complex psychological reactions. Herman tells us that “traumatic events ... shatter the construction of the self” (51); we also hear this distressing refrain in the words of many mothers who have lost their child. Sandy Phillips, whose twenty-four-year-old daughter Jessica Ghawi was murdered in the movie theatre mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado, on 20 July 2012, shares the following: “Your identity has been stripped from you. You know, whether it’s mother or daddy or father or sister or brother—I no longer have that title. I no longer have that relationship.” And Nicole Hockley, the mother of Dylan Hockley who died in the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School on 14 December 2012 at the age of six, echoes the same thoughts of losing not only her son but herself on that horrific day: “Every plan I had went out the window, and I just kind of lost my way in terms of where do you go from here, how do you pick yourself up and move forward, and find a new path?” (qtd. in Lemoult). Pamela Wright Young whose seventeen-year-old son Tyrone Lawson was shot outside of Chicago State University after a basketball game on 16 January 2013 (Rodriguez)

simply says: “Something in you stops when your child dies” (qtd. in Edwards and Luscombe).

But not only do people who experience traumatic events lose connection with themselves, they lose connection with others. According to Herman, “traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community ... Traumatic events have primary effects ... on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (51). And this sense of a loss of connection is recounted eloquently in the stories of many of the mothers who have lost their children to gun violence. These mothers feel as though they are different from everyone else, no longer a part of normal motherhood even when they have other children. Annika Dworet, whose seventeen-year-old-son Nicholas was shot down at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on 14 February 2018, says that even family and friends “can never fully, fully understand” (qtd. in Edwards and Luscombe), and Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, builds on this by saying “even though people have been shot and killed before, you do feel like you are the only one going through that pain” (qtd. in Welch). Queen Brown, the mother of Eviton Brown, age twenty-four and killed in Miami, Florida, in 2006, elaborates on this loss of community: “My son was killed in October. I tried to do dinner with family and friends in November but I cried through the entire thing ... And then I learned I was not invited to Christmas dinner because I made people uncomfortable.... We are grieving moms. We represent sadness—no one wants to be around us” (qtd. in Welch). Without access to a community of mothers who embrace a mother-centred mentality, which is the centrepiece of matricentric feminism, Queen Brown was unsupported in her profound loss, a factor which compounded her feelings of devastation.

Mothers also speak, as Herman does, of the deaths of their children resulting in a loss of meaning—an existential crisis. Nicole Hockley, Dylan’s mom, tells us that “People don’t think about all the ways people’s lives are forever transformed.... There’s this huge ripple effect of violence and anger and dysfunction.” And Sandy Phillips, Jessica’s mom, says that “once the vigils are over and the media is gone, that’s when things get really bad—the world moves on and you don’t. It’s a pain you can’t outrun” (qtd. in Edwards and Luscombe).

Healing

In the face of this devastation, is it possible for meaning and purpose to be restored? Does any mother recover? Is there a pathway back from this kind of senseless and violent death? The answer to these questions is both yes and no. The pain is always there—the anniversaries of the day, birthdays, and holidays

are challenging, of course—but we do see many mothers emerging from the darkness. Trauma experts suggest that healing is possible, but the work to achieve it is hard. To quote Richard Mollica, another trauma expert, what must happen is that “the new story that emerges is no longer a story about powerlessness—about losing the world” but rather “becomes a story ... of survival and recovery” (312).

Herman suggests that three complex processes are paramount to insure success in this journey—namely, restoring a sense of safety, engaging in deep mourning in the presence of supportive others, and reconnecting with the outside world to create a new future. But to feel safe, the first step in the healing process is truly difficult in the USA—where mass shootings continue to occur on nearly a daily basis, where little progress is made to enact common-sense gun laws, and where police shoot first before assessing the actual danger they face. In a recent article in *The Guardian* the point was made that “a mass shooting is no longer a once-in-a-lifetime event in the U.S.,” as at least thirty people attacked in a mass shooting at the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, on 8 November 2018 were also survivors of the mass shooting on 1 October 2017 at a concert in Las Vegas, Nevada, where fifty-eight people were killed and 851 injured. (Marche). I would suggest that perhaps the terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019 contributed to the three suicides—two young survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and one the parent of a child murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School—which all occurred only days after the New Zealand massacre. If respite from massive gun violence cannot be found in New Zealand, is anyplace safe? Without a sense that safety is indeed possible, healing and the will to continue on in life can be lost by many survivors or the family members of those lost.

Amazingly, however, many grieving mothers who know that safety will never be assured not even for their other children somehow do find ways to move forwards despite the enormity of their grief. Research suggests that the sharing of their devastation with others who have faced the same pain is one of the ways to find the strength to become present to the depths of their grief and to begin the healing journey. To enter this process of openly sharing grief is an incredible act of courage because as one mother says, “who wants to go someplace when you are going to be on the operating table. You have to realize that it hurts, and then you have to address the hurt” (qtd. in Welch). Elsewhere, I have written extensively about why this process leads to healing through using the relational-cultural theory, which has been articulated in the work of Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues. Briefly, this theory explains that by entering spaces where our vulnerability is supported, it becomes possible to begin the process of reawakening hope and transforming the meaning of our loss. Coming together to mourn and to bear witness to loss and atrocity

accomplishes another important goal: it allows grieving mothers to keep connected with the child they have lost (Edmonds).

Dr. Dorothy Johnson-Speight—the mother of Khaaliq Johnson, shot in a dispute over a parking space on 6 December 2001 at the age of twenty-four in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—learned to express her grief first in psychotherapy and then by creating a space for other mothers to come together to grieve and to tell the stories of their children’s lives, not just their deaths. Through Mothers in Charge, an organization she founded, she created two innovative programs:

“We Remember Them,” a moving tribute to each lost child set to music, accompanied by the reading of a poem, and available on the website www.mothersincharge.org; and “Monday Moms,” accessible on the same website, where each Monday a different mother shares her journey of healing. Johnson-Speight’s own story is presented in an interview on the website:

Where I am today, I have not always been here. You know, it was a process, a long journey and initially I think I was trying to self-destruct—self medicating, finding anything I could to avoid the pain and loss of my son, but at some point I knew I had to do it another way. One, for him, and two, for myself. Khaaliq was a great guy and my only son and at some point I knew I had to live for him. I couldn’t let the person who took Khaaliq’s life take my life too... [But] I couldn’t do it by myself. (“In Focus”)

Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, has created a similar process she calls “the Circle of Mothers,” where grieving mothers can once again come together to share their pain, hold one another in their hearts, and honour the lives of their children. Lucy McBath—the mother of seventeen-year-old Jordan Davis, who was shot to death at a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida, on 23 November 2012 because his music was too loud—has attended these circles and describes how moving it is to hold up a photo of her child and then to be invited to

say something to our child, as if he was there in the room ... to be able to verbalize what I had been holding since Jordan’s death—how I miss him, how I love him - in a room full of women who would not judge me was a gift... So many people say, “I cannot imagine how you feel.” To be around women who know exactly how you feel is healing. (qtd. in Welch)

Sandy Phillips, mother of an Aurora shooting victim, captures the blending of mourning in the midst of attempts at healing when she describes her feelings when she sees mothers holding up photos of their now deceased children. She says seeing those pictures “takes her to her knees” (qtd. in

Marche). But from mother after mother, we hear the same mantra of healing captured by the idea that they must go on in order to pay tribute to their children and the lives they might have lived. The motto for Sybrina Fulton's organization, The Trayvon Martin Foundation, for example, is "We Are Trayvon," whereas Dorothy Johnson-Speight found the courage to complete her doctoral degree in honor of her son Khaaliq who wanted to set up a counselling practice with his mom before his death. She tells us that "speaking of the purpose of my son's life gives me a reason to go on" ("In Focus"). Vernetta Burger honors her son by saying her participation in healing processes have given her "ways of trying to speak about him in ways that keep his memory alive. Not just keeping his memory alive but ways of giving other mothers, other parents, the same hope that I have received ... that's what gives me strength, that's what gives me healing, that's what gives me endurance and perseverance on days when I don't think I want to ... get up out of the bed" ("Monday Moms: Vernetta Burger").

It is as though these mothers, somehow, knew that healing could only occur in the presence of other mothers suffering the same pain. Metaphorically, they knew, as O'Reilly articulates, that they needed "a room of their own" populated by other mothers holding a mother-centred viewpoint. They needed a place where the narratives about their losses could reveal how the pain they feel on the violent death of their children is inextricably related to their identity as mothers. They needed to make clear that the loss of their beloved child is intertwined with their own losses of hope for the future and their sadness in knowing that they would never see the full fruits of their years of extraordinary effort raising strong, beautiful, and good children. They made clear that their recovery involved reclaiming their children, celebrating the years of life they did have with them, and vowing to honour their children by not allowing the murderer to take their lives too. Being a mother intensified their loss but also energized their vow to work to recover. What these mothers affirm is that a space for matrifocal narratives, so central to matricentric feminism, is what empowered their healing (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*).

What is remarkable is that not only have many mothers of gun victims come together to heal through communal rituals of mourning and transformation, but many have also somehow found the courage to go beyond their personal struggles to reconnect with the broader society and to work for change in very public ways. Herman terms this "finding a survivor mission" and suggests that in doing so, survivors "discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action." She goes on to say that "while there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others" (207). Sybrina Fulton echoes this same idea when she describes that a central theme of her work is "to gain fellowship toward personal restoration and ultimately community building."

She advises others to “find what best way to serve your community” and “don’t let your tragedy define you” (qtd. in Welch). Sandy and Lonnie Phillips, through their travels to embrace the families of other gun victims, hope to give survivors something of a toolkit on how to make it through the oncoming days, weeks, and months in the public eye. Their organization, Survivors Empowered has as its mission statement the words “We are your soft spot to land after your life has been forever changed by gun violence.” Dorothy Johnson-Speight also works on projects to reduce violence both in the schools and in the community at large while reaching out to those in prison who have committed violence. Samaria Rice, mother of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice—who was killed on 22 November 2014 by police while holding a toy gun on a playground in Cleveland, Ohio—is working to open The Tamir Rice Afrocentric Cultural Center to honour her son’s life and to provide a safe space for neighborhood children to create art (Wise). Reporting for *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Rachel Dissell characterizes Samaria’s dream for the centre in this way: Samaria “envisions a warm and energetic space filled with children. They are painting and drawing with pastels. They are beating African drums and bowing violins. They are performing plays they created in an intimate theatre.” A very high profile and successful organization, Sandy Hook Promise, was founded by Dylan Hockley’s mother Nicole and other Sandy Hook parents only months after the horrific school shooting. Like many mothers described here, Nicole wants to honour her son’s life rather than focusing on his death and currently serves as the managing director of this organization. Sandy Hook Promise is dedicated to preventing gun violence through a variety of innovative “Know the Signs” programs that focus on identifying isolated or struggling children, creating inclusive and antibullying classrooms, and educating children and parents on common sense gun safety and mental health issues.

Other mothers have headed into the political arena. Lucy McBath, mother of Jordan Davis, recently won a seat in the House of Representatives from Georgia (Cobb), and Lesley McSpadden, the mother of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown who was killed on 9 August 2014 by police in Ferguson, Missouri, recently lost her bid for a seat on the City Council of Ferguson (Eligon). Several mothers have also won prestigious honours. Sybrina Fulton was awarded an honorary doctoral degree from Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, in 2018 (Ekpo), and Nicole Hockley was named one of *People Magazine’s* “25 Women Changing the World in 2016” (McNeil); Hockley, also recently received the FBI Director’s Community Leadership Award for her years of dedication to the work of Sandy Hook Promise (NBC Connecticut). In learning of these movements towards empowerment and social reform, my sense is that these mothers embody the dimensions of character O’Reilly describes as unique to those embracing a matricentric feminism—namely, the

qualities of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*). They are clearly practicing mothering from a matricentric feminist position, as their way of being is now “explicitly and profoundly political and social” (O'Reilly, “Feminist Mothering” 802).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I dedicate this article to mothers everywhere who have lost their children to violence. I honour their pain and hope to provide some solace while being inspired by their strength, honest insights, and activism. Once again, it is mothers who teach us the meaning of resilience, courage, the impact of connection, and the depth and power of motherlove. It is my hope that all of us committed to matricentric feminism will do all we can to provide trauma-informed and mother-centred support for mothers who suffer and that each of us will find ways to mitigate the horrors of gun violence.

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