

Mother, Woman, Healer

Every Mother has a story. The story of who she is and how she grew into that woman. This is mine. I was 19 years old and living in the USA when I got pregnant with my first child. Certainly a large surprise for all of us. Doctors had spent years telling me that I may not ever be able to get pregnant, and even if I did I probably would not be able to carry to term. Since I was 13, I have suffered with endometriosis (a painful disease where the endometrial lining grows outside of the uterus and causes cyst-like formations on organs within the abdominal cavity. With each menstrual cycle these growths cause debilitating pain). Just a few months before I got pregnant I had surgery for the endometriosis. It was very successful, but the gynecologist neglected to tell me that for a few months after the surgery I would be very fertile. Nine years later I am still glad that this important information never reached my ears.

Unfortunately, I was not in a very healthy relationship when I got pregnant. As a teenager, who had already engaged in more than my share of abusive relationships, I did not yet have the experience with relationships and life to recognize that it was time to end the relationship. Instead I thought I should suck it up and try to make it work. A few months later I came to the realization it just was not going to work. When I tried to break up with my boyfriend he became very upset; he blocked the door and prevented me from leaving. I had never seen that side of him, and it scared me. After some discussion I could see he was not calming down and I felt my only salvation lay in retracting what I had said and assuring him that we were still a couple. In the morning I left. When I reached my parents' home I called and told him it was over. He harassed, stalked, and threatened me for months. I became so stressed and sick that the pregnancy was at risk. I was losing weight, bleeding, and unable to eat. After a threatening call where he told me he would take the baby as soon

as it was born and that I would never see the baby again, I had no choice but to leave the security of my parents' home and fly back to Canada.

I left a place where my finances were taken care of, where my parents were paying for my post-secondary education, where I had the support and care of both my parents and my younger brother. I left to give my baby the opportunity to be born. Once in Toronto, I had to go on welfare, I received less than \$700 per month—my rent was \$660. Do the math. There is not a lot left over to pay for the phone, transportation, and, most importantly, for food. I had been away from Ontario long enough for many of my close friendships to have dissolved, and I was essentially on my own, pregnant and poverty-stricken. This is not the direction I thought my life would take when I imagined what I would be when I grew up.

With the support of a couple of close family friends and my aunt, I gave birth a month early to a five-and-a-half pound baby boy. Let me tell you, for such a small thing he sure did hurt a lot. But he was beautiful, and many days and nights I just lay beside him staring at his absolute perfection. Though he did not have any physical complications, as he grew up there were a lot of developmental problems—socialization, behaviour, aggression, anxiety. I had to work hard to get him diagnosed, but eventually he landed several popular titles: ADHD, ODD, PDD, PTSD (Attention Deficit Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

The first year of his life I couldn't afford to eat much so I had only one meal a day, usually Kraft dinner or a bowl of cereal. He was breastfed so I figured he was probably fine. For the most part he was. As he began to eat more solid foods, I would save the money I had to buy him fresh fruits and vegetables and then make the baby food myself. I learned to cut a lot of corners, but I was young and had a lot of pride, I couldn't tell my parents the dire straits I was in, and I wouldn't go to a food bank either. But just before his first birthday I went back to university for a degree in psychology, got a student loan, and moved out of the city. The student loan was a life saver. It was a lot more per month than the money I was getting from welfare and by that point my parents had figured out that I had been starving and had begun to send up a little money each month to help with food.

I never realized how depressed I was. I saw a psychiatrist for the post-traumatic-stress (PTSD) I suffered from my experiences in the U.S. I just looked at it as PTSD, I never saw it as depression, or anxiety, or even Post Partum Mood Disorder (PPMD). I just knew I wasn't the same girl I used to be. I was a frail and frightened version of the woman I almost was. In my last year at York University, I had a great professor who taught me more than just how to interpret a text book. I took several classes with him on Art and Psychotherapy, Ritual and Healing, Expressive Art Therapies.... It changed me. It healed me. It empowered me. It was the first step to my recovery, which would take another seven more years. It was because of him I made the first



Tara Mae Hillyer, "Pregnancy"

decision in my almost adult life to do what I wanted to do, not what I thought I should do. It was scary and I had no rational justification for it, other than I really felt from the depths of my soul this is what I was supposed to do. I went on to post-graduate work in Outdoor Recreation, a huge diversion from the course previously plotted for my life.

During this last year of school my landlord found it engaging to use me as a distraction from his family and his life. No matter how many times I tried to divert his attentions, he kept coming back, more and more forcefully, until one evening when his wife was out of town. That night he came down to the

basement apartment and told me how he fantasized about me and then satisfied himself to those thoughts. He tried to touch me and kiss me. I dodged his attempts, but he became more and more insistent. I managed to dissuade him and corral him back to the stairs leading to his portion of the house. The next night he tried again. I avoided his efforts once more and decided it was time to move. I wrote my letter of departure and made arrangements to leave within the month.

During this time an old friend of mine stopped in for a visit. He came over completely strung out on methamphetamines. He was more aggressive than my landlord, and had no idea how forceful he was being. He threw me around like a sack of potatoes. Silently I prayed that my son, who was sleeping in the other room, would not wake up and end up in his path. As he came down from his high, he needed to go home and get his stash. He didn't come back. I don't think he remembered he even came over in the first place. The last time I heard about him he was in jail.

We moved into a house. I started the post-graduate program. My son started a new daycare. It was a one year course in kayaking, canoeing, backpacking—challenge courses and ecology. In addition, each student chose an area of focus. Mine was wilderness therapy. It would seem I still could not divert from myself from the call of people-care after all. I integrated art, wilderness, recreation, and therapy into a beautiful way for people to connect with nature, humanity, and themselves. A few more pieces of my fractured soul slowly healed. But it was a difficult year for my son. He had been kicked out of numerous child care centres, and babysitting was getting more and more difficult to come by. However, we both managed the year and I graduated with several certificates.

I got a job as a supervisor for children's recreation centre, working with children with special needs. But, it was in the city and we weren't. The toll of driving extended hours, and the requirement for before and after-care for my son proved to be too much. I was there for a year. I enjoyed the stimulation, the programming, the kids, but in the end, my own child was more important, and I had to change jobs.

After a few short contracts I settled at a centre for pregnant teens. The centre provided high school education, parenting education, social workers, and a variety of support programs. It also only operated during the hours of a regular school day. This meant that I didn't require before or after-care for my son and could drop him off and pick him up after school. It was what I needed to be the Mother my son needed. However, it also meant I was only working part-time. My new job didn't really utilize any of the education I had earned, but it was a job that was full of wonderful and supportive women. It was a place where I visited my past in every young woman that walked through the door.

It was hard for me at first to connect to any of the young women at the centre. Not because they were oppositional, or difficult, or because they car-

ried an attitude that could barely fit through the door, but because I could see myself in each of these young women. These were young women who had been abused in ways that would make even the strongest stomach churn. These young women were forced to grow up before they were finished being children. These young women were so dedicated to the life inside them that they sacrificed the person they thought they were going to be to allow the woman inside them to come forth. As I connected one by one to the young women in the centre, I connected to the young woman in me—to that girl who never finished being a girl. To that girl who carried fear and terror inside her which ate at her confidence, esteem, and security everyday.

As the days passed I grew inspired by the feats of courage these young women demonstrated. They grew and matured and they were the most incredible mothers I had ever seen. Despite their age and lack of education, they were more caring and devoted to their children than many of the 30-something mothers I have known. Eventually, I allowed myself to acknowledge the courage I had inside myself. I acknowledged the sacrifices I had made and continue to make. I acknowledged that I was indeed the perfect mother for my son. The young women at the centre taught me that. And for that I am eternally grateful.

I kept my ties to the outdoor world and joined the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario, where I sat on the Board of Directors for a term. It was there that I met a man who was a single father of two boys, one of whom had some special needs. There was a connection between us because we were both the single parent of a child with special needs. I thought he understood. I thought he “got it.” I thought he recognized how hard I worked every day as a mother, as a woman, as an individual. I thought he respected me as a peer and as woman. I entered a relationship with him. I got pregnant. I was wrong. He was none of the things I thought he was, least of all understanding of who I was and what I had to offer.

He wanted me to have an abortion, or to give the baby up for adoption. I couldn't do it. I changed all my plans, again. Prior to finding out I was pregnant I had sold my house, gave notice at my job, and had been accepted into a Master's Program in the States. Because my first son did not have the presence of a father in his life I was determined to do everything in my power to provide the opportunity for my next child to have a father. I didn't realize at the time it was beyond my power to do so. I think sometimes we want something so desperately for our children that reality means very little.

By the third month of my pregnancy, my son and I were homeless and living on friends' sofas. The relationship with my unborn child's father was dissolving, horribly, and there was still pressure from him to terminate the pregnancy. We stopped seeing each other but I told him I would contact him when the baby was born. We did communicate a few times before then, but not much was said. I wanted this pregnancy and birth to be different, but a lot was the same. This time I ended up on bed rest, and thankfully I had enough work hours under my belt to qualify for employment insurance. My second

son was born on his grandfather's 50th birthday, in my bed at home. It did not go according to plan, but by the time he graced us with his presence my best friends were present, my Aunt was being traumatized by the pain I was experiencing, two midwives were delivering the baby, and my eldest son (at the time six years old) had slept through the whole thing.

He was an Angel. He was perfect. He did not cry when he was born; he just stared at me. My heart heard his inner voice announce me his Mother. Not long afterward my eldest son woke up and welcomed his brother into the family. He was the first person other than myself to hold the baby. He has been the proudest big brother ever since. It took longer to recover physically from this delivery. Though I didn't have any stitches, my body was sore for a couple of months. Life was bliss for four months, until the Post Partum Mood Disorder (PPMD) struck with an intensity that paralyzed me.

For months fear and terror gripped me, and in the moments I was not afraid, I was very depressed. It was only because I channel-hopped past Oprah one day, pausing long enough to see Brooke Shields tell some of her story about having Post Partum Depression, that I recognized I needed support. I was extremely reluctant to take medication, but as the days passed and panic consumed me, I edged closer and closer to making that decision. I joined a group for women with PPMD and started taking specific vitamins and herbs to help combat the symptoms and encourage my brain to increase the hormones I needed to balance out my emotional and psychological state (which took almost four months at high doses to have any kind of effect at all). I also visited a Sangoma (a South African Shaman/Medicine Woman/Healer), which proved to be a pivotal point in my recovery process. I do not believe it was any single strategy that made the treatment effective, but all the little pieces fitting together. It took almost a full year of deep spiritual work, herbal supplements, counseling, and support groups before I started feeling real relief from the PPMD.

The baby's father was in and out of the picture. He would come by when it was convenient for him and stay usually ten to twenty minutes. He would hover over me when I was nursing, well into my personal space. The year that followed was difficult between the baby's father and myself. If I was hospitable and friendly he would interpret that as a sexual advance and treat the baby and myself much better. But as soon as he figured out that nothing had changed and we were not going to be involved again he'd miss a couple of visits, be curt with me, and take less interest in the baby. By the time the baby was 18 months old he called me and told me he never wanted the baby and still didn't. It was the most deplorable phone conversation I have ever had. I sat in shock as he spewed off the most horrible things a person could say about their own child and the mother of their child. Over the previous two years he had said reprehensible things, he had sent me emails calling me a bad mother, he criticized everything I did, but this phone call beat all of those conversations and emails put together. I was devastated for my son. A week later he changed his



Tara Mae Hillyer, "Flower Baby"



Tara Mae Hillyer, "Serious"

mind, again. It seems it all revolved around the child support payments that the Social Service Office was forcing upon him. The baby was too expensive and inconvenient.

In the meantime my eldest son continued to have difficulties in school. Each year, since JK, he had been transferred to a different school by the school board. As he came up on the waitlists for support programs he would be too old, or the parameters of the program had changed, and he was no longer eligible for service. The only constant we had was an annual visit to Youthdale in Toronto. We had been through Markham Stouffville Pediatric Assessment Clinic, Blue Hills Child and Family Centre, Early Intervention, York Centre for Children Youth and Families, Kinark, Sick Kids Hospital (Toronto), and Southlake Crisis for Youth. Not one of these agencies was able to provide on-going care.

In January 2006 the situation at school became so desperate I felt there was no other option than to remove him from school and home school him. Although I was terrified this would only add more stress to our already fragile relationship, we took the plunge and never looked back. It was the best decision I had ever made regarding his care and treatment. I saw a dramatic change in his personality. He calmed down immediately. We had an active and engaging schedule of experiential learning and book learning. He was doing fantastic. In the first few months we home schooled, he jumped a grade level. He was motivated and curious and dedicated. I was so proud of him, and us for the commitment we made to each other and to ourselves. The baby benefited just as much as my eldest son did. The baby joined us on all our outings, was present as I taught small groups of home schoolers, and had the opportunity to interact with children of varying ages. We all enjoyed the experience.

Months past where the father of the baby and I pretended everything was fine. The month before Christmas he told me he wanted joint custody so he could use the baby as a tax write off. This was a smack in the face. When I returned from holidays visiting my parents, he sent me an email again asking for joint custody so he could get a tax deductible/refund. He listed a few other demands, which at this point seemed to reflect a marking of territory. I tried to explain to him joint custody had nothing to do with claiming a dependant. He would have none of it. Things were escalating. Though I had sole custody de facto, I filed for legal sole-custody. When I served him the papers he was not very impressed. He felt compelled to stand in the driveway at eight o'clock at night on the coldest night of the year to "discuss" it. He said I was an obstacle to his relationship with his son. I stomped my foot like a child having a tantrum and asked him if he was serious. I bent over backwards to accommodate him. I always let him choose when he wanted to come for visits. Only after a year of random visits did I even request a schedule. Even then I still ridiculously accommodated him when he changed the time, called to cancel, changed the day, or didn't show up. He rarely showed up on the agreed dates and times.



Tara Mae Hillyer, "Reclaiming Freedom"

When he couldn't argue that point anymore he switched to talking about what would happen if I died or became incapacitated. Part way through his argument his words changed from "if" to "when you're dead." That was enough to make me a little nervous. My response was simple. I told him I wanted my children to remain together and that I didn't expect him to care for my eldest child. Then he went on to say he didn't want to fight for the baby after I died. I told him what the lawyers had told me, which is that even if I named him the guardian in my will anyone could contest it. There is a six-month period



Tara Mae Hillyer, "Emerging Light"

to file for permanent custody. He began arguing about having to go to court and I should make sure that everything was in place in case I should die so disputes wouldn't happen. I said, "look if I am dead there is nothing I can do." At that point, my friend came out of his house to rescue me.

What he did not know was that during my vacation I was diligently working to reclaim my freedom and overcome my fear of men. I was actively working to heal from years of abusive relationships. I spent many months meditating on how to overcome my paralyzing fears. In the end, the message I received was to photograph men and the desert and find a way to see them both as sacred and beautiful; the philosophy behind it being that if I was connected to men and the desert in a sacred and beautiful way, then there would no longer be a cause to fear them. I journaled through the process. I photographed flora, and landscape and men. Up to that point I was very skilled at photographing women and children beautifully, but I had yet to find away to capture men beautifully in photographs. Suddenly, there in the photos before me were beautiful images of men and the desert in a way I had never conceived of before. And in the Sonoran Desert, a place that I feared and dreaded for so long, I found the serenity that I had been longing for.

I couldn't keep these images and the story of my recovery to myself. I put the images and the journal entries together and created an art exhibit for other women to come and see; for other women to know that no matter how much time has passed living in abusive relationships, or how many men had abused them, or how deeply their fear was rooted, there was a way out. Maybe it wasn't the same path I chose, but there is a path for each of us.

This whole endeavour generated a momentum in me to take back my power. I filed claims for custody in the courts. I stood up for myself, not always

without resistance, but I always found help when I needed it. I took an entrepreneurial class for women in business. I created a business plan. I registered my business in my name and began taking clients as a Medicine Woman—a healing form I have practiced since I was a teenager. I launched the photo exhibit (on my birthday) the week I graduated from the business program. I developed my website (www.taramaehillyer.com) and several workshops to encourage others on their own path. I continue creating the opportunity for me to be the best mother and woman I can be. I feel it, my children feel it, and those who know me see it.

Money is still tight, my eldest son still struggles with school, my baby's father still limits his visitation, my car is on it's last wheels, and my apartment is certainly too small for the three of us. Despite these things, and all the trials of being a woman and being a single mother, I would not have written my life any different. It is all these experiences that have peeled away at the masks of people I had to be, to finally uncover the woman I truly am. I invite the many women who had children before they had grown into a woman themselves, to look within and see the shining courage and compassion that carries them through each day—to honour themselves as women, as mothers, and as children of the Earth. Our children are our greatest gifts, our greatest challenges, and our sure path to what we are capable of. Blessings.

Young Moms Speak Out



Sarah Pilon and daughter, Skyra



Sarah Pilon