

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Essays

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection

March 2023

Mothers Lost and Found: The Center Ring Of Who We Are

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays

Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Mothers Lost and Found: The Center Ring Of Who We Are" (2023). *Essays*. 21. https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays/21

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Essays by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lfthompson@pittstate.edu.

Introduction to Section II: Mother Loss

Mothers Lost and Found: The Center Ring Of Who We Are

When I walked into the room at the retirement center to facilitate the intergenerational women's writing workshop that day, I was astonished to find several teenagers -- often labeled "the bad girls" for their propensity for drugs, drinking, sexual activity and little tolerance for school -- in the laps of women old enough to be their great-grandmothers. At that moment, I realized how much mother hunger and mother loss pervade our culture, snaking through the psyches of these girls who had lost their mothers to bad boyfriends, bad choices and bad circumstances, right through the beating hearts of the elders, aching both for their lost mothers and mothering years. During the months that followed, I witnessed acutely how the distance between women and their mothers shapes every nuance of what we believe, allow ourselves and we pass onto our daughters. At the same time, I saw in this workshop something that's echoed throughout the following essays: how sharing our stories can bring us wholeness, connection and courage.

We live in a world scarred by yearning. Growing up in a culture that both valorizes and demeans mothering, we find ironic heartbreaks in most of our lives when it comes to how we claim ourselves as daughters or mothers. In the last 40 years, the feminist movement has so altered what a woman could do, be and know that many of us have grown up seeking and cleaving to our own callings despite the women one generation behind us facing severely limited choices. I remember playing the board game "What Shall I Be?" (released in 1966) that listed only six careers for women: model, nurse, actress, teacher, ballet dancer or airline hostess, yet it was obvious that the ultimate career choice was simply "mother." Yet by the time I was of age, those six choices has exploded into dozens of possibilities. With such divides fueled by culture shift, the streams or rivers of enmeshment, misunderstanding, pain and yearning that characterize

even the best mother-daughter relationships could widen into great lakes between generations. These essays demonstrate how such distances can be crossed or narrowed, bridged or diminished between she-who-raised-us and who we are now.

In making our way back to our mothers, we discover how much mother loss isn't just about the mother who died, but about the dying, and moreover, the living that separated us. In such reflection, we can see anew ways in which we stereotyped our own mothers and kept them at bay, often for what felt like our survival. In "Rosemary for Remembrance -- Violet for Revenge," Elizabeth VanPatten tells us, "It is wise to let sleeping closets lie," a necessary step in her own evolution before she discovered the wisdom of not letting the past lie in wait for us or lie to us. Facing her demonization of her mother, she finds forgiveness for the woman her mother tried to be and greater freedom in her own life.

Understanding our mothers also means looking at the power structures of culture, and within culture, communities and families, which often stripped or limited our mothers from making their choices, using their will and following their desires. Claric Stasz in "Edgewood" looks at how her father's decisions dampened down her mother's vitality and creativity, which she would only recover in widowhood through an eccentric life of travel. Such generational gaps, made of the black hole of self-sacrifice, also speak through Marilyn J. Curry's essay "The Deal We Made," in which Curry finds her way to her mother through an unlikely vehicle: a television game show. Learning how to see their mothers without blame and with forgiveness, Ana Manwaring in "Not My Mother's Child" and Katrina Norfleet in "My Hero" look beyond childhood hopes and fears at how their mothers navigated a patriarchal world. Such navigation skills are a gift that keeps on giving for both Norfleet and Manwaring.

There are also the stories of losing mothers while not old enough to fly from the nest, and then learning to be a woman without and guide and with some luck, love,

daring, grief and improvisation. Deborah Jones-Norberto in "Three Mothers" illuminates the complexity and love of having three mothers: "One, chosen in grief, another lost to death and one who created my body." Remembering the biological mother who surrendered her, the adoptive mother who died too young, and the stepmother who didn't want her, Jones-Norberto looks at the limits and limitlessness of love, and what, after the loss of all three, remains as her guiding star.

As for the bittersweet and excruciating moments of ultimately losing our mothers, Elle Tyler examines impending mother loss when her mother is given only a few weeks left to live. Tyler asks, "What was I yearning for in these last days? I know I longed for something cathartic and meaningful, something to bring us closer." In "Motherless Child," Nancy LaTurner faces a sudden loss from a great geographic distance, opening her heart toward what is only reconcilable over time. Barbara Toboni in "A Moon Song" tells what it was like to the daughter of singer in a series of rental homes, where she grew all too well-practiced at saying goodbye. Laura McHale Holland's "Little Traveler" looks into the painful loss of a mother by suicide, and how to carry old pain and fresh sorrow. In all these stories of dying mothers, the authors stretch open their tattered hearts to find meaning and courage, compassion for their mothers and passion for their own lives.

Such work of the heart often heals not only a daughter but the generations. Tiah Marie Beaument's essay, "The Birds of Promise: A Letter to My Godmother," celebrates the transformation of a family tree cloaked with "evil intention" to a life bathed in light, in part because of the gifts of a godmother, intent on bringing a grieving child out to the wonders of the world despite her own demons.

In each essay in this section, there is the lingering song of legacy: what our mothers, grandmothers and generations of women before them leave to us, and what we will do with the materials of our gifts, losses, challenges, questions and stories. "Past Generations" by Nekane Polo tells the story of her mother, an idealistic young woman,

and her grandmother, unfolding what legacies speak through Polo's life today.

In each story of mother loss, we are reading the stories already written into our bodies and psyches, our pasts and futures, about what propels us into crafting, revising and ultimately living our own life story. We carry out mothers, lost and found, in us as a tree carries its center ring at its core. Only through telling and witnessing our own and each other's stories may we find what freedom from mother hunger and tenderness for mother loss and, ultimately, the love that remains.