

## THE MOTHER LOAD

*The Lord called me before I was born;  
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.  
Isaiah 40:1*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written  
all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them yet existed.  
I come to the end, I am still with you.  
Psalm 139:13-16*

*You have been borne by me from your birth,  
carried from the womb,  
even to your old age I am he,  
even when you turn gray, I will carry you.  
I have made you and I will bear.  
Isaiah 46:3,4*

Like two mountain streams rushing down a hillside, twin currents of life bore me into the world with tender force. Each current had its own unique power: the one, a river of life arising within my mother's womb where I gestated during the months of pregnancy and continued as I was cradled in her arms and listened to her songs; the other, a more mysterious force coming from my father, locking my soul to his while I was still young. It is the Mother whose legacy I explore here, beginning with—

### **The Mother I Never Knew**

I have spent a lifetime unraveling the powerful influence my mother exerted upon me. Beginning in her body, knit in her womb, I absorbed something of the complex strength and tenderness in her character. I would need both in order to survive and become myself. Recently I came upon a photograph in an old album that startled me into a new consciousness of this woman who became my mother.

The delicate shading, the lighting, and the gesture of Mother's body, the tilt of her head, and the way she looks at the contented face of her newborn baby—all of these things move me. I wonder how my father, "legally blind" and using an old-style box camera, obtained such results. The picture is full of love, warm and deep. Love from my father who held the camera, and love from my twenty-six year-old mother who looks at her firstborn son, and through the mirror reflection is viewed by my father holding the lens.

What is her life at that point? Coming from the simple confines of her Maine farm, to marry my father whose future would seem uncertain, with his poor eyesight, and then to travel across the world to a foreign country to birth a child within the first year of arrival—how did she experience this moment, caught in freeze frame by the camera? She stands erect and tall, her face bent tenderly over the sleeping child, her long garments cloaking her body gracefully.

The mirror allows me to see my mother's face from both sides. Does she yet know that her firstborn son, Howard, has spina bifida and will survive only a few months? That this brother whom I never knew, will be laid to rest in a cemetery in North China near the sea? This womanly figure is not the Devouring Mother of ancient myth. She is young and hopeful, and the image of her is art.

I was a much longed-for and prayed-for child, arriving four years after my second brother Philip was born. My parents took care to tell me how, in the days before my birth, they would climb a pine-laden hill in the town of Epsom, New Hampshire, on fall afternoons, stretch out on the soft pine needles to rest, my brother playing nearby, my father writing sonnets. Mother remembered me at birth as "so pink and white, different from many newborn babies." Then she added: "You were born more contented than many." After a short time had passed and my temperament emerged, she wrote again in my baby book, "Eunice is strong-willed." By adolescence, that strong will of mine was seen as a direct challenge to her authority, whereas I felt completely dominated by this powerful woman, especially by her ability to make me feel shame and guilt.

I look at this picture now, a decade after her death at the age of ninety-five, and I see an independent young woman, softened by the suffering of labor. She is a mother in this picture, but not yet of me. I can detach, and receive her motherhood as an objective reality—as someone else's mother. I can let myself identify with her fully. I have her body structure, many of her bodily strengths and weaknesses. We come from the same stock.

## The Good Mother

Another image presents itself, this one embedded in memory.

*It is early on a frosty January morning in Northwood, New Hampshire. I am five years old. I awaken in my bedroom, the windows open to the wintry cold. I am used to finding snow on my coverlet by morning. I scurry out of bed and race down the stairs to the pot-bellied stove in the front room. There by the fire, Mother is kneeling frog-like in her maroon bathrobe, her Bible open on the chair before her. I wriggle my shivering body underneath her arm, forcing her to embrace me and to acknowledge my presence. She gathers me in, even as I understand that I must not interrupt the divine service going on.*

I was vaguely aware as a child that other mothers were more stylish and slim. But I was puzzled, "Where were their laps?" I loved curling up into the capacious softness of my mother's body. Her large-boned frame was cushioned, perfectly designed for holding my wriggling form. I nestled in her lap while she crooned.

She was a comforting and ideal mother in my early childhood, always present, able to soothe, and full of games to entertain. She burst into song as she worked around the house. Her presence was physical and palpable as she busied herself in the kitchen. She dug her arms up to the elbows in bread dough, kneading with force and skill. The pungent smell of freshly baked whole wheat bread filled the kitchen. On special occasions, she treated us with cinnamon buns or cookies plump with raisin filling. When I was sick—twice with pneumonia in the frightening days before antibiotics—Mother hovered near with an endless array of liquids to nurse me back to health: juice, Ovaltine, egg nog, warm milk, lemon fizz. Food was comfort for both giver and receiver.

On Sunday afternoons I was allowed the treat of combing Mother's long hair. The pleasure was mutual, for Mother loved the sensuousness of having her hair brushed and combed. In later years, I complained about her lack of style. I wished she looked like the other women with their permanents and short cuts. I think she kept her hair long because of my father's fondness for it; perhaps it was part of their own private love ritual.

Mother was trained not to speak of, or even see, the shadow side of life. And it cried for acknowledgment. As a four-year-old discovering the responses of my own body in an innocent moment of pleasure, I encountered my mother's shocked and agitated response. Though very young, I knew I must keep certain things secret from this person who was my mainstay and comfort, in whose lap I snuggled with cooing contentment. A tiny barrier had arisen.

Parenting was a loving duty for my mother, one that required her to quash sentiment in favor of the long-term goal of subduing my inherently sinful nature. She took her instructions primarily from her own experience as a child in a late nineteenth century farm household headed by her father, Howard Dyer, a patriarch in the noblest sense. Mother adored her father and described him to me in glowing terms. He may have assumed saintly status because he died of a stroke when Mother was sixteen. The loss was crushing, enveloping earlier times with a roseate glow by contrast. Although she talked of playful times with her father, she frequently repeated stories about his punishments, which seemed arbitrary or severe to me. Mother saw his strict and loving traits as totally compatible and absorbed his hatred of lying without question.

It then becomes ironic that I told my first lie to my mother—an act which took considerable courage and ignorance. We were squeezed together in the tiny pantry off the kitchen in our Northwood, New Hampshire, home, making cookies together. As a four-year-old, I was immensely proud of being able to be included in this mysterious matriarchal process. At one point, Mother left me alone while she went to fetch an ingredient elsewhere in the kitchen. "Don't touch those raisins," she cautioned me as she disappeared through the pantry doorway.

As soon as I was alone, the delicious thought that she herself had planted in my head overwhelmed me. I reached my pudgy fist into the jar and scooped out a handful of raisins and crammed them into my mouth. Sooner than expected, Mother returned. She took one look at my bulging cheeks. "Eunice! Did you eat any raisins?"

If only she had not asked. My reply was instinctive, and protective. "Nope," a word uttered with some difficulty through the yet-unswallowed raisin goo in my mouth. "Open your mouth," commanded Mother. I opened wide, revealing the sticky mass inside. Caught!

This posed a dilemma for my mother, who had been taught that lying is a serious sin, sins must be punished, and spanking is an act of love in such an instance. So she spanked me, likely one or two swats, but they left a sting on my soul. I felt betrayed, not being privy to the set of beliefs of this righteous school of parenting. I am not sure that I consciously adopted the new strategy which emerged—that of hiding unapproved behavior—but it became my way of coping from that point on.

It was tempting to induce Mother's reactions by occasional bursts of outrageous behavior. I could count on her shocked, "Eunice!" coupled with a frustrated whimper, indicating her loss of control. Something in me wanted to punctuate the seriousness with which she took small offenses, and to provoke a more whimsical response. Something

else in me was deathly afraid of her disapproval. I became a master of deceit very early. For I must have her love, a love which was as palpable as her judgment, despite the fact that I did not consistently please her.

### **The Grand Mother**

Whereas Mother took her child-rearing strategy from the example of her father, a benevolent and just master of discipline, her mother became the model for her relationship to her husband—unquestioning love and devotion, and an attitude of servanthood. I would find in my grandmother, Bessie Shepard Dyer, the unconditional love I craved.

Bessie was a Cockney, born "within the sounds of Bow Bells", a church in London. At sixteen, Bessie came across the Atlantic, and settled in Charleston, Maine, fifty miles northwest of Bangor. She became live-in hired help for a farmer named Herb Howes. We always heard him called 'Erb 'Owes in Grandma's Cockney accent. She scrubbed floors and cooked meals, and did the laundry in galvanized iron tubs for the family and for their hired hands.

In time, Howard Dyer came courting and soon Bessie and Howard married and set up housekeeping on a farm. When Howard suddenly died in 1912 in his early fifties, Bessie picked up the reins of management of the orchard and animals without missing a beat. But a bleak sorrow hovered over the home. Soon Bessie moved away from the farm, to a cottage in the village, the place where I spent many happy summer vacations as a child. The memories come back readily through my childhood's heightened sense of smell.

The kitchen was often suffused with a floury odor laced with a hint of molasses whenever Grandma made cookies or gingerbread. As soon as they were laid out on racks to cool, my brother and his cousin would swoop up a handful, with Grandma scolding them, but in such a way that I could tell she was more pleased than angry.

There was no underground drain for waste water from our sink and the laundry tubs sitting in a side room, so a slightly putrid smell arose from the swirling gray residue in the yard outside whenever we washed dishes or clothes. In contrast, the sweet spring water that we trudged a quarter mile up the road to fetch smelled fresh.

A friendly burn smell filled the kitchen whenever my mother and aunt heated the heavy "sad irons" on the back of the wood stove. The ironing board cover was always covered with scorch marks. I was proud when I was old enough to be trusted to use these clumsy appliances.

We loved these family times in Grandma's home. I remember seeing her scrunch up her face as she wrung out the laundry by hand. I hovered near as she painstakingly sewed quilts, working the stitches inch by inch with her gnarled work-worn fingers. She sang in a

high nasal crooning voice, her piercing dark eyes crinkling with a smile. On a Sunday morning she would clip the stray hairs on her chin, sweep up her white hair in a bun, plunk on a straw hat, and set out for church. Everyone loved her there, and the men, especially, treated her gallantly, offering help with an arm as she struggled down the steps or got into a car for the ride home. In her own eyes, she was simply an 'umble person.

Grandma's presence in our home was a constant when I was growing up. Although she made regular trips to visit her other daughters, she considered our place to be her home. When I came home from college for Christmas my senior year, I remember Grandma pushing me away from the sink when I started doing the dishes.

"You're tired. You've been working hard at college," she chirped. "I'll do the dishes." I took one incredulous look at her diminutive eighty-three year old frame planted firmly at the sink. It took all my force to put my arms around her and carry her into the living room.

Two years later when I went home for Christmas, I saw that Grandma's health had deteriorated. Soon Grandma stopped eating. She had always served others; she had taken care never to be a burden. This was her only way to quietly ebb away.

A few weeks later my mother wrote me that Grandma had died. I laid my head on my desk and sobbed. The finality of death caught me by surprise. I did not want to be without my grandmother. Like so many other daughters, I had instinctively moved past my own mother to get to the "Grand Mother" in order to receive acceptance and approval. Getting this direct from the preceding generation was too fraught with expectations and judgments and fears. Writer Naomi Lowinsky notes that a woman "is easily polarized with her mother. She needs the power of the . . . grandmother, the one who is a generation removed . . . to help her find her way."\* Grandmother love was safe and enveloping and I basked in it.

Tensions with my mother put my own capacity for maternal warmth at peril, as I grew. It was easy to turn against all that my mother represented, and in the process unwittingly destroy a precious legacy mothers give their daughters—the power to nurture. I would need that capacity in the life calling which later emerged, that of encouraging others in personal spiritual growth. The heritage my grandmother imparted saved some of that motherly legacy in me.

\*Naomi Lowinsky, "Mother of Mothers: The Power of the Grandmother in the Female Psyche," in *To Be a Woman*, ed. by Connie Zweig (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990), p. 87