

Preface to the Duke Edition

Several years ago, I was teaching an undergraduate course called “Voices of Mothers and Daughters in Novels By Women.” We had read *Jane Eyre* which introduced the great themes and classic motifs of the daughter’s journey toward self-realization. And then we came to Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, one of the first novels in English to be written by a mother who takes a mother’s point of view as the subject of a literary work. When it was first published, many critics and reviewers found the heroine, Edna, to be unloving and selfish, an unnatural mother, and I had learned over years of teaching the novel that contemporary generations of students often felt the same. So before we began this story of a woman trying to chart a path to herself, struggling to become an artist, loving her children but unwilling or unable to “turn over her soul to them,” I asked my students to close their eyes and think about “the good mother.” As they sat there ruminating silently, I asked a few widely spaced questions: What is she like? How does she act? What do we need from her? Then I asked them to open their eyes and write down some of what had come to them. As they read out the qualities of “the good mother” I wrote them on the blackboard until it was filled with overlapping, crowded text, long sentences and single words: She is giving and caring. Unselfish. A model of independence, but she needs her children’s love deeply. Highly disciplined. A disciplinarian, but she understands the need for fun. Reliable, yet childlike. Tells you right from wrong, but is never intrusive. Emotionally connected, but she can be mysterious—she has her own life! As they called out the phrases while I wrote, my students understood the pattern emerging and rolled their eyes at their own surprising beliefs. I asked them to close their eyes again. Now imagine, I said, that you are not daughters and sons but

mothers. You are yourself, but you have just been told you are having a baby. The room filled with gasps and groans. Eyes snapped opened. They felt terrified, they said, of the impossible expectations. They were only human, after all. They felt inadequate. Even in an imaginary, passing moment, they already felt classic maternal guilt.

Now the silence of the moment was mine. I looked around the room at these men and women young enough to be my children, and I understood that the story of mothers from their own point of view will never be told for the last time, will never once and for all alter the deepest structures of our feelings. As long as we have children and raise them—both badly and well, as we must—the story of the mother in her own voice will have to be told and retold. We will have to break the silence and break it again as we try to become real for our children and, at the same time, come more fully to understand our society and ourselves.

Rereading the pages of this story of a new mother written over twenty years ago, I remember feeling what the writer Meena Alexander has called “the shock of arrival.” Like an immigrant on foreign shores, I was stunned, uncertain of direction, trying to understand the history and culture of my new home—which was not yet anything like home to me. What strikes me most forcefully in this memoir now is the experience of pregnancy, birthing, and early motherhood as a life crisis, filled with the passion, ambivalence, and even obsession of any transformation. Now, my sons are grown, and in my work motherhood has been a primary subject, the central theme of two books which came after *The Mother Knot*. In my novel *Worlds Beyond My Control*, I wrote, in part, of how the ordinary experience of children growing up and the extraordinary experience of one of them contracting a chronic disease (in my son’s case, diabetes) filled me with a sense of impotence. Yet the humility that was the hard-won, painful consequence of both ordinary and extraordinary loss deepened and sharpened my love even as it forced upon me an awareness of our separate bodies, our separate lives.

I am forty-five years old. I have two sons, one is gone from home. The other’s leaving gathers energy like a storm off the coast, and I have known hurricanes before. I begin the dreary process of batten- ing down hatches, taping windows, packing breakables in layers of newspaper, then laying them in cartons. At night, when Anthony is out on the street, I lie in bed and practice putting old

habits away as if they were china plates I'd hoped to save forever. I cannot protect him, I tell myself in the dark. Even if at this very moment some mugger is poised for attack, even if he is lying damaged, cut and bruised, even if I imagine every possible danger and like a witch think it away, I cannot protect him. I have no control, I tell myself in the dark. There is nothing I can do now. His life. My life. Separate as sentences.

In a more recent memoir, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, I explored the particular experience of being a white mother of Black sons, a theme already there in *The Mother Knot* but overlooked by most readers, and I tried once again to express how enmeshed these two passions of motherhood and writing have been for me:

When I began to write seriously—that is, in a disciplined way—when I was born, in other words, into being a writer, I also had just had a child. I thought I had nothing to write about because motherhood represented only something personal, not potentially transformative or transcendent, certainly not literary. It was a revelation to read writers such as Tillie Olsen who was using her knowledge of motherhood as metaphoric, enabling her to write of many layers of human experience. I have written many different stories since that revelation, but being a mother continued to be a central passion of my life, and so it was one of the experiences I most wanted to write about, for the same reasons any writer wants to write about her passions—to name them more accurately, to understand them, to convey meaning to others, to use one's own life to think about life itself.

That theme, too, of a young writer coming into her own voice is central to *The Mother Knot*. When I wrote this memoir, I felt I belonged nowhere, certainly not to the texts and sub-texts about motherhood, whether by artists or scientists, then passing for the truth. Because of my own youth and passion, and the women's movement growing and spreading around me, my alienation and loneliness was translated into anger and the determination to write in a public voice. Since then, we have been given truer stories, not only through the recovery of old works like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, but by the many writers and artists who have taken up the subject of motherhood in the past two decades. From Tillie Olsen—whose classic story of maternal desperation

and wisdom, “I Stand Here Ironing,” was one of the seeds which began it all—through Grace Paley, Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Audre Lorde, Sara Ruddick, Alice Walker, Lynn Sharon Schwartz, Lynda Schor, Jessica Benjamin, Maureen Reddy, Sharon Olds, Lucille Clifton, Toni Morrison, Nancy Huston, Marianne Hirsch—to name only a handful in what is becoming a rich tradition—such writers and thinkers have helped me to understand our history and the meaning of my own work.

But even the most familiar, often told stories, it seems, must continually be revised. Last year, after surviving breast cancer, I found my own mother, who had died forty-five years earlier from the same disease, resurrected in my consciousness like a giantess come to claim her stolen place. From this surprising reunion came the recognition of an intriguing paradox: The “shock of arrival” had taken many years and many books for me. In novels and memoirs and in my actual life with my children, I had struggled to learn the language of a mother’s voice. Now in my early fifties, forced to confront the myths I had constructed about my mother, I saw I had learned the mother’s language so well I had to learn the daughter’s voice again.

When I reread *The Mother Knot* today, I hear that voice, the young woman trying to learn how to be a mother while she is longing for a mother herself. She can be righteous, of course, full of fierce conviction, but she shouts the recognition of desire and the need for love.

And yet, her language is indeed my mother-tongue, because if it was as my sons’ mother that I first garnered the courage to write my stories for the world, it was as my mother’s daughter that I looked squarely at the terror of belonging nowhere and began to recover some of the places where I belong. The mother knot tightens and loosens for me. Protecting and constraining, it is the source of my own awakening.

Jane Lazarre

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