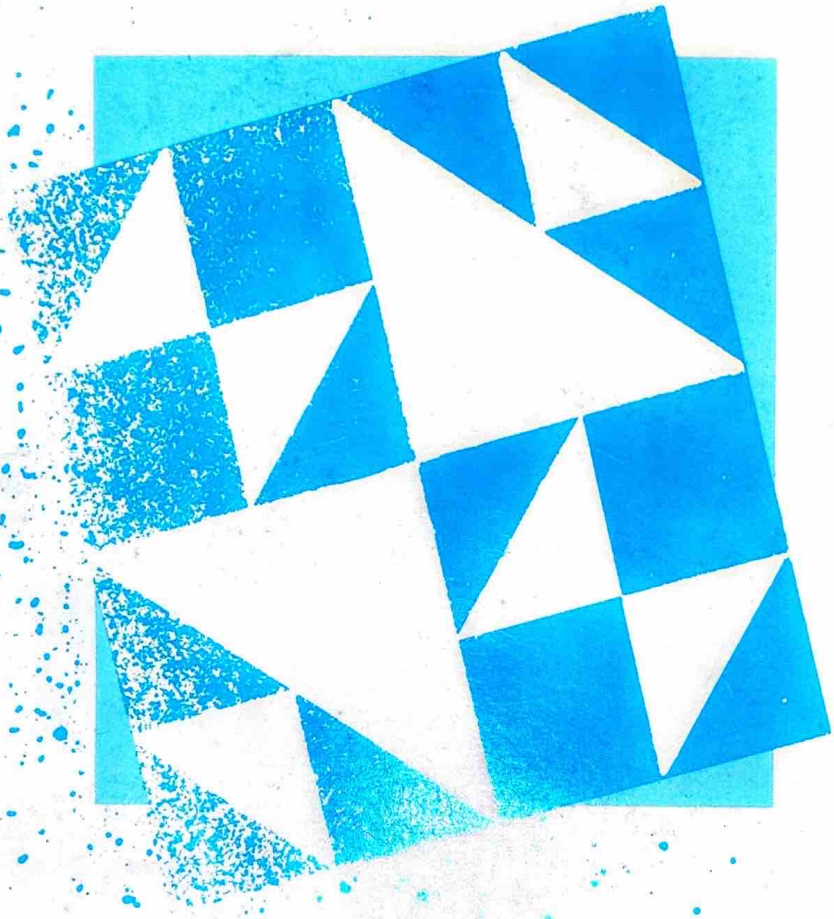
LesbianEthics



Lesbians and Our Mothers

Volume 5 · No. 1

Lesbian Ethics

Editor: Fox

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Lesbian Ethics

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Editor's Introduction 2

Lesbian Luggage: Incest, Lesbians, Psychosexuality, and the Next Generation 3
Sid

Cutting the Cord 21
Carolyn Gage

Fierce Love and Well Mothering 30
Vonceil Smith

Her Life and Mine 33
Noel Furie

On Being Disowned 39
Carla Duke

Lesbians and Our Mothers 48
Readers' Forum

Absolute Absence 62
Fox

Stalking Guilt 72
Joyce Trebilcot

Mary Poppins and My Childhood in Hell 76
Kate Moran

Talking About Evil 82
Anne

And in This Corner 90
Bridget Collins

Madness, Social Disability and Access 96
Rachel Perkins and Celia Kitzinger

A Commentary on "Madness, Social Disability and Access" 108
Fox

Authors' Guidelines/Announcements 109

Editor's Introduction

A lifetime ago I thought doing an issue on our mothers would be a light diversion. It was not to be. There were rumors that dykes with good relationships with their mothers existed and were going to contribute articles, but with one or two exceptions, they seem to have been too complacent. Summer vacations perhaps. And so once again, I present you with a volume of scorching intensity as only lesbians can do it. And I have to say, I don't think any number of articles about loving moms can save the institution of motherhood after this one.

The class column returns to *LE* in this issue, under the guidance of Bridget Collins.

LE is now going to be available on cassette. If you would like to help record *LE* on tape, let me know.

This is the third intense issue in a row, and I do not want dykes to begin fleeing at the sight of an *LE* cover. We are going to have a change of pace. You may remember I said this issue would come out in 92 or my name wasn't Fox. Well it didn't but I'm still Fox. I've decided I neither can nor want to do more than one issue a year, and so I am going to return to my earlier plan of alternating issues with guest editors. This way perhaps *LE* can come out twice a year!! *LE* 5:2 is going to be edited by Jackie Anderson, and here's what she's up to:

Community Building • Public Policy • Movement Building

As lesbians, we are often in conversation concerning community—do we have one, what should it be like, what do we owe it, what does it owe us, who has a right to be considered a member, and what should be its relations with other communities. We often struggle concerning how we should respond to lesbians who define as sexually liberated, who practice s/m, who steal, who abuse drugs, who batter, who are/are not feminist or lesbian enough, etc.

The December 93 issue of Lesbian Ethics will be a forum for us to share some of our ideas concerning our community. Deadline is October 1, 93.

Send inquiries and manuscripts to: Jackie Anderson, Humanities Dept., Olive-Harvey College, 10001 South Woodlawn, Chicago, IL 60628.

LE 5:3, which I will be editing, will be the Radical Healing issue. And after these last 3 issues we need it. The focus is new ideas and practical methods for healing across the widest possible range. Deadline is April 1, 94. Both short and long pieces are welcome.

I welcome proposals from potential guest editors, in keeping with *LE*'s Authors' Guidelines.

Fox

Lesbian Luggage: Incest, Lesbians, Psychosexuality, and the Next Generation

Sid

Part 1: A Pattern of Incest Complicity in My Matriline. (How I found out I was passing along an incest pattern to my daughter.)

Part 2: I'm a Lesbian but Don't Want to Be in a Roomful of Them. (Thrashing Around in Unsafe Space.)

Part 3: What's This Sitting in My Lap? Lesbians and the Next Generation. (Connecting with Girl Children.)

Part 4: Psychosexuality.

Part 1: A Pattern of Complicity in My Matriline

"I'm strong like my mother," is one of my earliest articulated thoughts. Her skirt hem rippled as she pursued her whirlwind pace of housekeeping. I was in awe. Energy and determination were basic to her personality. She washed with a hand-wringer, hung clothes outdoors, sprinkled them damp and ironed them to perfection. She swept, used a carpet-sweeper, later a vacuum, mopped, waxed, made beds, cleaned walls, ledges, baseboards, sinks, toilets; she darned, sewed clothes for three children, and cooked. Always cooking! She never complained, never varied, never expected appreciation, just *did* it, whatever was next. She was Vesuvius, a force of nature.

It was clear she expected me to mature into the same thing. As soon as I was old enough to lift an iron I was set kneeling on a chair to press handkerchiefs and pillow cases. Before starting school I could mind my two younger siblings, polish silverware, wash and dry dishes, set the table, scour sinks. At a young age I learned the pace and self-sacrifice of drudgery—no questions, no complaints. This was my "strength in the female line" that I called on, later, to get me through my hungry years.

Other things about her I to this day don't like. She's uncomfortable with discussion, especially if it's personal, keeps her opinions to herself. She repeats two maxims about talking: "If you can't say something nice don't say anything at all," and "Don't speak unless you are spoken to."

There were other severe rules inherited from *her* mother, a snuff-chewing virago with a mean backhand: "Never say 'no' to your parents," and "Always answer adults with 'Yes, sir' and 'Yes, ma'am'." This grandmother scared the daylights out of me, the way she never smiled and was always beating my cousin Susie out behind the outhouse. She yelled at me, threw basins of water at me, and locked me in a bedroom; though I lived in terror of it, she never beat me. Perhaps my mother intervened on my behalf, I will probably never know. Luckily I only spent two weeks, once a year, at her farm.

Looking back I'm surprised at how often I was punished for things I *said*. In addition to failing to show verbal respect, or speaking at wrong times, I was punished for saying *bad words*. "Lie" was a bad word; "fib" was OK. "Yeah" was bad—too slangy. For slips I had my mouth washed out with soap. For respect infractions I was slapped, spanked or switched. The face-slapping left me with mildly impaired short-term memory, especially for people's faces; the switching has left me deeply antagonistic toward willow trees.

My personal cross to bear was being 'too smart for my own good.' Punishment, of course, was 'for my own good.' According to my mother, she'd had a wonderful childhood and if anyone got punished it was 'for their own good.' I knew better. I had heard about the time Grandpa horsewhipped my mother so badly she missed school for a week. After hearing this story, I'd been grateful that she'd used willow wands and not horsewhips on me. I swore I would never hit *my* children if I had any.

I had one, in 1969, shortly after leaving home for college and three years before *Roe v. Wade*. I dealt with life as best I could on my own: married the child's father briefly, discovered via the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) that I sexually preferred wimmin, divorced, moved, settled down with a lover, raised Jill. At 38 I was politically radical, had left teaching for a reliable blue-collar job, and was well into my second long-term relationship; the first had ended amicably. Jill was in high school, doing well, and financially I could make ends meet. Yet disquiet, like a mushroom, apparently nurtured by the relative tranquility of my life, was growing inside me. During quiet moments I felt a bellyful of gnawing anxiety.

I had a few hints of what it might be. I'd read Alice Miller's work on how violence and sexual abuse repeats itself from generation to generation.[1] I understood her point that a person's obsessions reveal the nature of unremembered childhood traumas. I had an obsession: prehistory.

I was fascinated with the era before writing. Miller's work suggested that something significant happened to me in my *personal* history before

words, that is, before the age of three and a half. Also, in the past year I'd been glancing through books like *The Best Kept Secret* and *Kiss Daddy Good Night*,[2] for no particular reason.

My lover Annie, a New Age enthusiast, suggested we experience rebirthing. Why not? Like a fool, I sped headlong into my personal snake pit.

I do *not* recommend rebirthing. Rebirthers are not trained to recognize, much less deal with, true psychological crisis. The breathing exercises took me not to my birth experience but to a horrifying vision in which I was tortured by someone whose face was obscure. This unleashed a torrent of disorienting fear, pain, and rage, which neither I nor the rebirther had a clue about how to handle.

Annie caught the brunt of my rude awakening. For several days I alternately raged at her or wept on my bed. I couldn't be touched. And yet I truly had no idea of what was wrong.

Worn down, Annie told me to get help. I found a decent Jungian incest specialist, a lesbian, under whose guidance imagery began to flow from within. I dreamed about my grandfather and naked toddlers. I recalled a repetitive dream I'd had at ages four and five in which an elephant tickled me with his trunk until I screamed in pain. I felt tremendous relief when I could articulate that I hated for men to touch me. Guided, I became strong enough to see a roaring whiteness inside myself. I determined to see behind it.

I faced a white door. Inside was a crib in which a toddler-aged child curled up in fetal position, screaming. Intense pain streamed from her in the form of colored ribbons. I stood transfixed, helpless. Though I knew she was a part of me, I dared not touch the little girl lest I hurt her more.

It took two days to regain present-time orientation. Thereafter, for a couple of weeks, I felt emotionally numb. I'd felt the same once before—just after Jill's birth, when I decided to keep her instead of giving her up for adoption. For several weeks afterward I'd looked at my new baby not knowing *what* to feel. Just so, now I was looking at a baby *me* and experiencing the same disorientation. I realized my grandfather, long dead and scarcely remembered, had done something awful to her but didn't know what to feel or do.

I craved a clear memory of what had happened but therapy reached a point of diminishing return. I stopped going. I went to Incest Survivors Anonymous but it didn't calm me. I read *The Obsidian Mirror*[3] and realized my dreams were telling me my mother had been molested by Grandpa too. But without clear concise memories, I couldn't reach a clear concise hatred for my grandfather.

I *did* hate having been a victim. I began to despise my father, for all the times, remembered well, he'd pulled down my pants and spanked

me. I made an uneasy, unstable accommodation to myself as a former sexually-assaulted child. Then a Pap smear came back with bad news.

"I want you to get a colposcopy and a punch biopsy," explained my womin naturopath. "For the biopsy, they'll insert a long needle into the cervix to take a tissue sample."

I went into a catatonic freeze. A *needle* in my vagina? My mind recoiled from the image, then shut down. As the doctor became aware that something was wrong, she shook my knee, called my name. I wasn't sure where I was, who *she* was. I felt far away, didn't want to leave, burst into sobs. Annie came and got me.

Once again I raged and withdrew, but this time it was worse. At home I sat on the stairs, staring into space, angry past explanation; or lay in bed weeping. Now, beyond touching, I didn't want Annie to even speak to me; words lost meaning, seemed to hurt. Although a part of me knew better, I felt I was dying.

Five days into this something clicked. I realized this was the mind of my crib-child.

"What do you *want*?" I cried.

"No one puts needles in me!" came the shrieking answer. "Die first!"

I summoned up the room with the door, peeked in. The child was sitting up, unhappy tears streaming down her cheeks. She looked at me mistrustfully.

"All right." What could I do but agree? "Have it your way. I'll refuse treatment. If we die, we die."

Satisfied, the child dismissed me. Luckily, my naturopath knew an herbal-nutritional regime that (slowly) cleared up my infection. I considered the virus could be a physical manifestation of incest. During my cure, I was under doctor's orders to practice safe sex. Annie cracked.

She had an out-of-town affair. More than a little proud of herself, she opined that I should understand. We broke like a dropped vase. With a present-time crisis available, I went into a raging/weeping emotional marathon in which my toddler-girl participated wholeheartedly.

One day I found her willing to let me pick her up and hold her. Then, via a dream, she told me her name: Pumpkin. More and more clearly I could see her: a year and a half old, bowl-cut hair, skimpy sundress.

I got out my photo album and with racing pulse leafed backward toward pictures of myself at that age. There was Pumpkin! I had a whole set of photos taken summer of 1950 on Grandma's farm. It was Pumpkin: toddling among chickens, getting into a washtub, sitting on porch steps—with eyes full of fear. My heart went out to her.



"I love you, dear," I whispered. "What would you like to do? Something fun."

"Color," she answered shyly. I bought crayons, tablets of blank paper. We scribbled madly. I told her she was wonderful. This started my recovery.

One day, months after the break-up with Annie, while weeping over lost love, with my inner eye I saw Pumpkin solemnly turn and extend her arms as if to comfort *me*. Something about the gesture shocked me; I realized with a jolt this image was not only a visualization of Pumpkin, but a *real memory* of Jill when *she* was that age!

Before I divorced Jill's father, I agreed to a trial separation, sharing custody with him by six month intervals, his turn first. I left the state. Just before I was to take my turn, he took the child and disappeared. A few days later I caught up with them in an airport a thousand miles away. He was carrying Jill in his arms and I was coming at them from behind. As I approached, I wondered whether the child would remember me after six months; but on glimpsing me, she twisted toward me in her father's arms, not smiling, but reaching out her arms for me to take her. It was the exact gesture I'd envisioned in Pumpkin!

I rapidly compared dates and ages. What I suspected was true. I'd left Jill at the exact age *I* was when Grandpa assaulted me. I'd left Jill alone with her father for six months! Anything could have happened!

Immediately I thought about my friend Kate, lesbian mother of two daughters, who had recently confided how fearful she'd become as she watched her younger girl approach the age of eight. "Eight was when my step-father started doing things to me," she'd explained nervously. "When my older girl got to be eight, our relationship got terrible. I got real cold toward her, just wanted to get away from her. She's sixteen now and I don't think she'll ever forgive me. Now I'm starting to get the same feelings all over again with my younger child."

Everything Alice Miller wrote about traumas being re-enacted in each generation suddenly hit home. My mind raced. The critical age was one to one and a half—was that when Grandpa molested my mother? There seemed to be no way to find out without asking her—something I was not prepared to do.

All unintending, one of my mother's older brothers provided the answer. He sent me a copy of his memoirs. Early in the text was the story of how Grandpa had his appendix removed and had to stay home for several months regaining his strength before he could go back to field work. At the same time Grandma, from untreated tooth decay, got so weak she couldn't get out of bed. All her teeth were pulled. For a month

she was bedridden; it fell to Grandpa to care for the children, two school-age boys and a little girl. My mother had been one and a half.

"Bingo!" I cried, seeing what some sociologists called the classic functional incest situation: an incapacitated wife, an unsupervised husband, available children, and a belief that the man has an absolute right to sex (Southern Baptist). Clearly, strength wasn't the only thing being passed down in my female line.

I suspect Grandpa molested most of the toddlers—including some boys—in his immediate family; and that Grandma's inability to stop him was the source of her severity toward children. In her defense I remember the story told about the time she tried to leave him. He marched her back at the end of a shotgun. My uncle wrote that she helped dress for burial wimmin who had been beaten to death by their husbands. Finally, she'd spoken often of a recurring dream in which her children were buried beneath the earth, crying for her, while she frantically—unsuccessfully—dug for them with her bare hands.

I was amazed to see the pattern of mother-absence, from my grandmother's illness to my six-month disappearing act, placing a year-and-a-half old daughter at risk. This insight was followed by crushing guilt. Carefully, I combed back through memory, searching for signs of early sexual assault in my Jill's behavior.[4] Thankfully, I could find only the aftereffects of my having left her. Nonetheless, it seemed imperative that I discuss my discovery with her—Jill would be, after all, the next link.

Jill was twenty. She listened attentively as I explained.

"What's most important and why I'm telling you this is that it's a pattern being passed down from mother to daughter in an unconscious way. I didn't know *why* I left you when I did, in fact I thought I had good reasons. Even though you weren't raped, you were still abandoned, and that means damage was done to you that you might repeat. When *your* daughter is one and a half, you'll be at risk for finding some excuse to disappear. Who knows? You might catch pneumonia or break a leg or win a trip to the moon. But now that we both know what's going on, we can fight it, break the pattern."

She understood immediately. "End it here," she agreed. "In me."

"Right!"

Inspired by Jill's understanding, I took up Reevaluation Co-counseling (RC). I wanted to help Pumpkin release her emotions.

At first the memories were all kinesthetic. We—Pumpkin and I—experienced being pushed down, held down, mouth covered and legs forced apart. We'd fought; we'd known what was happening to us wasn't right. Later, we remembered that it had happened in dirt; later

than that we saw rose brambles overhead, full of long thorns. Then the memory of what had happened afterward surfaced.

I'd been cleaned up by Grandma. Holding me roughly by one arm, wiping my torso and legs clean with a rag, she admonished, "Stop crying! Stop crying!" I wept for my mommy. Grandma shook me, "Be quiet, be quiet!" I ended up standing beside her rocker (it hurt to sit down), whimpering, while she jabbed at some kind of sewing or crocheting, something that involved a long needle. I/Pumpkin stared at the needle piercing the fabric and felt far away. *Where* was mommy?

From this memory spewed a ripe fury. I felt *much* angrier with my mother and grandmother for not protecting me than I felt toward Grandpa. In new sessions I got violent. I screamed, pounded the floor.

After a while I felt rinsed clean. Now when I checked on Pumpkin, she just smiled and waved at me. Noticeably, she was getting older. Everything seemed to be much better.

Then the unthinkable happened. I answered the phone and it was the Emergency Room. Jill had been hit by a van while riding her bike. She had head injuries. The doctor said, "It's serious. We need you here now. She may be in brain surgery when you arrive."

To make a long story short, she's OK today.

Readers may understandably doubt a linear connection concerning the timing of the accident, but it happened when Jill reached the age *I* had been when she was born. To the month. I wonder if, as a little baby, she felt my numbness and unconsciously patterned that when *she* reached that age she'd be numb also. This possibility does not seem far-fetched to me. This re-enactment stuff is powerful.

I share my story because I suspect my *awareness* of my own part in passing on an incest pattern is *un*common. First, I know a lot about my matriline. Second, my contact with my rapist was limited and the damage done was likewise limited (though nonetheless experienced as life threatening). Recovery for me was comparatively easy.[5] Third, I've clearly seen my complicitous absence-pattern, which endangered Jill. Finally, I was spared the staggering guilt of her having actually been molested. If her father *had* assaulted her, how could I be writing about it?

Looking back, I intuitively grasp that my mother's "strength" was/is a learned way to repress—it was/is a thick layer of scar tissue over an old wound. Likewise I see that being forbidden to speak the truth of what Grandpa had done to me, or even cry about it ("Be quiet! Be quiet!") was the root of my family's many restrictions on children's speech. I now suspect that wherever children are seen but not heard, sexual assault is going on.

Part 2: I'm a Lesbian but Don't Want to Be in a Roomful of Them

The lesbian subculture (LSC) of my experience—I've been a central or tangential member for twentysome years in two geographically separated cities—has for me been a source of some joy, some aggravation, and some downright horror. Today I feel toward LSC as I used to feel about my natal family: extremely ambivalent. Lesbian mothers are marginal to LSC in most places; our responsibility to children puts us closer to the mainstream, which encompasses lesbians who don't identify with LSC, het people, and gay men.

Many lesbian non-mothers say they dislike the *evidence* of our having had past sex relations with men, i.e., *our children*. Non-mothers (in later stages of WLM) used to call this "carrying the male presence" as if they could not look at a child without being assaulted by primal scenes of her conception. For many years the blatant irrationality of this criticism—meant to wound, insult and alienate—escaped me. *All* of us spring from a heterosexual act. Why this special stigma attached to children?

Less opaque are the epithets of hatred so casually tossed off against our children: brats, rug-rats, little beasts. My experience as a lesbian mother has led me to conclude that LSC's dislike/disdain for children is less about politics than about post traumatic stress. Children's exuberant energy and strong, direct emotions are hard for most of us to take. They rouse the feelings of our introjected[6] childhood psyches; we lack distancing mechanisms; we want to get away. I believe this avoidance is a mild but mass incest after-effect in, but not peculiar to, LSC.

To entertain the idea of mass after-effects, one must be convinced that the incidence of incest in the general femel population is massive. At one point in my recovery I mulled over statistical studies[7] and examined psychological data on how to interpret those figures. Seeking as reliable a figure as possible, eventually I settled on 70%.[8] "Sexual assault" in the studies covered inappropriate fondling through violent rape.[9]

This figure is probably low. Soon after deciding on it, I heard a verbal report at a conference on a British study which concluded that 89% of girls in that country have been sexually assaulted. Can the U.S. be far behind? I strongly advocate that we accept that most lesbians are childhood sexual assault survivors, and that there is no clear demarcation between survivors and non-survivors, only a bell curve[10] of severity of assault/severity of after-effects. Child sexual assault almost always results in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[11] So it would be strange if any large group of wimmin did *not* show mass psychological disturbances.



Blume[12] believes the practice of "femininity" per se, by wimmin as a group, is a post-incest disorder. I agree, and would add that lesbians as a group also show post-incest symptoms specific to our subculture.

These include, but are not limited to: Dislike and avoidance of children (blocking out our own childhoods); compulsive sexuality and romance addiction; mass emotional intensity and obsession with safe space, i.e., love for wimmin irretrievably entwined with fear, mistrust, and pain (replay of mother-relationship); drug and alcohol addiction; and sado-masochism practiced as an institution (sexual acting out).

Post-incest syndrome contributes heavily to each of these behaviors. The behaviors are difficult to change, because the part of a womin's psyche that carries the trauma and anger is too young, simply lacks the cognitive faculty of higher thought. Post-incest hostility is intense, undiscriminating, and unrelenting, carried within (introjected) as an ever-present scream. It is common to rationalize our introjected feelings with quasi-logical trappings, but post-incest disorders *always* interfere with higher-level cognition. Laid down in us before we reached the age of logic, they cannot be matured by mere conscious decision, can barely be apprehended by close scrutiny!

Further they are all the more invisible in LSC because we lesbians are not forced to examine our unconscious behaviors in the context of how we interact with children. *All* our unresolved traumas are intensified because our subculture admits very few children. The time-honored mechanism for discharging one's own impacted childhood traumas is to pass them on vertically to the next generation. People not prone to self-reflection pass on the worst they experienced in knee-jerk fashion; people given to consciousness try to improve on what happened to them.

There is a gigantic social dialog, an intergenerational chain of events, in which most lesbians never participate. This (convolving, confabulating) world-wide social discourse and steady hurricane of activity is called RAISING THE NEXT GENERATION. It is our specie's greatest ongoing opportunity for personal and social improvement (and we are improving),[13] and it works on both the conscious and unconscious of each participant. Without some broad avenue of improvement open to us, we lesbian incest survivors are trapped with each other and our wild and wooly introjected children, in whom resides a little shining wisdom and a lot of burning irrationality.

When Jill was two she discovered hitting. She tried it out on some of her daycare buddies. Without thinking, I would smack her while admonishing, "Don't hit!" This was pure reenactment of what my parents had done to me. How stupid my behavior was became clear to me only

when I got (rightfully) challenged: "Geez, Sid, how is that kid going to learn not to hit from you hitting her?" Because of the criticism, I began rigorously suppressing my own internalized little-kid impulse to hit. This was ethical behavior, and progress for me and for Jill. She, now grown, has very little hitting experience to pass on.

We who have been active in lesbian groups, from social circles to political cadres, know how quickly and predictably high levels of tension arise among us and impede all forward movement. I have witnessed screamfests, sabotages, and fistfights among lesbian "sisters" (anyone out there who hasn't?). These self-defeating behaviors caused us, early on, to change the inspirational WLM slogan, "Sisterhood is Powerful" into the derisive but reality-based, "Sisterhood is Bullshit."

We haven't been ignorant of all this, or passive. We've known we have a problem but we've completely misread what it was all about, figured it for an adult-to-adult misperception of our good conscious intentions to share power. We invented "feminist process" to deal with this misapprehension, and crucified our raging introjected children on dreadful, stultifying (stagnating, stupefying, braincell-killing, boring beyond belief) rules for speaking and listening based (significantly) on therapy situations.[14] The worst meetings I've ever walked out of in my life were these. I think I prefer a fistfight. Well, almost.

To our dismay, we still couldn't get along. We seemed to lack something essential—genuine bonding—even though we shared self-interest.

And there's something else going on under the surface.

I believe lesbians, much more than het wimmin, have anger at other wimmin arising from *our mothers' failure to defend us*. Remember, I went through a stage in recovery of being angrier with my mother than I was with my grandfather. Why? At first blush it also seems illogical. Disempowered people cannot be held politically responsible for oppressors' actions: the slave mother is not responsible for the sale of her daughter. Still—I insist, still!—my mother was no slave! *Where was she when I needed her?* To this day I have no idea; and I have not yet asked.[15]

There are two components in the psychology of safety: danger and protection. Safety doesn't mean a naive belief that there are no dangers in the world—quite the opposite, for a womin with that belief would be most unsafe of all. Safety means knowing that dangers exist but having adequate protections in place, such as distance or barricades. The essence of a good childhood is to grow up in protected space, and to enjoy powerful parental allies who simultaneously teach about and protect from danger.



This is our issue with the non-perpetrating parent, usually mother: she failed to be our safety fence. Incest survivors naturally generate great rage against the parent who failed to protect. This rage in turn often merges with/leads to the anger we feel, as former girl children, at inadequate mothering in general. Born femel, a girl-child is ". . . never loved enough. In truth; in point of fact; objectively; she is never loved enough." (Andrea Dworkin).[16]

Few of us, however—even those working hard on incest recovery—have allowed ourselves to face the implications of this particular rage against our mothers. It is the root of our adult love-hate, trust-mistrust, of wimmin in general. Operating below awareness, these feelings push us into repetitive and irrational behaviors. We *want* love and trust from other wimmin, but as soon as we feel it, our introjected child begins searching for the breaking point she has learned *must* be there. After all, her own mother failed her. Can anyone else really adequately love and protect us when our own mothers couldn't? Of course not, and we are internally driven to prove it, time after time.[17]

During the last decade our practice of safe space has not made us more politically effective. We had hoped that in safe space our best qualities would bloom. Our experience has been the opposite. We have reached a point of diminishing returns. It is time to pull conclusions from this wealth of pain.

I believe this means consciousness-raising on mother-betrayal feelings and eventually finding ways to act as adult protectors of the generation coming up behind us. As lesbians we have been specializing in digging deep into our own pain. We have become remarkably and perhaps necessarily self-absorbed. But let's not be stuck.

Part 3: Lesbians and the Next Generation

> What's this sitting in my lap? Why it's the next generation!
> —*Rap artist Neneh Cherry*

CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT AND CHILD ABUSE ARE THE LINCHPINS OF PATRIARCHY. THIS IS THE WAR WIMMIN HAVE FOUGHT FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS; THE WAR WE MUST WIN AT ANY COST.

The war has two fronts: salvaging our own violated psyches as individual survivors and stopping perpetrators from creating the next wave of victims. The two dovetail together. A womin has to win the fight for her own sanity to be an effective warrior. She needs emotional strength and all her cognitive faculties. In turn, when a child benefits from her

attention and example, a womin gets the benefit of contradicting her own patriarchal script that she can't stop child rape.

As wimmin you and I have very likely been sexually assaulted as girls . . . and as adults . . . and must as part of our maturation process and our existential condition find a place to stand that we call Sane. A big part of sanity is the ability to snap into present time at will so we can deal with real, present-time dangers to ourselves and others as well as with real, present-time opportunities. The point of therapy must be to get to know one's introjected kids and establish a working relationship with them, such that the adult part of the psyche controls present-time orientation. This position must be gained as quickly and efficiently as possible. I hope mass consciousness will shorten therapy.

Meanwhile, the perpetrators aren't asleep. If we are completely preoccupied with therapy, ignoring attacks on all the girls coming up behind us, how are we any different from all the wimmin through the millennia, trained to tremble and avert our eyes from what men do? Incest recovery may never be complete, but so what? If we can arrive at functional sanity and start connecting with, caring about, the girls coming up behind, I for one say Good Enough.

It's not just a one-way street. We need children's complex presence in our lives; apart from them we are blocked from a part of ourselves, the evocation of our own inner children, both wounded and, more importantly, *un*wounded. From them we rediscover play, fantasy, and strong sensory delight that predates sexuality.

Without children in our lives we cannot develop long-distance vision, the kind that extends from generation to generation. "As for lesbians and lesbian mothers," wrote a correspondent, a lesbian with teenagers, "I find single lesbians without children to be selfish and lacking a sense of what is truly important." She meant that long view.

I am NOT advocating lesbians become birth mothers, adopt or artificially inseminate. Especially not the last![18] There are many avenues to lending one's support to the upcoming generation short of raising children oneself.

Clearly we must not be connecting with children in order to dump our traumas on them. We must be consciously benevolent and self-disciplined around them (as all good parents try for). I suggest two ways for us, *as lesbians*, to connect with girls: vertically within our natal kin groups as *bad/baed aunts* and horizontally within LSC as co-mothers, or *co-madres* (I like the musicality of the latter term). In both roles our interest in the child would be ongoing, aunt-like and consciously protective.



My lesbian friend N. coined the term "bad aunt." She says about her young nieces: "My sister is bringing them up so regimented! I hate it! I get silly with them, loosen them up, and then here comes my sister saying, 'Don't listen to your Aunt N. She's silly.' So I'm the Bad Aunt."

Her comment brought to mind Judy Grahn's observation that the word *bad* is possibly derived from Anglo-saxons *baedel*, meaning "hermaphrodite," i.e., "gay."[19] Thus a *bad/baed* aunt is a gay aunt, loose, different, strange, uncommon, and off the beaten path (pun intended). Every family should have one.

Laughter is essential when relating to children and grows more important as they get older. Teenagers especially need to laugh. Having fun is a code language that builds empathy and trust. I recommend it over seriousness. It is also the best approach when there are obstacles such as disapproving or dangerous relatives.

My brother, who lives at a distance, strenuously disapproves of my life. We don't communicate. I ignore him, but send my two nieces candy for Christmas and money plus *Wonder Woman* comic books for their birthdays. On the surface it's inoffensive stuff—they get the gifts. I'm sure they also get the message. Simply providing a contrast presents them with an alternative within the family, which is the most important place for a contrast to be. When they get old enough to make their own decisions, possibly we'll get closer.

Even the uncomplicated relationship, if positive, can take a dramatic turn. Recently in my city, two different teen-age girls made news by turning in their fathers for incest. In both cases the young womin went first to an aunt with her story; receiving support, each went on to press charges.

I have my own little story. One of Jill's high school girlfriends came to me when she needed an abortion; although we were not close, she had unsympathetic parents and regarded me as "cool." It felt great to be an ally to this young womin.

In present-time reality incest is a CRIME. If we have strong suspicions or know of active perpetrators in our families, we must intervene on behalf of minors to either protective services or the criminal system, whichever is locally appropriate.[20]

To co-madre with lesbian mothers is essentially the same thing as baed-aunting, but can involve greater empathy. When Jill was a preschooler, I helped set up a day care co-op that had many lesbian volunteers. For two years it was a wonderful, fun, swinging place, fueled by lesbian-built playground equipment and carob-honey brownies. I still miss it fiercely.

Part 4: Psychosexuality

Having accepted and worked with Pumpkin for some time now, the conscious and rational part of my mind can recognize when this introject takes over and can either allow or veto her behavior. Veto power is important; it's no good to have a child driving or making medical decisions. If the situation calls for it, I can even override her basic view of the world: that *Men are dangerous* and *Wimmin fail to protect.* This creed and its corollaries, *Avoid men* and *Don't trust wimmin*, have been implanted in most U.S. women through childhood trauma.

Long before I developed rational veto power, however, yet another part of my brain had a lot of experience overriding Pumpkin's world philosophy: the sex part.[21]

In high school and college I felt intense peer pressure to fuck. This was to prove I had matured, practically to prove I was sapient. Producing a boyfriend, baby, or both is de rigueur for most U.S. young wimmin. Of course, producing a girlfriend is considered a faux pas.

To "achieve" fucking, the incest survivor must, among other tasks, suppress her early education about sex. Specifically het wimmin must override that *Men are dangerous* and lez wimmin must override that *Wimmin can't be trusted.*[22]

Het wimmin are flooded with familial cultural support and approval when they take on (approved) boyfriends. Sometimes this is the first support and approval these wimmin have known. It redoubles (in many circles) if the womin pursues conventional marriage. Het wimmin's psychological override of *Avoid men* expresses itself in the search for an exceptional man. In the push toward fucking, het wimmin need never question that *Wimmin can't be trusted.*

For lesbians the opposite pertains. We enjoy no cultural support or approval for taking on girlfriends and indeed this is the time most of us receive our strongest messages of rejection, being expelled from our natal families as we take our first sexual partners. Without such a strong cultural equation of sex with adulthood, I suspect many lesbians would perfect innate skills and talents, remaining . . . What? Nonsexual, unsexual, self-sexual? We need words for these choices . . . in any case, delaying sexual activity until their mid-twenties.[23]

But the usual experience is that in searching for or finding a girlfriend, we lose our natal family and enter lesbian subculture. It is important to recognize that LSC's primary purpose is to facilitate wimmin fucking wimmin. There is no need in LSC to question *Men are dangerous* because men are not desired for fucking; but the underlying message in



LSC is the same as in mainstream culture—through sex we validate our presence on earth.

In LSC the pressure to be sexual is possibly more intense than in mainstream culture, because usually we're a small group, everyone knows everyone's business, and there's little room to hide. Entry and continued membership in our subculture hinge on seeking sexual partners, groping through the motions, or at least having a history of once having done so. A womin who claims to be lez but is not sexually active is suspect. In the logic of psychosexuality, only by fucking can a lez demonstrate she trusts wimmin and is herself trustworthy. The idea of safe space directly supports lesbian sexuality.

For us the finding of a lover is momentous. A womin one can trust! She becomes by projection a savior, a rescuer, a miracle, and an antidote to our deepest fears of eternal abandonment. She often replaces a rejecting family and becomes, quite literally and physically, the ultimate safe space. When these unconscious sentiments are leavened into the joys of sex, the mixture is compelling. In ecstatic sexual relations many of us *do feel* safe and cradled, though the experience is temporary.

To get to sex, a lesbian has had to override her childhood understanding, that *Wimmin can't be trusted*, with LSC myths. She has become engaged, by passionate sex and/or "in love" feelings, with a lover to whom she believes the usual rules do not apply. Often she has rushed into sex (if more of us took our time and considered each relationship, there'd be a lot less fucking). Yet during this time the childhood anxiety has not been cured; it is only being held in abeyance while the sexual program runs its course. Maintaining strength in the sexual program depends on maintaining novelty. This is part of brain structure: we pay attention to the new, the unfamiliar, the vivid, the unique.

Through familiarity and repetition we eventually use up the novelty potential in any sexual relationship; we then have the possibility, *if* our resurgent anxiety levels are not too high, to realistically assess each other, like what we see, and recommit the relationship on a different level. We can mature into love which depends on genuine shared interests, fondness and respect. This second-stage love, if successful, will be more like an alliance than a fusion. Its great benefit is that the energy that went into sexuality during the zing stage is freed up. Like a peace dividend, that energy can be turned outward to the benefit of community, perhaps even the next generation. Many of us are at the age and stage of life where we would find satisfaction in this result.

Unfortunately, losing the zing usually triggers no such growth. Instead, the old and persistent *Wimmin can't be trusted* anxiety resurges in one

or both partners. Shortcomings that seemed invisible or endearing turn into proofs of irresponsibility and disloyalty. We start to evaluate each other as ordinary wimmin: weak, unreliable, and full of the same flaws we so hated in our mothers. Whichever womin is most uncomfortable will break away to try to fall in love anew, for she has learned that by falling in love she can drown out, at least temporarily, her painful disappointment with wimmin in general.

All this is basically an unconscious process. LSC assists with the myth that if one lover didn't make the falling-in-love fix last forever, there is probably, somewhere, another womin who is perfect. Alternatively, in LSC lovers may turn to thrill practices such as S/M to prolong novelty.[24] This is why lesbian community is particularly vibrant as a sexual marketplace, and also particularly circular.

The pain of ending a love affair is intolerable. Having experienced bliss for even a brief time—being existentially validated, overriding childhood mistrust, and feeling safely cradled—only to have it snatched away! It's horrible! But the pain is sharpened even more by introjected memories of past betrayals going inevitably back to mother. If the womin is not given to consciousness, if nothing has been learned, her immediate impulse will be a panicked search for a replacement sexual affair.

Unfortunately for us, the emotional goal of sexual affairs, remothering disguised as sexual love, cannot possibly be achieved. No one in present time can replace one's past inadequate mother. The search is pointless. Adult-adult relationships are based ultimately on companionship and affection, not on such impossible fulfillments.

A great healing leap is needed. We must consciousness-raise out of this tiresome childhood drama. Unacknowledged, our incested and abused childhoods rule our psychology and disrupt our maturation. Unintegrated, our childhood introjections alienate us from the next generation. Untranscended, our very sexuality keeps us infantile.

Endnotes

[1]Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1982). Classic work by Swiss psychiatrist on perpetuating violence. Non-technical, feminist. Contains probing examination of the childhood of Adolf Hitler and the generation of Germans who supported him. *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* (1984, same publisher) contains a lucid rebuttal of Freud's drive theory.

[2]Louise Armstrong, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* (New York: Pocket, 1987), a first person account; and Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), a historical overview of child sexual abuse in Western society.

[3]Louise Wisechild, *The Obsidian Mirror* (Seattle: Seal, 1988), a personal account of recovery through therapy from long and severe childhood incest.

[4]Jill's father was Jewish, a group that statistically has fewer assaultive men.

[5]I hope. I have some reason to think I've retrieved the major traumas.

[6]*Introjection* is a psychiatric term used by Alice Miller to describe incorporating traumatic childhood experiences into the psyche such that they can be reexperienced (when stimulated). I was reacting to an (unremembered) introjected event when I went catatonic in the naturopath's office. When the traumas are ongoing and multiple, the introjections can form clusters that become introjected children, like Pumpkin. Introjection is the opposite of projection.

[7]Diana Russell, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Basic, 1986), in-depth, somewhat technical statistical analysis of a large sampling of women—a wealth of information; and Gail Wyatt and Gloria Powell (Eds.), *Lasting Effects of Child Sexual Assault* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1988).

[8]Child sexual assault, by its nature, triggers amnesiac defenses in the victim (post-traumatic stress disorder) and thus self-reporting as in the two studies cited will *always* be lower than actual incidence. Also, because much assault takes place before age three and a half, before language, many survivors have available only incomplete and/or purely kinesthetic memories. On this point see Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, pp. 120-121 and 147, and E. Sue Blume, *Secret Survivors* (New York: John Wiley, 1990), p. 25. The younger and/or more violently assaulted a child victim was, the longer it will take her as an adult to remember incidents and the more coded and incomprehensible these memories may be, as was my "memory" of being unable to speak.

Psychological material on incest memories suggested I at least double self-reported figures. This is where the 70% figure comes from.

[9]Certain kinds of incest such as exhibitionism and emotional abuse, because no touching is involved, are excluded from statistical studies.

[10]A "bell" or "normal" curve is frequently found when measuring psychosociological and political phenomena, such as sexual assault. Such a curve would show that few wimmin experienced the two extremes of very severe or very slight sexual assault, while the largest number of wimmin experienced a medium degree of sexual assault.

[11]RC theorizes that when children have completely supportive adults, they can discharge all emotions at the time of trauma and thus will not need to repress, avoiding PTSD. Any comment?

[12]*Secret Survivors* (see Note 8). The definitive work on post-incest syndrome. Includes an after-effects checklist.

[13]Read *The History of Childhood*, Ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974) to get an overview of the improvement.

[14]"Feminist process" arose directly from practicing therapists in my city.

[15]I will soon. Writing this paper has helped me see that my mother was complicitous, by her absence, to my assault. My father too! Until now I've excused myself from confronting her on the grounds that she was not the perpetrator.

[16]Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, p. 170.

[17]I once attended a lesbian conference in which a coterie of attendees were dragging around stuffed animals and talking baby-talk. When others became annoyed and protested, the child-enacting wimmin got a lot of satisfaction from the negative attention and from being indignant about how non-nurturing lesbians are to each other. This is an extreme example, but many lesbians' idea of safe space is not far removed from such transparently childish needs.

[18]AI results in male babies 85% of the time. I've always thought of AI as the desire to avoid a penis for five minutes resulting in living with one for 20 years. This statistic deserves to be better known than it is.

For those considering becoming birth mothers, Helen Diner in *Mothers and Amazons* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973) shared a bit of Amazon lore that still seems wise about the Thermodontidine Amazons. "Ethics demanded that they must always resist the temptation to marry or rear a male child. For this reason they must perform the sex act indiscriminately with any stranger chosen at random, without emotional or sensual ties, and only for the sake of reproduction" (p. 100).

The Amazons, we recall, were active warriors.

[19]*Another Mother Tongue* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), p. 275.

[20]I personally advocate Gold Flower Brigades, wimmin's vigilante groups, as last resorts.

[21]Recent studies of the brain and consciousness indicate that what we each consider to be "I" is actually a composite of neural networks that don't integrate well. Rational consciousness is a small part of the brain; unconscious processes are by far the largest portion. In between are semi-autonomous and semi-conscious networks such as those involved in vision, sexuality, introjects.

[22]For purposes of simplicity, I assume lez and het orientation to be genetically determined.

[23]I don't believe in a strong femel sex drive. There have existed too many documented non-patriarchal cultures in which wimmin gave sex an extremely low priority.

[24]Thrill practices aside, there is a clear and terrible danger inherent in S/M, which is that a womin becomes orgasmically addicted to reenacting her child abuse/sex assault experiences. She learns/is reinforced to become not only a victim but also a perpetrator, though in controlled situations. This is extension of abuse, not its eradication. Ending abuse requires non-sexual therapy for the adult victim and intergenerational intervention on behalf of children.

This paper can be copied by women for non-profit purposes.

Cutting the Cord

Carolyn Gage

I have estranged from my mother voluntarily, and this has resulted in a shift of perspective as radical as the one produced by Galileo's thesis that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the solar system.

Although it may seem like heresy to a society which teaches children "thou shalt not be aware,"[1] a daughter can place herself at the center of her own solar system, reducing her mother to a distant planet, whose orbit is so remote it no longer exerts any pull. Galileo's theory did not move the sun, and my estrangement has not moved my mother. But what has happened is that my perceptions have been radically and irreversibly altered—and the movements in my personal universe are no longer the mystery they used to be when I labored under the delusion that my mother's love was central to my identity.

Motherhood is a role, not a state of being. Just as my mother had created and self-defined her role as a mother, so she had defined and created the complementary role I was to play as her daughter. I had been unable to challenge this role until I became an adult, because as an infant, I had depended almost exclusively on my mother as the organizer of my perceptions.

Just as a computer must boot up with a basic Disk Operating System (DOS) in order to run the other programs, so a child's mind must also have some basic form of organization imported from an adult system, in order to handle the increasingly diverse and complex social stimuli which come into the child's experience. I imported as my DOS the way my mother experienced the world, which included the way she saw herself and the way she saw me. This system had no programming to handle certain pieces of data, like my mother's secret nightly drinking or the father-rape I experienced. This information was sealed away in hidden files for twenty years, until I underwent the terrifying process of dumping the original DOS and reprogramming myself.

The beginning of my process of deconstructing the myths about my mother occurred when I realized I could not conceive of a female deity, of a spiritually empowered mother-figure. For me, the very idea implied

a contradiction in terms. "Mother" meant weak and pathetic, someone with good intentions, but completely without power. In fact, the whole idea of "womanhood" was flawed.

As a writer, I knew I had a problem. Someone had stolen my power of naming. The ability to conceptualize "mother" had been taken from me. I had a dissociated concept of the term: the sentimentalized fiction and a horrifying reality. Since "mother" is the archetype for so many of our relationships to others and orientations towards systems, I knew this split meant trouble. According to the definitions downloaded into my brain by my family of birth, I was set up to run nothing but relationship programs based on denial (the sentimental fiction) or abuse (the reality of my experience with my mother).

What did I stand to lose if I changed the default program? Not much—except the illusion that my mother loved me. That may seem to be a measly pay-off for retaining a system of beliefs guaranteed to produce a life of misery and isolation, but cutting the cord—even when the mother, like mine, is toxic—is one of the hardest things I have ever done. I felt like I was taking my own life.

When a child begins life with a mother or other primary caregiver, she develops from a state where her mother's well-being (including the maintenance of her denial systems) are one-and-the-same with the child's own well-being. Unfortunately, it is also during this period of ultimate co-dependency that the child's original tracks of perception are laid in the brain. For this reason, there is a deep instinctual reflex to protect the ties to the mother, almost at any cost. Even when the child becomes an adult who can support herself, seek out healthier role models, and meet her needs for intimacy in a variety of ways, it is still very, very difficult to reject the primary caregiver.

Galileo's insistence on a new order for the solar system brought down the wrath of the Inquisition on his head, and he was compelled to recant under threat of torture. A similar pack of judges and tormentors waits to descend on the heretic who would displace the central authority figures for the basic unit of patriarchy, the family.

Because of this threat, the intellectual ability to perceive that one's mother is a dangerous influence is not necessarily accompanied by the resolve to alter the relationship. The emotional repercussions of estrangement are often acute and dramatic, and many therapists are reluctant to advise cutting contact, because they fear having to deal with these consequences—finding it more convenient to work with the less obvious, but more virulent consequences of the long-term toxic exposure than with the blatant symptoms of withdrawal. Ongoing contact also ensures the



client's continued deference to central authority, a dynamic which can be exploited by unprincipled therapists.

I had lived half my life with my mother defining what "mother" meant to me, and I realized I was still, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "wildly unmothered."[2] Nor did I have any clue how to correct the situation. But I did know that I was unwilling to live the second half of my life as I had lived the first, and that the key lay in reclaiming the power to name.

I began a long and painful process of reconstructing images of motherhood. This took several years.

I made a poster covered with pictures of my "mothers" and their quotes. I would visit these women in my mind. I would talk with them. They included Harriet Tubman, who returned time and time again to the hellish country of her enslavement, to bring other sufferers to freedom. In her fierce warrior motherhood, she would threaten to shoot anyone who jeopardized the mission by attempting to turn back. And she never lost a passenger.

Another mother is Ida Wells-Barnett, who told the truth about lynching, even at a time when rising middle class Blacks were separating themselves from what they saw as a misguided and fanatical cause. Unfazed by lack of support, Ida carried a gun and let everyone know she intended to use it.

Another of my mothers is Donaldina Cameron, who spent her life on dangerous missions to rescue Chinese girls who were being drugged with opium, imprisoned, and forced into lives of prostitution in San Francisco's Chinatown. Rescuing girls who had been taught to believe she was the incarnation of the "White Devil," Donaldina's life was in constant danger, but she could not hear of a girl in slavery without attempting to save her.

And there is Belva Lockwood, who refused a teaching job which paid women less than men. There is Andrea Dworkin, the tireless worker and truth-teller about pornography. There is Emily Dickinson, who faithfully nurtured and cultivated her brilliance in isolation and obscurity, knowing that her work would never be recognized in her lifetime. There is Amelia Earhart, challenging women to live our dreams, admonishing us that courage is the price of peace. There is Gertrude Stein, who continued to write all her life, in the face of unrelenting scorn and ridicule.

As I began to reclaim the word "mother," in terms that held specific meaning for me as a playwright, as a Lesbian, as a survivor of incest, it became more and more clear to me that my own so-called mother was a grotesque caricature of the role. She had used me for her own support, even before I was old enough to go to school. She had poured the tales

of her own disappointed life into my childish ears, establishing the dynamic wherein I would be her confidante, but she would never be mine. She had exposed me repeatedly to the sexual assaults, violence, and emotional abuse of the man she married—using me, in fact, as a buffer for herself. And finally, she had attempted to head off any efforts on my part to recruit support by discrediting and marginalizing me in the family, and attempting to sabotage any relationships I might try to develop outside the family.

Just as one cannot say "mankind" and think "woman," one cannot have two such diametrically opposed models for the word "mother." Either the word meant courage, loyalty, protection, integrity, adherence to one's vision, and accountability . . . or it meant the particular social fiction cultivated by my primary caregiver and based on the fact of her biological parentage. I chose the first definition, and this left me with the question of what to do about the false role model. How do you strip your mother of her motherhood?

The first thing I did was to change my name. I named myself after the woman whose life held the most relevance to the challenges I faced: Matilda Joslyn Gage. Matilda Gage had been a prominent worker in the suffrage movement in this country. One hundred years before the arrival of "Women's Studies," Matilda had been researching women of achievement from every region of the world, all the way back to Sappho. She wrote a scathing indictment of christianity, *Women, Church, and State,* revealing the hopeless misogyny behind the entire religion—and this at the same time when Elizabeth Cady Stanton was attempting to feminize the scriptures in her so-called "women's bible"!

Matilda's radical feminism incorporated an uncompromising critique of all the institutions of patriarchy, making the connections between women's clothing, marriage, christianity, racism, and suffrage. She was eventually betrayed by the women she had trusted the most and maneuvered out of the movement to which she had given her life. Until recently, she had been effectively written out of the history of women's suffrage, even though her contributions were as significant as those of Anthony and Stanton.

Matilda's integrated vision and complete refusal to make any concessions to the prejudices of the time were the reasons I wanted her to be my spiritual mother. I have built a house for Matilda in my mind, and I visit with her frequently. Some might call it prayer. She asks me in, we drink tea, and I tell her about my latest eviction or the most recent attempts to censor my work. I especially talk to her about horizontal hostil ity, which I encounter frequently as a Lesbian performer and playwright.



She confirms my experience, shares some of her history, and encourages me to let myself know what I know about human nature. I leave her house, basking in her pride that I am her daughter, reinforced in my sense of mission. That we have found each other across the centuries is vindication for both of us.

At the time that I changed my last name to Gage, I also reclaimed my first name, Carolyn. My mother had named me after herself, a practice which in itself represents an assault on a child's autonomy. To avoid confusion, I had always been referred to as "Carol," while my mother was called "Carolyn." Realizing the serious implications of a name which was a shortened version of my mother's, I took back my right to be called "Carolyn," and in doing so, challenged my mother's identity.

My mother was resistant to honoring my name change until I pointed out that to persist in calling someone a name they don't like is a form of abuse. She now addresses her letters to me by my name, by her name. The competition she had attempted to avoid by programming me as an extension, a reflection, a diminutive version of herself, has boomeranged. The fact we share the same name invites the very comparisons she hoped to strangle at birth.

During this period of intensive reprogramming, I felt a strong need to be protected from personal contact with the woman I was "de-mothering." I knew that my new operating system was not ready to take over all the functions yet, and that I needed to avoid situations where she could trigger the dissociative state I refer to as the "Dutiful Daughter" program.

I changed and unlisted my number, and I only communicated with my mother through letters. She had a strong reaction to this severance, because it deprived her of the opportunity to emit the auditory and visual cues which never failed to access pre-programmed "Dutiful Daughter" responses in me. She contacted friends of mine, warning them that I was crazy and probably suicidal—my desire not to see her being sure proof of derangement!

I listed specific episodes of abuse and betrayal from my childhood, and I confronted her with these in a letter. She denied everything. She charged me with ruining her holidays, causing her sleep to be disrupted. She insisted that she and I had been victims together, that she had had no responsibility—or capacity—to protect me from my father. And then she began to send chatty letters, as if nothing had changed between us.

After two years, she became desperate to see me, and she flew 3000 miles, against my will, to the city where I lived. Still refusing to be accountable, she was hoping that her physical presence might inspire me to resume the fiction of the loving mother and her adoring daughter.

Her gravitational pull was so great, I had to leave the city during the period when I knew she would be there. This was one of the most difficult and painful actions I have ever taken.

My mother was so convinced that I must be the creature she had created for her own purposes, she could not believe I wouldn't meet her at the airport. I pictured her sitting in her hotel room—with a bottle of vodka—for those three days, expecting hourly to hear from me. I sat on the side of a mountain a hundred miles away, wondering if I was a heartless ingrate or a valiant Amazon warrior. Did the sun revolve around the earth or did the earth revolve around the sun? Would I, could I, actually become the center of my universe, after all these years of orbiting others?

The third year of estrangement passed. My recovery was advancing. I was beginning to integrate some of the silenced and split-off selves from my past. One day, I sat down with all these damaged and sometimes dangerous children—most of whom feared and distrusted the woman who raised us—and I asked them if there was anything she could possibly do which would make them believe she had changed, that she really was safe to contact. The answer was immediate, and it took me by surprise: They wanted money. A lot of money.

I had never asked for money from either parent, because it was part of my conditioning from my father that all females are gold-diggers and financial parasites. My mother conditioned me not to ask for anything, ever. It was difficult for me to make this demand, and I needed to challenge not only the original programming about money and worthless daughters, but also some later values from the women's community that love and money are entirely unrelated.

This is, of course, ridiculous. Children understand very early the connection between the two. They know when they are a low priority in terms of family finances. They notice when the parents indulge their own whims, but dismiss the desires of the child. They are very quick to understand when the family economic policies are based on the fact that the father is entitled and the other members are charity cases.

In my case, my mother had ignored my abuse because of her attachment to my father's money and social status. She had married two very wealthy men, and she was certainly capable of making reparations.

Demanding financial reparation brought my relationship to my birth mother into immediate focus. The money issues in our family had apparently been even more taboo than the alcoholism or the sexual abuse. Making this demand was a radical action which lent substance to my memory of abuse and enhanced my self-esteem. I excerpt from the letter:

I read your letter with interest. You express an apparently sincere desire to meet with me and talk. All of your correspondence to me over the last three years has expressed this interest in presenting your side of things.

The problem between us is *not* my failure to listen to you. It is your failure to hear me and to take responsibility for your actions in the past. For thirty-four years I listened to your problems. I remember being hauled out of bed when I was four years old to take care of you. I know your position. I know it by heart. As a child, I had no choice but to listen to you, listen to you, listen to you . . . even as I starved and cut myself up and vomited and cried at night. I listened to you. You didn't listen to me. . . .

You have defined and continue to define me as the problem. This is a common position for mothers to take with daughters in incest/abuse situations, because they are unwilling to confront the abuser or their own complicity. The abuser punched me; I was banished from the house. My teachers notice my acting out behaviors; I get taken to be incarcerated in a mental institute. I am unable to eat or I throw up in the presence of the abuser; I am sent to my room for being antisocial and accused of hypochondria. My pain draws comments from the neighbor; I am lectured and shamed for getting you into trouble. . . .

I am not interested in making you feel guilty or in making you suffer at all. I know you suffer tremendously. But your guilt and suffering do me no good at all. The issue is not guilt. It is responsibility. . . .

You want a dialogue with me? Here is a list of the facts in our relationship. . . .

1) For eighteen years, I suffered severe emotional battering, physical deprivation, and sexual abuse. This abuse was ongoing and extreme. I will live with the effects of it for the rest of my life. This abuse has scarred me deeply and has affected my relationships, my career, and my self-esteem.

2) As a child (an overly-conscientious one at that), I was in no way the cause of the abuse. I neither provoked it nor deserved it.

3) The kind of abuse I experienced is not a normal part of growing up. Verbal, physical, and sexual abuse are not part of paying one's dues as a child. They are immoral and criminal acts.

4) Without your complicity, the abuse could not have occurred. You enabled the abuser, participated in a campaign to cover up, and blamed the victim.

5) You knew about the abuse. You witnessed daily the emotional battering. You chose to ignore the obvious self-mutilation, starvation, and other blatant symptoms I developed in response to living in terror. You ignored a neighbor's intervention . . .

6) You had a legal and moral responsibility as my guardian to protect me.

7) You chose to continue exposing me to the abuser. This choice was motivated, at least in part, by the abuser's money—which meant security, comfort, and status to you. This security, comfort and status were not available to me as the victim, living as I did with painful physical pathologies, living in terror, and having no status in the family . . .

8) You have the ability to offer reparations for the damage you were in part responsible for. This is not true for many abused children, but in our case, it is . . . Nothing could ever compensate me for the horror of my childhood or the damage I have and continue to suffer, but reparations would demonstrate to me that you acknowledged the abuse, claimed responsibility, regretted your choices, and were willing to rectify as much as possible the damage from the past. If you are unwilling to make reparations, then you obviously believe one or more of the following lies:

There was no abuse. It wasn't significant. I deserved or caused it. Abuse is a natural part of childhood. You didn't know. It wasn't your responsibility. You couldn't stop it. You can't pay.

All of these statements are lies. We have no basis for communication if your position incorporates any of these statements.

My mother responded to the demand for reparations with predictable outrage. She had spent her life prostituting herself to gain the money she had, and she was not about to see another woman—a Lesbian!—get her hard-earned money, even if she had pimped her daughter. No one ever paid her for the suffering she experienced as a child! Why should she pay her own daughter?

That was two years ago. I receive letters from her from time to time, mostly pleas for reconciliation. I have explained to her that "reconciliation" implies a return to a previous state of unity, but that all we ever had was a fiction based on denial of my abuse. What could we go back to, except a lie at my expense? I can't believe in Santa Claus again, either.

The estrangement is unsettling, painful, but increasingly insignificant. I have been able to focus on my real mothers, on their examples, on actions which are mothering for me and for the women in my life—and, I hope, the women of the future.

It is my perception, from the center of my solar system, that many women pay a high price for even the annual visit home, the six or seven phone calls a year, the birthday cards. This is because abuse is always registered. One cannot choose to ignore it, transcend or transform it. One can numb out, one can dissociate, one can side with the abuser



against oneself, one can pass it on, one can drink, one can work compulsively, one can devote one's life to the pursuit of rescuers—who strangely enough always turn into betrayer-abandoners. One can do many things with abuse—except avoid the damage.

I never attempt intimacy with women who maintain dysfunctional contact/dissociative states with toxic family members. I have learned from experience who picks up after these visits—that I will become the target for the projected affect. Having undergone a painful withdrawal to achieve "relationship sobriety" in my life, I am unwilling to give my energy to women who are practicing denial and maintaining contact with a toxic family. The issue is not the quality or quantity of interactions with a toxic mother—although, of course, the less contact the better. Rather, the most overwhelming impact from contact with a toxic mother derives from a Lesbian's decision to retain the counterfeit as a prototype.

Endnotes

[1]From the title of Alice Miller's *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1984).

[2]Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam, 1977), p. 226.

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Fierce Love and Well Mothering

Vonceil Smith

My mother was born into the classic black authoritarian household of the 1920s (described in detail by Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*). Learning to call her father something other than Mr. Hall was a slow and labored process. His total domination afforded him privilege to control and abuse his wife and children. His regular use of corporal punishment was endorsed by the dominant community, making his home a castle with a dungeon. Long before her puberty, my mother's father began entering her bedroom. Though everyone in the house knew of his inappropriate attentions, there was no one who could protect her.

Escape from his sexual violence required that she become a child bride (at age 12) to a man whose rough handling of her was seconded only by his economic neglect. Her weekly torture by his drunken "love-making" was interrupted by the ravaging effects of pregnancy and nonassisted labor and delivery. My mother breastfed her first child, a son, until his third birthday for fear that there would not be enough food.

This woman's, my mother's, second escape came when my father fought the dragon that was her husband and spirited her to another city. She describes relief that violence with this new husband only occurred outside of the bedroom. She was also relieved to find herself, now an adult, only beaten once every two weeks and rarely hungry.

I was born into her second marriage. My father seemed to me more or less like everybody else's Daddy. I worshipped him as only a daughter can. As much as I loved the man who took me fishing, bragged on me to his friends and made me safe, I hated the man who beat my mother and made me afraid. During these episodes of violence, this man, who typically denied me nothing, shut out my pleas.

During one of these episodes, I can remember sitting on the second floor landing cradling a 38 caliber revolver and wondering exactly how far Daddy would have to go before I shot him. Feeling more and more impotent I realized I could never kill him or risk that this violence would be turned on me.

Ever my mother's daughter I did not remain powerless against this assault on my well being. At about age 12, I began to vomit and faint during each fight. The abuse my mother quietly bore was traded for rage that her daughter would suffer also. Her foot went down, my father went

away. My mother feared making me victim to a stepfather and allowed "Daddy" to return. The cycle had, however, been broken. He has not hit her in over 20 years.

Other than my father and brother, my life was empty of male contact. I was rarely left alone with uncles or cousins or ministers or doctors. My mother's tenacity in keeping me away from Daddy's buddies was obscure, and I supposed it was just one of her quirks. The other possibility was that the activities of men were off limits to me. She would or could not explain that this segregation was her way of keeping me safe.

My mother's attempts to keep me safe as a child are legendary. She hid the reality of racism from me until public school integration. She made sure that society's sanctioning of public school corporal punishment did not include me. I was always at my mother's side, under her skirts, watching her work. A familiar and secure smell.

When I was molested by the one uncle she trusted, my disclosure of that horror was met with belief and support. Mama made it clear that I had been wronged and that she had been betrayed. She also confronted him which made me proud and sure that my word had power. However, if I thought my life was restricted before that event, I was wrong. Her only way to ensure that I was never touched in that way again was to tighten the leash.

I did not date until my 16th birthday. My mother preferred that I drove on these dates and that of course we went Dutch. She also made sure that I could have fun and privacy at home. My friends were always amazed at how "cool" my mother was about vices.

Although my mother attempted to create in me a woman free to occupy her own space without fear, our histories of conflicted relationships with men took the expected toll. Beneath men's facade of humanity I saw violent animals, always on the prowl, always waiting to use their "power over" to cause pain, humiliation and destruction. It was not until my mother could explain her childhood that I questioned my fear and loathing of men. Only then did the sweating and trembling which happened when I used public transportation or stood in a crowd make sense.

It has always fascinated me that my flinching at the sight of men that were too tall or too loud, or let's face it, too male, went away when I defined myself as lesbian. As if the knowledge that they would never be in my bed, in my home, in my passion made me less afraid. There was more room to feel sorrow rather than hatred for my father. A place where my uncle's abuse became an indication of weakness rather than power.

Since coming out, most of my personal and political activities have centered on women. I find I am less fearful that my lesbianism is

neurotic in origin than some of my friends. However, I am less free in many respects because of my maternal bonds. I want my lovers and friends to know my mother and judge them by their response to her. Politically, I am less tolerant of victim centering than many of my sisters. My mother modeled and I learned to focus on my assets rather than encumbrances. I was furious when Alix Dobkin embraced Hedda Nussbaum as a cause, because my mother's victimization never was used to legitimize my abuse or neglect.

I have met very few women in my travels who have escaped childhood sexual abuse or violence. Whether this observation is a function of my particular peer group or not is uncertain. I would suspect, given my experience as a social scientist, that feminists are simply more willing to disclose that part of their past. Many of my lovers have been victims of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse. I cannot help but wonder whether this is my attempt to "marry a girl/just like the one/that married dear old Dad." For example, my last lover was an Irish Catholic woman in her mid 30s, whose childhood includes horrors I have rarely seen even in court referred cases of child abuse. Her early life was filled with broken bones, forced prostitution, starvation, and no medical care. This abuse occurred publicly, in full view of the criminal justice, educational, religious, and welfare systems of this country.

Although my mother enjoys my lesbian friends, she can only like my lovers for the first two weeks. After she is quite certain that the relationship is sexual, cordiality goes out the window. I believe that my lovers become not rivals, but ersatz men in my mother's eyes. Consequently, she can only view them as a threat to my safety and well being. My mother and I constantly discuss, argue, pout, and despair about this problem as well as others. My mother is disappointed that I do not share her views about christianity, femininity, sexuality, or politics. I am disappointed that she can accept me as a lesbian in principle, but not in practice.

Despite all the disagreements that camouflage true feelings, my mother and I are committed deeply to each other and to our relationship. Selfishly, I am not about to lose the person who has known me always, who wants me happy, and who loves me the best way she knows how. I believe my mother adores me because of and in spite of who I have become. And I know she is tickled by my journey through dykedom. Through me my mother lives vicariously a life that was never open to her. Why should she let little things keep her from the adventure?

This paper can be copied by women for non-profit purposes.

Her Life and Mine

Noel Furie

Dedication

For Selma who insisted I grow and always wanted the best for and from me. It is impossible to imagine life without her.

And for Betsey who held me through the most painful passages.

I am 48 now, two years older than my mother was when she died. It's strange not having her out there in front of me any more. Throughout my life I had thought, "This is what she was doing at my age and how different I am." Or, "How much the same we are." Now she is not there for me as that given against which to measure myself. It used to be that mostly I thought I was doing it better than she had, measure for measure. That was before she died. I still think it is true, but *how* I think it has changed.

So then to go back.

My mother Therese was 19 when I was born. She was the seventh of seven sisters of an Irish-French mother and a German father. The story goes that her family was quite well-to-do. All the daughters went to private Catholic boarding schools until the stock market crash when her father lost a fortune. My mother was a little girl then. It must have been hard for *her* mother to cope with the combination of financial disaster, a husband in a T.B. sanatorium and the work of caring for her youngest daughter, Therese. Because her six sisters before her had gone to Catholic boarding schools with the Order of the Sacred Heart, the nuns decided that my mother could attend their prestigious school free of charge. She was in their care from the age of four until she graduated from high school. I understand that there were some summers and holidays when she stayed at school since going home was impossible for reasons that are still unclear to me. According to family and school reports, Therese was considered brilliant and difficult. I was 26 when she died. How she died is hard to talk about. It was many years before I came to understand the pain—both hers and mine.

My mother Therese married my father when she was 18 years old, having just graduated from high school. He was 19 and in the air force.

It was 1943. I was born in 1944. I don't have any clear early memories of her, but there are pictures, and she was a beautiful young woman. From those pictures I can also see that she loved me, her first baby. I don't know when things started going bad for her. After my birth? Or that of my first brother? The earliest memory of trouble that I have dates to when I was 3 or 4 years old. We were in Oregon in a logging camp. There was a period when she kept the curtains closed on all the windows of our cabin. And then one day her pajamas caught on fire. From the pot-bellied stove? The cause was never entirely clear but I knew that she had set the fire. I'm not sure how I knew. I think it was something my father said as he struggled to put out the flames.

Sometime after that she flew East to New York City. My brother, my father and I took a train across the country shortly thereafter to be with her on the East Coast so that she could see the psychiatrist here who was to make her "well."

I have no memories of emotional difficulties for my mother for several years following our arrival on the East Coast except for those long periods of time when the curtains closed out the daylight. Then a third child was born and shortly thereafter, a fourth. My mother told me at a later date that her psychiatrist had warned my father that she would be unable to cope with more children. And it was after this younger brother and sister were born that what had come to be known as my mother's "mental illness" began to coalesce. Certainly it became a vivid reality for me.

Now, I can remember adoring my mother with all the passion possible in the heart of a two year old girl. I wanted her to love me. I wanted to be absorbed completely by the wonder of her. The later years of pain and anger all but smothered that original and deeper passion.

The pain began to be conscious for me when I was 13 or so. Three things happened that year. I am not sure of the sequence but each had enormous impact.

My mother was extremely beautiful according to whatever were the standards then. There is a story that a Hollywood talent agent "discovered" her when she was a child and wanted to make her a star. Her family forbade it—apparently it was beneath the dignity of her upperclass background. So in my thirteenth year, she decided that I and my brother would become models. And I would become and fulfill her dreams.

I had mixed feelings regarding my work as a model. On the one hand, I was flattered that I should be thought of as "pretty enough." At 13, I found it was exciting to take the train to New York City for bookings and professional children's school. On the other hand, I was very self-conscious, and often subject to harassment from male photographers. It had



been my mother who had made me vulnerable to this painful reality. I felt betrayed by her though at the time I had no words for it. The thought itself was barely formed. I was only conscious of a deep discomfort. I know now she was teaching me to become a woman in the way she thought she had wanted for herself. Though she did not understand it, that way was part of what destroyed her.

Also, that year, my younger brother almost died. The doctor didn't believe the danger he was in but my mother knew and her fear was palpable. Still, she took command, ordered my father to fill the tub with cold water and ice and then held my brother in the freezing water till his 107° fever came down. This moment of strength is vivid in my mind but I think the strain of it cost her dearly.

That year, my thirteenth, the third event I remember was my mother's "nervous breakdown." My father took her to Fairfield Hills State Mental Hospital. She was weak and begging not to be taken away. I don't know what she did to warrant being committed to an institution. It was one of the many times that such an event would shake my world and hers.

Why did these events happen? And what was her pain about? As I think about it now, I see her situation as not so very different from that of many women. In her case, she had not learned how to survive even minimally. She was terrified of much that I take for granted. She couldn't drive a car; she was afraid to go grocery shopping alone. The fact that she was beautiful weakened her further because she believed that her beauty would bring her happiness and that men would love her and take care of her because of it. But her beauty did not make her whole. And, because of her upperclass background, she expected others to do for her what most of us take for granted we will do for ourselves. Whatever capacity she had for growth was diminished by both her class expectations and by her beauty. She was "manic-depressive" and, though I didn't know it at the time, an alcoholic. She took tranquilizers and she tried to kill herself with terrifying regularity.

Through my teen years, my anger and contempt grew deeper as my mother grew more and more self-destructive. I was in a rage that she was destroying herself. I hated her for what she was doing to me and for what she was trying to do to herself. The door to what had been a passionate love for her was shut so tight that I couldn't feel any of her pain.

My mother stayed married to my father for 17 years. She told me that she had hated him much of that time and I remember he was a coward and cruel to her when she was most vulnerable. At the time I was sure that I wouldn't ever do anything so wasteful of my life as to stay in an unhappy marriage. When I got married myself, I knew it wasn't forever. But

it was unhappy and it was for ten years. And it was remembering how bad her life had been that made me change mine. By then, she had died.

My mother divorced my father when I was 16. She thought that my brother and I could support her and our younger siblings with our modeling. Her drinking and her use of tranquilizers continued and it became clear that she couldn't take care of four children. For my part, I resented her wanting me to work to take care of her. Eventually, there were court orders, child custody battles and interviews with child welfare people: My father ended up with custody of the four of us and my mother was devastated.

It was only after having had children of my own and facing the possibility of losing them because I am a Lesbian that I came to realize what the reality of losing her children had meant to her. At the time I tried to tell her it was alright, we'd visit her, call and so on. Now my own experience as a mother informs my understanding of the depth of her pain and humiliation.

In the years that followed, I graduated from high school and went to work in New York City. Various people took care of my mother during those years. Sometimes her family stepped in, sometimes a boyfriend or a friend. Sometimes I'd get a call from one of these people that Therese was in Fairfield Hills or sometimes the call would be from her: "Noelly, come help me." Then I would go to find her, with blood all over the house or threatening to overdose on her tranquilizers. I got sick of it.

Shortly after I was married, my mother remarried. Her new husband was a doctor with a decidedly sadistic streak. According to one of her sisters, he injected her with speed in their bedroom. She, for her part, tried to burn his house down. (I loved it that she had done that. I saw it as a rare act of rebellion on her part.)

I was 26 when my mother died. I had had my first child, a girl. My mother had married a third time and was living in Washington, DC with her new husband. How she died is difficult to talk about, but I will.

My mother's husband had gone to "dry out" at an alcoholic retreat. She had refused to go with him. She stayed in their apartment, and got drunk. Then she tore around the place in what must have been an incredible rage destroying everything he treasured. After a time, she passed out and suffocated in her own vomit. And so, finally, she destroyed herself.

A year after my mother died, I had another child. I found myself depressed as she had been. Unhappy in marriage as she had been. And I thought, I don't want my life to go on like this, so much like hers. This was in the early 70s, feminism had started its "second wave." And I



became a part of that second wave. It was at this time that I was able to begin to heal the pain between my mother and me.

Long before she died, I had left my mother. I closed the gate to the source of my passion for her because if it were left open, I could not survive her self-destruction. I had to close her out and in so doing I closed myself in. After she died, I began to know that a part of me had been lost to myself and that this loss was as painful as the loss of her. I felt deeply that I must learn to love her again. She was the source of my life. In whatever ways she failed me, I needed to understand that the responsibility was not hers but had the oppressive condition of women as its source.

It was five years after my mother died that I became a lesbian. I'm not sure that I would have had the strength to go against her will in such a manner if she had lived. Her energy and influence over me were very, very powerful. But she did die and in dying freed me to see her life and my need for my own.

I adored my first lesbian lover in the way that I had adored my mother when I was two years old. I wanted this woman to take care of me as my mother hadn't. She couldn't of course, nor did she want to take care of me in the way I thought I needed. Now I am grateful, though at the time all I could feel was rejection. Because I loved her and didn't want to lose her, I needed to find a way for us to have an adult and mutually respectful relationship. It was a long hard struggle during which I learned I had to take care of myself and to love myself. I feel very, very fortunate that she and I got through that stage of our knowing each other. We survived those changes and are now long-time intimates and cronies together.

I came to clear my guilt in regard to my mother with the help of my first lover and other lesbians with whom I was close. I remember one evening when four of us were looking through my family albums. The pictures there reveal the anger, tensions and the jealousies—as pictures will. It came as a great surprise that I had never really seen what was so obvious that night. Up until that moment I had always felt guilty about my anger toward my mother. Everyone else seemed to think her wonderful. She herself often said that I didn't love her enough; that she had loved *her* mother much, much more. That night I saw my mother and me through the eyes of my lesbian friends and I knew that my anger toward her had been justified. I remembered some of the times with her in which I had felt humiliated or in which I had shut down from the emotions caused by her self-destructiveness.

Through the years that followed my feminist perspective deepened and my anger toward my mother began to change. During that time I realized that I needed to see our situation (hers and mine) differently—in

a political context—so that I could grow beyond the anger into something constructive. I had a sense that if I couldn't do that, i.e., couldn't create something constructive in myself in regard to my relationship with my mother, then some part of what is spiritual about me, my longing for the Earth and some connection to it, would be lost. Her body, her female body, was and is both a metaphor and real, symbol and actuality, for the Earth and life. How destroyed her spirit was and therefore how destructive she was towards me is a concrete example of the result of patriarchy's constant attacks on all that is female and sacred. I felt I had to take her back to begin to heal the wounds we had inflicted upon each other. This healing goes on still, as our relationship does. I learned that my mother was a woman who had been taught, as all women have been taught, to pass her pain on down to her daughter. The patriarch insists on it. I thought of the specifics of her life: how much of a victim she had been and how much self-hate she had learned. My anger abated.

Over the next several years I found myself talking frequently with my lover about my mother. In her presence I was able to gradually open my heart to my grief. There were nights when the memory of my mother came flooding in and I would find myself sobbing, grieving at last, for my own loss and also for all the pain in her life.

So it was as a lesbian and with the support of other lesbians that I began to love my mother again. It was through my close and long-term intimate relationships with lesbians that I learned to trust. Lesbian women had confirmed my anger and understood on the deepest level the degree of pain which had existed between my mother and me. With my anger freed, I was able to understand the cause of my pain and then finally, after several more years, to truly mourn the loss of my mother—to herself, to me, to this earth.

I have a wooden doll made by a woman from Quebec. She arrived through the mail several years back. She looks like my mother did when I was young. So she is my mother and I have made my peace with her, through her. I told her that she had to behave herself. No self-destruction. No drinking. None of that funny business with the razor blades. And she has agreed because she wants to live. And she does. In me.

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On Being Disowned

Carla Duke

The Break

It was in January 1969, a few days after my 19th birthday. I was home from college for the holidays. The Christmas tree was still up, and my warm memories of the holidays and my birthday were still fresh.

I was working over the holidays at the VA Hospital doing statistics and writing an article about the research I had done the previous summer. My boss, Dr. Popkoff, was also my mother's therapist. This fact, until now, had not seemed particularly odd. Not that I liked the man. He had an insincere quality about him.

Thursday, when I was at the Hospital, he called me into his office.

"Your mother just left," he announced. Why is he telling me this, I wonder. My mother comes every week and she and I have an unspoken agreement not to speak about it or run into each other.

"She's been reading your mail."

"Reading my mail!" I was really furious about that; it was a complete violation of my rights to be reading my mail and even worse that it was all done on the sly. They had really sunk to new depths.

"Yes. She's been steaming the letters open and then resealing them. Since you came home for the holidays." So she has been reading all of my letters from my lover Susannah.

"It's none of their business." This was so personal. I was glad I'd been mailing my letters myself. At least, she wasn't reading mine, too.

"That's not how she feels about it." Here comes the lecture. "You promised them last summer you wouldn't get involved with anyone else. They feel a responsibility to get you over this perversion."

"They *forced* me to promise them just like they forced me to go to that Freudian psychiatrist by threatening to call Mary's parents in California and tell them we'd been sleeping together." Why couldn't anyone understand? "I loved Mary. And I love Susannah. There's nothing wrong with it. We're not hurting anybody!"

"I can't argue with you now, I haven't got time. I just wanted to warn you. They've had enough and they're going to talk to you tonight."

"Did you tell my mother you were going to talk to me?"

"Yes, she knows."

This didn't seem real.

After dinner, my mother and step-father called me to the dining room. I kept hoping the Doctor was wrong and everything would be all right.

My mother started. "Did Dr. Popkoff talk to you this afternoon?"

I nodded. I felt frozen inside.

"We have been reading your letters that come to the house. We know you are involved with this new one. What's her name? Susannah. You promised us you would never do this again."

She was really angry. My step-father didn't say anything, he just sat. For once my mother was going to do the talking.

"You have two choices," she continued austerely. "You can quit school, move back home, get a job and go through Freudian psychoanalysis to get cured of this 'disease'. You will pay for it yourself with your salary. It will probably take all the money you earn. You would live at home. It probably will take two to three years. If everything works out, we can talk about you going back to school then."

What was I hearing? This wasn't a choice. This was hell: The Freudian shrink they sent me to last summer was a complete nightmare. Everything that stood upright in a dream became a prick in his eyes and he would try to convince me I was fantasizing about sleeping with men. Disgusting. I couldn't do that again. And quit school? Vassar was the best thing that had happened to me in a long time. I loved being in school.

"Otherwise," my mother continued, "we will disown you. In our eyes, you will simply not be our daughter anymore. We will not give you any money. You must leave home and never come back again."

Not her daughter? Never come home? Never?

I started crying but made myself stop—I had to protect myself and not get too vulnerable.

"If you don't agree to psychoanalysis," she paused . . . now the real threats . . . "we have a responsibility to inform Vassar of what we know."

"What do you mean?" They're going to get me thrown out of college.

"We will write to the Dean of Students. We will tell him about your lesbian involvements and ask that you be expelled from school. We will ask them to revoke your scholarship."

No. I wouldn't let them. I would fight. I had to fight. I was scared.

My mother kept talking, she wasn't done yet.

"And Steve won't help you either. We are going to call him and tell him everything." So they would even call my father. My father who I had only just been in contact with for the past year after an eight year lapse.

I was completely numb.

They wanted an answer. There was no choice. If I agreed to what they asked, I would go stark raving mad. I didn't want to stop being a Lesbian; it had taken me years to accept it in myself. I didn't want to quit school. I certainly didn't want to have anything to do with Freudian psychoanalysis and I would never pay for it myself.

"I can't do what you ask," I said.

"You can. You don't want to!" my mother said.

I had a clear feeling I must acknowledge her in some way or get hit. I nodded back, with my eyes locked on the floor.

"And Harry must never set foot on this property again." What did they have against Harry, the only man in my life?

Losing no time, my mother went to the phone and called my father in Detroit. I was fading in and out and couldn't follow the conversation. Then she called me over to the phone. "He wants to talk to you." Was I going to have to sit through a hateful lecture that ended in rejection? Would my father try to cajole or reason with me to do as my parents wanted? I picked up the receiver with dread.

"Hi, Honey." My father sounded so sad. "Carla, I want you to know you can always stay here." My father was crying. "No matter what, Honey, you can always stay with me."

I was in shock and relief at the same time. Could this be real? I was going to have to open my mouth and say something. Oh, but I couldn't cry. I had to stay numb. I couldn't cry.

"When are you coming, Honey? Please come for a few days before you go back to school."

"Yeah. Day after tomorrow. I'll have to change my plane reservations."

"Good, we'll expect you then." Silence. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No." We said goodbye and hung up.

"He wants you to come there?" my mother demanded.

"Yes." My step-father was looking very stern. Oh, God, here it comes.

"You can never come back here again."

"I know." Please don't hit me.

"You know?" It seemed that my mother really wanted to be certain that I had heard everything she had said. I knew I had to look her in the eye before she would believe me.

"Yes, I know." I looked right at her with the blankest face I could muster and then looked away. Yes, I believe you mother. I know this is not an empty threat. I believe you will really do this.

Both my mother and my step-father seemed suddenly exhausted. Could it possibly be over? I waited another minute. No one spoke.

"Could I go to my room?" Was all hell going to break loose? Would this be taken as extreme disrespect? Oh, I wanted to get away from them and be by myself.

"Yes, you may."

The next day was a normal Friday. When I got off the Hospital elevator, the aluminum Christmas tree gleamed at me. I glared back. Our nice holiday had all been a sham. They had been planning this for weeks. For weeks.

My friend Harry picked me up for lunch. I told him what had happened, the whole miserable story. "I thought about moving over to your house tonight and staying there until my plane left in the morning." Could I go on? "The thing is, I don't know how much of a scene it would cause." I waited. It came. "I would really like to preserve my relationship with my mother as much as I can. And so I'd rather avoid any dramatic scenes if I can." I could hear myself pleading. "I'll stay at the house. It will make less trouble. But let's see each other tonight."

"Okay."

At 4:30 that afternoon, I called my step-father as usual to arrange to meet him and get a ride home. I was surprised to find he'd left without me. We lived 10 miles away in the countryside. I made up an excuse and asked one of the junior psychologists for a ride home. When I got home, I didn't mention it and noone asked me about it.

Frozen with fright, I announced most politely that Harry was coming at six to pick me up. Without looking up from his newspaper, my step-father said, "I told you Harry was not allowed on this property again."

I tried to stay calm, "I thought that meant once I was gone."

"No. It means Right Now!"

"I'm sorry. I misunderstood. It means a lot to me to see him again, before I go." I paused delicately. "Couldn't I just . . ."

My step-father was staring right into me with his hatred. "I told you he was not to come on this property again and I MEAN IT!"

I shivered my acquiescence and went to the phone. I was not staying here. Harry calmed me and we talked it over.

I was scared. Now I would have to tell them I was leaving. I knew my parents' need to control me. They might do anything. Well, I could call the police if they tried to hurt me. No, they wouldn't do that, would they?

I hung up the phone and went to my room to finish packing. There were so many things and I had only these two suitcases which were



already full of clothes I needed. What should I take? I would never have another chance. My stamp collection? No. My trophies from High School? No, that was kid stuff. My lesbian Colette novels? I couldn't find them. My mother must have gone through my bookcase and thrown them out. I packed my other favorite books. My HiFi? Too big. I packed the few photographs I had of myself as a kid. My mother had most of them. My sweatshirt I'd painted? No, too dippy. My stuffed animals? No room. I simply couldn't take it all.

I walked into the den. My mother sat cold and indifferent.

"Well, I thought I'd come in and tell you that I want to go to Harry's tonight, instead of staying here." I caught my breath. "I think it is ridiculous for you to take me to the airport since you've disowned me."

"I quite agree," my step-father said. "But I hope," a hot glare of anger covered his face, "that you haven't any ideas of Harry coming here to pick you up! He is not EVER to come on this property again!"

"No," I said meekly. "I was planning to take a taxi."

He looked relieved. "Well, I think that would be ok, don't you, Jane?"

"Yes," said my mother, "that would be fine."

"Call the taxi right now," he commanded.

"Well, I have to change clothes first."

"Fine," he roared, "but the taxi can be on its way while you change! I'll go out and move the car." He started putting on his boots.

I looked puzzled. "Move the car?" I asked softly.

"Yes," my mother said proudly, "we thought Harry might come and pick you up, so Dad parked the car in front of the gate."

My step-father stopped on the way to the door and came back.

"What flight are you taking in the morning?" He was brusque and official. No, I decided, I wasn't going to tell them.

"I don't see that you need to know that," I said almost calmly. I knew I had that right—I was no longer any relation to these two people.

"GET OUT OF HERE! GET OUT!'

"I have to change clothes," I muttered.

"FORGET THAT! GET OUT!"

"I haven't got any shoes on," I pleaded.

"Then get some on and get out! Jane, call a taxi."

I rushed away to my room, collected my last things. He rushed by and grabbed a suitcase and dragged it outside. It had taken him less than one minute to go 100 yards down the driveway and move the car. He must have run all the way.

I dragged a suitcase outside also. He gave me an angry glare as I passed him. I went back for the clothes on hangers. On my way out,

I kissed my mother on the cheek and said goodbye. She didn't respond. She didn't even flinch. So I went out the door to wait for the taxi.

My step-father raced past me."Goodbye, Dad."

No answer. He slammed the door behind him. I was alone in the dark.

I just stood there. In the cold. Leaning against the wooden support of the carport, my hands in my pockets. It was cold. Well, maybe it was cold, but I didn't feel it really. I just felt empty.

I thought to light a cigarette, but decided to save it for when I got cold. It would take a while for the taxi to come. At least 15 minutes.

The red lights of the radio transmission tower a mile away stared at me unblinking. It was a clear winter night and the stars were bright. Orion hung overhead, menacingly. Did they want me gone too?

Someone in the house turned on the outside light. My mother? My step-father? I was feeling cold. And there was an uneasiness in my back. They must be staring at me through the window. Wishing there was something I could do to hurry the taxi and leave, I hated them and life. I turned around. There was no one at the window.

I thought momentarily that they should care that I was out here freezing in the cold. Jesus! It must be 20 degrees. I shivered, just once. The whole scene of my expulsion flashed through my mind. I blocked it out.

I was freezing.

I was happy. I wanted to spin in a circle with rapture and dance. But I was sad. Every muscle and nerve of my body wanted to act out the ecstasy. I wanted to jump up and down. I wanted to run, fast. Away.

I thought, they must wonder if I am still here, if it was over or not. But no one was at the window. I was cold.

All my things sat on the pavement in the pale blue suitcases. Everything I owned that wasn't at school. I lit a cigarette. It warmed my hands a bit. I drifted back. Back to my childhood . . . . Remember the dream-wish you used to have: That some terrible accident would happen and your parents would die. That your parents would be gone, and you could go live at the orphanage and be happy. But they beat you to it. They killed you in their minds first.

I just want the taxi to come. I am beginning to shake. My parents must know I'm still here. They must be starting to get angry that I'm still here. I forget that doesn't matter now.



Now

It was 15 years until I saw my mother again; I hope never to see my step-father. By disowning me they gave me a swift lesson in "family values": if you are not what they value, then you are not in the family! I realized that my "family" must be a community of lesbians, not relatives.

My father took me in and helped me finish school. It meant a lot to me that he always made room for me—but I can't say it ever felt like home. His wife and I had an odd relationship, a mixture of fascination, dislike and friendship. The following Christmas was the worst in my life and started me thinking about the meaning of this Christian, family-oriented holiday—which I no longer celebrate.

When I got back to Vassar, I met with the Dean of Women as well as the head of Financial Aid and announced they would be receiving a letter branding me as a lesbian (to my knowledge it never came). Both women were sympathetic and helpful; the rule was if you were seeking "professional help" you would not be expelled or penalized in any way. There had to be rules, the Dean said, because these things "spread like wildfire." I spent the school year seeing a psychologist. (The following year this rule disappeared when Vassar went coed.)

Once again psychology/psychiatry was being used as mind/morality policing; they would try to change me, convince me that being a lesbian was bad and/or immature and/or a delusion. My mother's therapist could/should have helped my mother to work through her prejudices and accept me as a lesbian—instead he supported her in rejecting her only child. I became so suspicious of psychology/therapy/counseling that it was ten years until I was able to start therapy and get the professional help and support I desperately needed to start recovering from my childhood.

My first reaction to my parents disowning me was shock and self-protection. For me, this included icing my feelings so I did not lose control or become too vulnerable. I spent much of the first 6 months going around in a daze on a passive self-destructive course; my grades fell, I lost my campus job due to inattention, I went out with anyone, man or woman, who expressed an interest in me. When summer came, I was back at my father's house feeling desperately isolated. Letters from friends and my lesbian ex-lover were treasured jewels. I thought frequently of suicide, and began to plan an elaborate ritual for my death. I would drown myself in the lake when I returned to school, the lake where my first lesbian lover and I had gone many times to neck. I could picture it all so clearly in my mind. But that was 1969; feminism was exploding.

When I returned to Vassar I became embroiled in consciousness raising; many confusing, depressing things in life became clear. I recognized that I was a lesbian and the threat that represented to society. I rejected men, with great relief, and committed myself to the cause of women, the lesbian community and liberation; I felt reborn and forgot all about dying.

But, in spite of my joyous discovery of myself and the lesbian feminist community, I could not deal with my emotions. I put up a thick shell around myself with nonchalance and alcohol. Alcohol hurt my relationships, it harmed my body, it muddled my life—but I pretended not to notice. It dulled the deep and tremendous grief I felt about my mother. Not all of my agony stemmed from being disowned. There were so many issues from my childhood: my mother's erratic behavior, one minute loving and nurturing, the next violent and angry, slapping me across the room; her lack of respect for my boundaries; my step-father's alcoholic and dictatorial behavior; their expectation that I live their version of my life without regard for my talents or feelings; the physical and emotional retaliation when I disappointed them; the constant demand to be "nice."

When I finally acknowledged at age 30 that I was an alcoholic and stopped drinking, I faced an overwhelming mountain of unfinished business, which I am still working on: trust, issues around being heard and acknowledged (e.g., my irrational anger when my lover can't hear me), my fear of success or high visibility, my difficulty disclosing myself to others, my extreme fear of other peoples' anger and criticism, my anger/rage which sometimes erupts at the smallest trifle, and on and on.

My relationship with my mother has gone through many phases since she disowned me 24 years ago. For years I labored to regain her approval, writing long heart-felt letters trying to educate her and make her see that I had the same joys and sorrows in my life as anyone else. Her responses talked about the dog, the new roof, rarely anything substantial. After five years, I confronted her about disowning me—and she denied it! This was the last straw, I made up my mind that the next time I moved I would not tell my mother. No more cold upsetting letters, no more unsettling feminine Christmas gifts; I had had enough. It was a joyous feeling. I was finally fighting back. I was taking some power.

After four years of no contact, my mother located me. She had divorced my step-father; his alcoholism had worsened, he was beating her and finally tried to kill her. I was glad he was out of the picture now but I was wary. Did I want a relationship with my mother? Who was she really? Had she changed? I decided to re-establish a limited relationship with her. We wrote a few letters back and forth. I was sober now and cautious, my first priority to take care of myself, not educate her. My father was urging me to visit him and reconnect with my mother.

I decided I, the adult, wanted to face her in person with the safety of my father as a neutral party. Anticipating the visit, I had this terrible nightmare in which my mother, my father and I were having dinner and my mother started attacking me as a lesbian and a pervert. I ran out of the restaurant. I was in the middle of nowhere. I was trapped here with this awful woman! I woke up in a panic. Slowly I began to differentiate between the dream and real life. Yes, I could escape—I was no longer 19 and at the mercy of those around me. I could get a friend on the phone; I could get a plane ticket. I was NOT trapped. I could get back to California and my friends and lover and home. And if she did this on our visit, I would leave immediately and I would NEVER see her again EVER. She would have proven herself completely untrustworthy. Now I was the one with the power of rejection. The tables had turned.

Seeing her in person brought up even more. I had hidden from myself the warm, fun side of our relationship. As an only child, I shared a treasure of memories with my mother that I shared with no one else. I discovered feelings I would never have even guessed: somewhere deep in my heart, I loved myself a little more because I felt my mother's love again. I felt terribly courageous for sitting in the same room with someone who was once so dangerous. Some teenager inside of me became an adult that day; it was as if our relationship had frozen with me at 19 and here I was suddenly 34. And when the visit was over and my mother left, the heartache rose to the surface and tears streamed down my face.

My mother has changed a great deal; she is respectful now of me and my lesbianism. I am warily moving toward a fuller relationship with her, mostly because each step forces me to deal with my childhood, with my grief, with my feelings about myself and her and women in general. My anguish over my mother's rejecting me still feels like a pit of gloom and despair. I try to deny it, to avoid it, and yet it is inescapable. Every new grief in my life—my father's death, my debilitating illness (chronic fatigue immune dysfunction syndrome), any desperate point in my primary relationships—reconnects to this old one.

I still have much work to do on my relationship with my mother (like protecting myself from her occasional criticisms). The good parts warm my heart and often give me amazing insights into myself. I will never really forgive my mother for disowning me; I don't even want to. But I do want a connection with her as long as she continues to treat me with respect.

Lesbians may copy this paper for non-profit purposes.

Lesbians and Our Mothers

A Readers' Forum

The Hard Lessons of Loss

The deaths of two wimmin I loved have taught me profound lessons about loss. My dear friend Inez, a wise womon with the truest, gentlest heart, died suddenly in March 1990. My mother, Pam, died of lung cancer, finally, at 59, in April 1988. The grief that I've felt over Inez's death has been grief for myself, for the loss of Inez from my life. But the grief I've felt over my mom's death has been grief for her, for the lightless misery of self-hatred and self-doubt with which her entire life was saturated, from which she was never able to redeem herself.

Much of what I remember of my mother during my childhood is her desperate attempt to maintain some sense of balance both for herself and her children in an enormously unbalanced existence. For a number of years, my mother's emotional painkiller of choice was alcohol, and for a long time, she did her best not to drink before 5 in the evening. By 5, my four brothers and sisters were home from school, my father was in for the evening, and dinner was on the way. After 5 was a "safer" time to pass out from the alcohol—and this she did, daily. I remember my mother scrambling around the house in the early morning winter hours, half-dressed, hair and eyes distraught, anxiously trying to get presents wrapped and arranged so that her children could experience a "normal" Christmas. I remember lying awake at night listening as my mother drove away to stay in a nearby motel, sometimes for weeks at a time, because she was unable to manage her own pain and the demands and emptiness of home life. But even during these times of what must have been emotionally tortuous separations for my mom, she made an effort to maintain contact with us, put aside emotional and physical energy, for example, to attend to my favorite doll, which only she could fix properly when its arms fell off.

My mother loved me and my brothers and sisters to the point of desperation. We were for her another sort of emotional painkiller. What she did not realize, unfortunately, was that no matter how much she loved us, what we saw before us was a womon who hated herself, whose own life was one of self-destruction. And I took in this message of self-hatred so profoundly that it came to seem to me as inseparable from myself as



my own skin. And for this, too I grieve—my near destruction, near loss of my self.

I believed that I did not have the right—or even the ability—to make my own life a success, since my mother had not been able to do this with her life. Only a small part of myself—the part of me that kept me alive during these 26 years—was not focused on my own unworthiness as a human being. I mirrored the self-hatred and self-destructive behavior I'd seen all of my life from my mother. My mother's efforts to block out the pain of this society-taught self-hatred included alcoholism, binging, the highs of diet pills and the lows of psychiatric drugs, caffeine, cigarettes and tv. When I was 26, I realized with gut-wrenching pain how closely my own behavior reflected my mother's. I avoided cigarettes and alcohol passionately, but I went through food (adding anorexia to the binge-eating), psychiatric drugs and psychiatry, as my mother had. I did my time with tv, and found it a very good mind-number. And just as she had, I attempted suicide—twice for her one attempt. The first time I overdosed, I was involuntarily hospitalized in the same hospital my mother had been in less than ten years before. I was 17.

But through all of these truly terrible years, I stayed alive because I wanted to get out of this incredibly intricate maze of self-destruction. And slowly I became able to do the internal work necessary.

Shortly before this period of internal transformation began for me, my mother learned, after having been seriously ill for quite a while, that she had lung cancer. My mom refused chemotherapy, because she had watched its extreme side effects for friends who had died from cancer. At first I felt very angry at my mom for not pursuing treatment of any kind, for just "giving up." But later it was clear to me that my mom was ready to die, that living had never seemed much of a gift to her, and facing the loss of it didn't frighten her. I, too, had always looked at death in this way—as a relief rather than as a loss.

Before my mom died I talked honestly with her for the first time in my life about how negatively I'd been affected by my experiences as a child of two less-than-emotionally-healthy parents in an endlessly unhealthy society. I told her, among other things, that I'd spent my whole life convinced that my oldest brother and sister were my parents' favorites and that no matter how hard I tried, I could never measure up to them in my parents' eyes. My mother, whose first response had always been honesty, astonished me by telling me that I, in fact, had always been her favorite. And yes, despite my initial surprise, it was clear to me that this fit. It was clear to me that my mother had nearly worshipped me and that I'd carried around this favoritism my whole life like a ball and chain,



hopelessly, endlessly trying to be worthy of it, an of course unattainable goal. Particularly since I was bent on destroying myself, rather than succeed where my mother had failed. It was only years later that I understood that part of my mom's connection with me was based on the similar ways in which we experienced the world, a commonality that my mom recognized long before I did.

In the seven months before my mom died, I was at last able to put the past into its place, to let go of the profound resentment, anger and disappointment I had felt toward my mother most of my life and to begin replacing the intense self-hatred that had dominated my life for so long. I wasn't pushed or talked into doing this, no therapist or 12 step group convinced me of its necessity—this was what my heart needed and wanted to do.

When you restore the past to its place so that you are no longer reliving the past in the present, you are able to hear the truth in what may have previously seemed mere trite truisms. "She did the best she could." Suddenly the truth and significance of these words reached me. She did the best she could. No, she wasn't an adequate parent, but she was a good womon. And it is this goodness and its wisdom that my mom modeled for me and left for me as a gift that will always be a part of my heart. She wasn't able to teach me how to love myself or to interact in a self-supportive way with other people, but she passed on to me the deep respect and acceptance that she herself extended to other human beings, black or white, gay or straight, "normal" by society's standards or not.

And my own gift to my mom is not my life, as I used to believe it had to be, but my use of her gift to me, my efforts to stretch my own vision and boundaries to include even those I don't understand or agree with.

My mom was both a painter and a poet, and saw all too clearly both the stunning beauty and the shattering ugliness of human beings and the world we create around us. I share her clarity of understanding, and feel both the preciousness and the hardness of what my mom passed on to me very deeply in my day to day life as a woman, a lesbian, and a feminist. But, unlike my mom, I now realize the validity and wholeness of my own truths. And some of my most profound truths, the very cornerstones of my being, are part of my mother's gift to me. I can feel them inside of me, supporting and nourishing me like the roots of a tree. For this I thank her—and let the anger, bitterness, and emptiness go, like leaves in the wind.

Theo. Kramer



Mom and Me

I am a 16 year-old lesbian writing about my relationship with my mother, a 48 year-old heterosexual woman. I truly believe that if it weren't for the insecurities and attitudes instilled in my mother by a man's world, she and I would have a much better relationship.

My mother, the first of four daughters in a nuclear family, grew up in a suburb of Worcester, Massachusetts. Hers was a very structured childhood with all the impositions of strict Catholic parents who followed their religion faithfully. I don't think she received much praise as a child. She has always been insecure to the point where any male attention flatters her. Because of her scramble to prove her worth to herself, my mother has a strong desire for male attention and approval. Her insecurities have made her refuse to protect herself from bad relationships with men, and she has made decisions without thinking of her responsibility to me, putting us both in danger.

In 1984 I came out with the fact that my stepfather had been molesting me throughout the two years of their marriage, but my mother didn't believe me. They broke up briefly, but she got back together with him, after the controversy blew over, for another four years of "wedded bliss." When their marriage again broke up in 1988, this time because he impregnated another woman, I began taking an active part in all of our major decisions, such as where we would live and what school I would go to. My mother did not spend her wages on survival items such as food and clothing. I often purchased these things with money I earned from babysitting nearly every night.

I discovered in the spring of 1991 that for some time she had been seeing her best friend's husband. She had, a number of times, snuck him into the house, where I was sleeping, and told him to leave before I got up for school in the morning so that I wouldn't find out. The structure of the house was such that, in order to pass from the stairs to my mother's room, one would have to go *through* my room. Any time he had to go to the bathroom, or downstairs for any reason, he walked right by my bed.

I feel that she violated my space by having him there, and my safety by allowing him access to me. She allowed her sexual activities to take higher priority than my safety.

I recall, when we were traveling together in Eastern Africa in 1991, that when I told her I wanted to come home to the United States, she wouldn't help me at all with my travel plans. I had to take care of finding the travel agent, making my flight reservations, finding a ride to the airport, and dealing with last minute complications all alone. She paid for

my ticket, but she only gave me ten dollars to get food while I was sitting in the airport for six hours, waiting for my connecting flight, and 23 hours flying time.

I've decided to put a stop to the emotional abuse, and I now live with two adult lesbians who watch out for my safety very well, and are concerned about my well-being. After a phone conversation during which she denied that she had disbelieved me about my stepfather's sexually and emotionally abusing me, my mother and I stopped speaking. A few months later we began visiting regularly, but as soon as we started dealing with important issues, my mother refused to discuss ever having made a mistake. We again are no longer speaking.

Iris Evernow

Three Studies

The Safeway of My Childhood

Papayas, the size of my baby brother
Mangos, bananas of all kinds.
My favorite are the round chiquitas
that are small and sweet.
The long ones,
My mother fries with lard
and serves with her Spanish rice.

My mother chooses a chicken from a cage.
She asks me to wait for the butcher
to chop its head off.
She has to run to another stand
to buy onions, squashes, and salt.
I frown as I sit on a bag of beans to wait.
A child my size beckons with her eyes for me
to come and play. She is sucking her thumb.
My mother wouldn't let me be her friend.
Her mother hasn't wiped her nose
and she is wearing guaraches.

I want to go back and buy roasted peanuts
from the women outside the church.
Tonight we might buy corn on the cob with chili,
lemon and salt from the passing men with carts.
Now we must hurry home with the warm headless body.



My mother promises that if I behave
She will buy me a piñata.
There is a blue, red and white clown
a yellow donkey with a long tail
and a slice of a red watermelon with black seeds.

Before dinner
we eat melted goat's cheese
on top of the warm tortillas we bought
from the women making them in the marketplace.
I cannot understand why my mother didn't buy "nopalitos,"
the cactus leaves
I like to eat with tortillas
and fried beans.
The Indian selling them in her round basket
was sitting on the floor, nursing a child
to sleep.

The church bells ring
as we all sit down to eat.
Mañana perhaps
my mother will buy oregano leaves
and tomatoes from the barefoot man.
His wife is big with child.
She wraps herself in her striped rebozo
of red, yellow and purple cotton.

My mother asks my father
for more money to buy
a big clay flower pot for her ferns.
He chews his meat and grumbles
I don't know what.
My mother says that she also wants
two more cages. One of bamboo for her canaries
and another one of thick wire
for the parrot that has chewed up his cage
and has grown to yell everyone's name
and his own all day.
The other morning
the loro bit off my finger
as he did with his cage.
I hope the cat eats him someday.

My Mother Calls Me

My mother calls me
asking me if I'm spending Christmas in L.A.
I close my eyes and think about last year.
She sits on her easy chair to watch soap operas
in Spanish from morning to night.
She cooks, does the laundry and other chores
without ever turning the tube off.
I cannot go away to the living room to read
because she has a collection of antique dolls
sitting on every chair.
Opening the curtains is a definite "No."
The light would discolor her dolls' dresses.
In the kitchen canaries sing
and parrots chatter sharply, "Hola, hola, uno, dos, tres."
I don't want to sleep in the guest room
where the TV is.
My mother knits a sweater for one of her Chihuahuas
and feeds them bits of steak during the commercials.
One jumps to her lap, shivering.
I see a flea on his bald head, jumping.
She covers her pet with a crochet blanket.
Blah, blah, blah in Spanish.
The house smells of dog.
I cannot sit by the steps of the front house
because my mother worries about what the neighbors might say.
I wake up every half-hour at night.
My mother's collection of cuckoo clocks cuckoo at different times.
"No, I can't come this year," I finally say.
"I'm broke."
For days I feel guilty.
My mother calls me.

The Photographs

In my mother's house in Los Angeles, filled with Louis XV imitation furniture that she brought from Mexico many years ago, there are two photographs. Across from the tapestry, where Italian ladies of the past dance, there is a large photo of my youngest sister. She is dressed in a kimono and fans herself. Her cheeks are those of a chubby seven year



old. To the right side of the wall my older sister blooms in her teens, looking very femme. I still remember those boys buzzing around her. I was the tomboy of the neighborhood. "Why isn't there a picture of you?" Chloe asked me once. She already knew about my mother's three marriages. The first and the last were with upper middle-class men. When they died they left her with nothing. My father was her second husband and never had any money. My mother asked what my friend had said. I translated. She said that if I brought her a photo of me, she'd hang it on the wall. In my painting class, I worked hardest on a self-portrait. The teacher gave me an "A," saying I had painted a surrealistic me. I was proud of how I had mixed the purple crayons for the background, the dark yellow and brown for my face, the black for my eyes and wrinkles, the gray for my hair, the blues for my shirt. I decided this was what I wanted my mother to have and I had myself framed. Each time I visited her, I could admire myself and see my eyes deeply staring. Along with fifty dollars and a Christmas card, I gave my mother myself. Half a year later, I stopped by unannounced and before I could say hello, I noticed I wasn't on the wall where I had seen her hang me last. I searched all over the living room. My two sisters were in their usual places, looking like they were holding court. I was in a corner, behind a heavy Louis XV chair, a cobweb already on my head, my ancient eyes staring toward the wall, my mouth half-opened, wanting to say something.

Victoria Alegria Rosales

Mama and Me

Mama, it is hard to write about her and what she has meant in my life.

At my mother's funeral my brother read a eulogy he had written. In it he extolled Mama's life of self sacrifice and how she had always put others' needs ahead of her own. Mama was a saint. Aunt Barbara has canonized her. My sister says "Mama's only fault was she never fulfilled her own desires."

My mother was a craftswombyn, she sewed most of my clothes when I was growing up. She would hand-smock dresses for me and my sister and later on for my daughters. Mama knit incredible Irish cabled sweaters, and Scandinavian and Peruvian designed sweaters. And she loved to teach her daughters and granddaughters. When she was in her fifties and sixties Mama learned how to quilt and refinish and reupholster furniture. She graduated from college when she was 60.

Mama loved to salvage items that others were throwing out and she would create something that was beautiful and useful. She would cut down worn towels and sheets and make face cloths and pillowcases. She would piece together tiny scraps of cloth and make pillows and quilts and potholders. She would patch torn jeans so they would fit comfortably, look good and last 6 more years. Then she would probably patch them again. If a shirt or jacket collar or cuff were worn, Mama would turn them and use the other side.

Mama was very precise and fastidious in everything she did. When she measured ingredients for a recipe, she would always use a knife to level off her measures. If Mama made a mistake in her knitting or sewing, she would tear out her work back to the mistake and fix it. Mama hung out her clothes with precision and always expressed pleasure when she saw a line of well hung laundry when she travelled.

In some ways Mama was very honest. She would never cheat on a test, lie on an application or take what wasn't hers; and she was horrified to learn the extent of her daughter's scamming. The only times I was aware of Mama being dishonest were when she was "protecting someone's feelings" or protecting the family. Like the time she lied to the state police who wanted to arrest and extradite me to california to face child stealing charges, and Mama helped me and my daughters hide. Or when she neglected to tell me that there were men in our family who were known to have molested little girls.

Mama was a state public health nurse who would travel to rural areas of cumberland and york counties to provide medical services to people in the country. She developed friendships with the people she served and would visit and help them when they had ceased being her patients.

Mama was a good woman. She accepted and lived the patriarchy's definition of a good woman. She helped those in need. She sacrificed herself for her family. She stayed with my father, an abusive asshole, and defended him when others would criticize his abuse. She did not make waves and accepted her lot in life. She also believed that you could count on your family to help and protect you. Even though her experience and my own disproved this, my mother and I both believed it.

Mama tried to teach me these things, but sometimes she would say what she really felt and tell me not to marry. She wanted me to be able to support myself "just in case." And when I called my mother with the news that I was pregnant, she responded by saying ,"It's not too late, if you have kids you're really trapped." I was amazed that Mama, mother of five, church going, Irish/Italian, working class daughter of immigrants would suggest abortion. She believed abortion was a mortal sin like



murder. Yet she would rather see her daughter commit a mortal sin than be trapped like she had been. But most of the time, Mama wasn't that honest and denied that she was abused and oppressed as a wife and mother.

So my mother taught me many things in addition to knitting, sewing and ironing; she taught me to "forgive and forget" and to "let bygones be bygones." She taught me not to "air dirty laundry in public." She would say "just ignore them and they'll stop" when my brother mark and his friends were tormenting me. But it would never work because mark would keep at me till I cried and then make fun of me for crying. And Mama would say "Don't give him the satisfaction of seeing that he got you." It is only recently that I realized that statement indicated that Mama knew mark was a prick that enjoyed causing pain.

Much of my life is about my mother. Either trying to live up to my mother's idea of what it means to be a good girl/daughter/wife/mother, or in frustration recognizing at first that I was unable and later that I was unwilling to model myself on Mama. Because I could perceive that she was miserable. My sister, Martha, denies my mother's misery and claims her happiness was her children.

I was taught by Mama and everything in my culture that "nice girls don't," and "men only respect nice girls." And my mother taught me to respect my "family" and "elders." So when my grandfather and the dentist and my brother would fondle me and stuff I thought the problem was that I was not a "nice girl." I knew it would break Mama's heart to know that her "good girl" wasn't a "nice girl." And since Mama did get her happiness from her children, I owed her for her self sacrifice to not let her know how painful my life had been.

Sometimes it was hard. There was a speakout on rape by survivors and I had volunteered to be a speaker, and Mama came and heard me name myself as incest survivor. Afterwards Mama said she wished I didn't have to be so public and she said she loved me and wanted me to be happy. Mama thought my outspokenness, my demands for freedom, and my portrayal of wombyn's lives were either my being naive or an exhibitionist or both. And she was afraid I would get hurt. She thought I should "concentrate on the good and just forget the bad ever happened." But that was and is impossible to do because I react to the abuse I have experienced; and when I deny or block those experiences I don't know who I am and I do destructive things.

So Mama tried and she loved me and I loved her and I tried to do it her way at first but it was killing me. Now I am figuring out what my

way is and deciding which of the things Mama taught me can help me and which are destructive.

Mama died seven years ago. I took care of her during the year and a half she was dying. There were many things that we did not tell each other. Mama's death was horrible and in many ways so was her life. I love and miss Mama and I'm not sure I could have written this if she were still alive.

Ana R. Kissed

Moving Beyond My Relationship with My Mom

I have many ways in which I remember my mom. I have the warmest of feelings when I remember her hugs. I remember her lying in bed with me and holding my ears as I cried from the pain of my ear-aches. I remember playing backgammon with her after dinner every night. These are part of the good memories. I also remember that when I came out to her 6 years ago she shut me out of her life completely. She lay on the floor of her bathroom and she cried. She told me that she hated me and that I was sick. She raised her hand to hit me, but she didn't hit me.

I have mixed feelings about writing of the relationship between me and my mom. Every time I write about this it is painful. Every time I put my pen down I have to do so for several days. But I have decided that it is worth it for me and that, hopefully, some of the lesbians who read my story and my opinions will find some worth in them. Family is an important issue for lesbians. We are always forming new families with our lovers and with our friends, while living in the heteropatriarchy where only the nuclear family is valued. Some of us maintain relationships with our moms and some of us do not. Some must think about the compromises they have made in order to maintain the relationship, while others must deal with the sacrifices they have had to make when their moms were unwilling to accept that they are living their lives as lesbians.

At age 28 I am a separatist and have been a lesbian for 7 years. I was a lesbian before I was a feminist. I came out as a lesbian because I was attracted to women. When I came out to my mom and dad a year later, I had only begun to read and talk about feminism in a serious way. Coming out to them at that time wasn't my idea. I had just graduated from college and was in transition between my parents' home and finding a job and a place to live in Washington, DC. My mom listened in on a phone conversation between me and my lover at the time.

Both of my parents reacted badly. There was a great deal of crying all around. I had wanted to come out to them when I wasn't staying at their



house and when I had a network of supportive lesbians living nearby. I knew from past comments that my mom believed lesbians to be sick women. So her strong negative reaction, while shocking in its force, didn't surprise me. After we had talked for most of the day, my parents said they needed more time to think about all that had been said and then basically told me to leave their house that day. I left with the understanding that I would come back in two weeks so that we could all talk again. The three of us had agreed that some compromises would have to be made on both sides because our beliefs were so different. I had already made it very clear that I would always remain a lesbian and that I had a lover who was important in my life and that these two issues weren't up for debate.

I called my parents a week later. My mom would not speak with me and my dad told me that she didn't want me to come home as planned. I didn't receive any news for a month and a half, when I received a letter from each of them. I don't even remember what my dad's letter said. We had never been close and I had never expected or hoped for anything from him. I do remember my mom's letter. She said that what I was doing was a moral sin and that I needed to find the lord and the "right man" and do so in that order. I had hoped she would somehow change her mind and tell me that she didn't care that I am a lesbian. Needless to say, I was very upset by her letter.

A month after I received the letters from my parents, my mom packed up all my things at my parents' house and had my sister tell me to pick them up as soon as possible. I wasn't anxious to do this, but I wanted the opportunity to speak with her. When I arrived at my parents' house, my mom was sitting on the couch knitting. I said hello, walked over to her and bent down to kiss her. Her lips were cold and didn't return my kiss. I knew then how seriously she wanted me out of her life.

I haven't seen or heard from my mom since that day. I called several times but she refused to speak with me. When I think back on the last time I saw my mom I am always amazed at how surreal it was. She had packed up all of my stuffed animals but refused to give me my baby pictures or my birth certificate. She packed up every project I had ever done for school and all of my used notebooks and then insisted that I phone several of her friends to say hello as though nothing had happened. She also put together a box of cooking spices and cookbooks because she knew that I didn't have them and that they were expensive to buy. She kept pretending that all was normal and that she cared about what I ate for dinner, how I got to work, and that I not spend my money on spices.

She acted as if she did still care about me, leading me to believe that we might one day have a relationship again. But that hasn't happened.

My mom's refusal to acknowledge me as a lesbian has affected me in many different ways. At first I hurt. I thought of her all the time. I remembered the times we went to the beach together, the times we played cards, and all of the times that I helped her water her plants, and the list goes on and on. I cried and I screamed at the sheer feeling of being overwhelmed by her absence. Most of all I wanted to ask her, "Why don't you remember loving me?"

As my hurt started to wane I became more and more angry. I had begun to read radical feminist theory and to unravel the lies of the fathers. I began to understand how severely I had been sold out by my mom. As a staunch supporter of the institution of heterosexuality, my mom has the privilege to tell me that as long as I remain a lesbian I don't exist. She is able to say this to me and get the full support of her husband and other children, leaving me to wonder where I fit in the nuclear family framework. The answer is, of course, that as a lesbian I don't. The lesbian will always be the oddity, the one who has to deny her realities in order to fit into the boundaries of the nuclear family.

I am in no way trying to minimize the pain of being rejected by my mom. It was horrible and I do still feel the loss. But I also know that my mom's shutting me out of her life and my moving far away from my birth family have enabled me to develop in a way that I might never have done had I tried to maintain a relationship with my mom based on compromise. As a lesbian separatist I actively fight the heteropatriarchy. I am fighting and working for a dyke-only world where oppression no longer exists. And while the heteropatriarchy does still exist I speak out about and work to stop violence against lesbians and women. I also recognize that my being thin, white, able-bodied, and from an upper-middle class background gives me privileges that many of my sisters don't have.

If my mom and I were to meet again tomorrow and I were to tell her all that I do in my daily life as a lesbian separatist she would be appalled. As a white, heterosexual woman living an upper-middle class lifestyle (she was raised working class but was upwardly mobile), my mom wants to maintain the status quo. When she tells me that men aren't violent towards lesbians and women and that oppression doesn't exist, she has the support of the heteropatriarchy behind her. In explaining myself to her I would be made to feel as though I was making all of these problems up. And I would be the one who loses were I to engage in this kind of conversation with her.

Being proud of the lesbian I am today, I no longer want to have a relationship with my mom knowing her to be the kind of woman she is. We have nothing in common other than our memories. We are in fact enemies. Part of me sometimes hopes my mom will accept my lesbianism and that we will have a relationship. I do miss her. But what I miss about her and about my relationship with her really no longer exists. The heteropatriarchy loves it when mothers and daughters are unable to maintain relationships with each other. The more women hate each other and fight each other, the longer the fathers will rule. But the truth is that my mom and I have opposite goals and to insist that we could ever be allies without one of us changing drastically is simply naive.

I believe it's important for all lesbians to spend time thinking about the kind of relationship they have with their mom and exactly what they get from that relationship. If your mom is a heterosexual, she sells you out everyday. Her heterosexuality supports the heteropatriarchy's myth that all women want to give their emotional and sexual support to men and that any woman who doesn't want to do this is a freak. Does your mom accept your lover and/or friends? Does she try to keep you from telling certain members of your birth family that you are a lesbian? Does she assume you are interested in all the latest news about your heterosexual cousins and neighbors? Does she still talk about your ex-boyfriend (if you were ever heterosexual)? Basically, does she let you be a lesbian when you are with her? If the answers are no, then you may want to ask yourself why you are maintaining a relationship with and spending your precious energy on this woman when there are so many lesbians out there needing and wanting your energy, your time, and your love.

Carol Cox

I'd like to thank Elizabeth for discussions throughout the many different stages of my writing this. I'd also like to thank Bev Jo, Linda Strega and Ruston for their wonderful chapter on family in *Dykes Loving Dykes*. I read the chapter while writing this essay and it and my ensuing conversations with Elizabeth influenced my thinking.

Absolute Absence

Fox

My relationship with R (my 'mother') is one of profoundest alienation.

I have never understood how dykes can refer to the "bliss" of being in the womb. Or the trauma of coming out into the cold cruel world. For me, a major drawback of reincarnation is that I would have to spend another nine months in that horrible place. SMothered, trapped, unable to move. I've been told this is an uncommon perception of the womb.

About 12 years ago R was in a vulnerable state; E (my 'father') had died several years before and she was now caring for his dying sister. She confessed to me that, because she and E considered it the modern thing to do, she had fed me only on a schedule and left me crying for long periods in between. She wondered if therefore she was responsible for how I . . . trailing off here, the implied end of the sentence being how badly I had turned out, how unhappy, angry, etc. etc. etc. I was stunned. How I wish I'd had the presence of mind to say, Well *I've* never tortured anyone. Who's responsible for how *you* turned out?

Soon afterwards, I told a 'friend' about this new information, I knew it was an important part of the answer to the question that had agonizingly puzzled me all my life. She got mad at me, said it was nothing, why was I always complaining, many others had suffered much more. I did not mention it again to anyone for many years.

I am terrified to be writing this. I am having the reactions I usually have when something brings me close to this stuff. Bumping into things, dropping things, breaking things, panicking about small things. A suffocating sensation like a hot flash without the heat. The frantic desire to hide where no one can find me, to run away. The inability to talk to or relate to anyone. The feeling everyone is laughing at me.

Over a year ago I attempted to get R to tell me more about this. What had she done when tormented by my crying, since a baby's cry is so marvelously designed to make you pick the baby up or do anything to

get the crying to stop (did she put me in the closet or somewhere she couldn't hear me)? She was evasive and began to talk about how difficult and angry I had been, "always," from the minute I was born, when I was older. I have good evidence that this form of abandonment went on until I reached an adult meal schedule, and that similar disregard of me also occurred in other ways when I was older. R mentioned in a letter to E when he was in the army in world war ii that, when people expressed concern about how she was treating me, she told them I was being raised "in the modern way." E did not leave for the war until I was two.

All my life I have been subject to raging fits of despair, accompanied by a sense of utter isolation. Occasionally, since I've been an adult, these fits have occurred in the presence of (not physically at) a lover I trusted, but usually they occur when I am alone. They are often brought on by feeling alone or rejected or not fitting in. I will sometimes find being in my home intolerable. I will get in my car and drive, on a highway or a mountain road, screaming as loud as I can, sobbing, pounding on the car seat, shaking the wheel. (If I am at home, I pound my fists into the walls.) Biting anything available, wanting to kill with my teeth.

I've always been terrified of dying. From as young as I can remember until my mid-30s there were times when this terror would reach extraordinary intensity, when I would find myself imagining or provoke myself into imagining my Self dying, ceasing to exist, evaporating. I can find no words to convey the feeling, it is unlike any other, an Absolute Terror. This was a common experience of mine until I saw E die of liver cancer and added another understanding of death to my experience. But I know that the Terror is still there and that I am simply hiding from it.

I've suspected but it has been from learning more about incest and cult abuse that I have come to Know, that these agonies are caused by my infant torture. I cried with joy to find myself described in Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (Basic Books, 1992, p. 108):

> The normal regulation of emotional states is . . . disrupted by traumatic experiences that repeatedly evoke terror, rage, and grief. These emotions ultimately coalesce in a dreadful feeling that psychiatrists call "dysphoria" and patients find almost impossible to describe. It is a state of confusion, agitation, emptiness, and utter aloneness. . . .
>
> The emotional state of the chronically abused child ranges from a baseline of unease, through intermediate states of anxiety and dysphoria, to extremes of panic, fury, and despair. . . . [T]he dissociative process sometimes goes too far. . . . [I]t may lead to a sense of complete disconnection from others and disintegration of the self. The psychoanalyst Gerald Adler names this intolerable feeling "annihilation panic."

Another way I have thought of these rages is that they are body memories, relivings of what was done to me, recycling until I paid attention: This was the beginning of the infant Fox's world, she knew nothing before this, except the suffocating womb. It went on forever. To infant Fox a second was like an hour is to adult Fox. I was in terror of dying, second after second, minute after minute, hour after hour; and this terror was repeated day after day, week after week, month after month. Waiting, waiting, waiting, would she come back and save my life? There was an Other, but there was nothing I could do to make her come. The only thing I could do was scream, to keep myself alive, to tell myself someone was there. In despair and in rage, that this wonderful, burgeoning self was prevented from Being In or Interacting With her world.

I have found hidden in myself a deep shame that I have been someone on whom others inflicted such depths of pain and lonliness.

I wanted to bite the nipple that was torturing me, but I couldn't because it was my only source of food and life. So when I was a little older I bit my sister, who was younger than me. I've been wondering whether all those idiosyncrasies that have been with me always are rooted in very early experiences. To take a fairly benign example, I have never been able to go to sleep without bringing the sheet or some other material up to my face and breathing through it. (I imagine my lungs are pretty linty by now.) R also told me that they had put mittens on my hands to keep me from sucking my thumb. And perhaps those mittens are also why, when I get stressed, I tend to lose feeling in my fingers and drop things.

I thought my Absolute Terror meant I was born an interesting, philosophical type. Now I see it is something quite different.

I have, as you might imagine, an intense fear of abandonment. And nothing will put me into "dysphoria" faster than WAITING. The other day I drove up to McDonalds and ordered a filet-of-fish. *After* I'd paid (very unfair), they told me I would have to wait a few minutes. I tried. I fumed. I got out of the car and started yelling at the manager. (I got coupons.)

This is a minor example, humorous even. Other instances in my life are more serious and disruptive. Waiting for someone to call, waiting for a lover to come home, for example. I get more and more distraught. Often I have to leave the house. And/or I blow up when she does call or come home. And yet I seem to find myself in these waiting situations more than other dykes, because, I think, I was taught from Day 1 that that is what life is like. I don't seek ways to change it. I simply expect not to matter to people, especially women. I can't imagine them thinking of



me or remembering me, if I'm not there. I feel powerless. I expect not to be heard, not to be believed.

I suspect too that this infant experience has affected my sexuality, made me slower to orgasm, set me up to find physiological release only after a long time. And although I'm turned off by actual S/M sex, my S/M fantasies are usually about very long periods of deprivation.

This scheduled feeding and attention, never responding to the infant herself, never allowing her to have an effect on her world, is the classic paradigm for creating depression. No matter what you do, it makes no difference; so you stop doing anything at all, because experiencing over and over again the destruction of hope is worse than experiencing the apathy. The particular insidiousness of depression is that it doesn't allow you to discover later that conditions have changed, because you have actively blocked yourself from testing the world. I have been noticing how often, when I start to worry about something, I say to myself, almost like a mantra, "Nothing can be done."

I have been chronically depressed all my life. I did not realize this until about 12 years ago, because my image of depression was of someone who sat in a chair and never did anything. I happened across a book in the library by a woman who experienced the same kinds of "dysphoria" I described above, and was finally diagnosed as having "endogenous" depression (depression which is chronic and does not seem to be caused by current events in one's life—often described as due to a "chemical imbalance") and put on anti-depressants. Fortunately at the time I had the only job I've ever had with health insurance. I went to a (gay male) shrink at the HMO, had a blood test, the results of which were as extreme as he had ever seen, and have been taking anti-depressants ever since. It took over a year to find the right combination—a year of agonizing suspended hope. When I remarked to the shrink that I hadn't realized I was depressed, he responded that I was one of the "lucky ones" who have "agitated depression," because the "agitation" raises adrenaline which reduces the depression. What's lucky is I'm a dyke. I kept yelling.

The usual view is that endogenous depression is some kind of genetic defect, and this in fact was my assumption about my own depression for many years. However, I am beginning to suspect that my depression was burned into my body by my parents' torture of me as an infant. I believe my body chemistry was altered in order to cope with the ongoing stress and deprivation. Recently on a TV program about medical vs. psychological therapy a male shrink said there is new research evidence that early trauma does alter body chemistry in ways that then sustain the

psychological dysfunction. If anyone knows any more about this, please write me.

I agree with Rachel and Celia's position in their paper in this issue: what matters is what effects a drug has. Drugs are not all the same. Antidepressants are not all the same, nor is any one the same for all people who take it. The ones I take have been around for many years and have no serious side effects. They do not produce an immediate or sharp change in mood, and I often forget to take them until after I've gone to bed. They do not numb me out or help me avoid pain. Instead, they keep me from spinning down into despair when things go badly; they give me times of ease and happiness when the real Fox emerges; they help me perceive clearly and remain calm enough to experiment with changing old assumptions and behavior patterns.

According to a recent book on child-rearing in my feminist book store, scheduled feeding, leaving the child to cry in between times, was advocated by Benjamin Spock, "Dr. Spock," in the 30s and 40s. I'm sure his books are where my parents got their "modern" ideas. (It's interesting that Spock has this 'kindly' reputation. I have a friend who was abused at a later age in ways apparently also derived from Spock. Perhaps Spock was also the source of the later methods used on me, the "modern way" R referred to.) Where *he* got the ideas is the interesting question. I'm very curious about the class, race, and ethnic history of this practice. My parents were upwardly mobile, poor/Portuguese (father) and working class/anglo (mother). I also wonder whether girl infants were more likely in practice to get this treatment, for longer periods, than boy infants.

According to the same book, it is now recognized that this practice was terrible and tormenting for both "caregiver" (care-non-giver?) and infant, but no mention was made of its lasting effects. I've heard a couple of therapists say, "Oh yes, that was awful," but that's it. Usually when I try to talk about it, I sense the other wanting to minimize and discount. That's understandable, who wants to deal with yet another source of trauma? . . . . I do.

I believe many of us were subjected to this torture. I know two other lesbians who believe the practice was traumatic for them. I would love to hear from any dykes who believe the same or who have any information at all about the practice.

As I prepare to write about my later 'relationship' with R, I realize I am profoundly grateful that she is not a lesbian and will probably not read this. I can say what I want to my community without having to think about what I want R to hear. More and more of us do not have this

luxury. We are becoming a multi-generational community, and we have some serious learning to do about how to deal with this fact.

The effects on me of the scheduling were greatly compounded by the facts that R had me to herself from ages 2 to 6 while E was overseas and that the ways she treated me during this time followed the same principles as the scheduling. The method suited R perfectly. The mother of a friend of mine had also tried to follow Spock, but confessed to her adult daughter that she wasn't able to do it, that she "cheated." Not my mom.

The first time I slept over at a school friend's house I was astonished that her mother came in and kissed her goodnight! And then, even more astonished that she came and kissed me goodnight! I do not remember one moment of warmth or bonding passing between me and R. We have never shared an emotion or an idea.

R's concept of 'mothering' is pathological; it is also, as she herself frequently says, her primary identity. For R, a mother is someone who does not react emotionally to her children, who never allows them to see they have affected or influenced her in any way. A mother is also someone who's job is to 'correct' her children whenever they have done something imperfectly, to point out every mistake and especially everything that hasn't been cleaned yet. Saying something positive is not an important thing to do.

For R, a mother is someone who completely controls her young children's lives, makes all their decisions for them—what to eat, what clothes they have and wear, what games they play, what toys they have, what stories they are read—without consulting them. Her children, young or adult, belong to her, she has a right to access to them whenever she wants and regardless of what they are doing. Even today, I react very intensely to being interrupted, with an instant irritation, a stuffed, suffocating feeling, but also with the judgment that I 'shouldn't' feel that way. (I'm learning to make my overt response more reasonable; it helps a lot to know where the irritation comes from.) R has, as they say, 'very poor boundaries.'

As I had been as an infant, so also as a young child was I unheard and unseen, except as an annoyance. I couldn't make anything happen or have any effect on her. I simply didn't matter. Whatever inner life she had, she never showed it to me. I could not connect with R, and that terrified me. Was I insane? Was I the one that was empty?

In my pre-teen years I expressed a lot of anger and despair openly at home, and so, when I was 11, R and E took me to a shrink. All I remember is that the first thing he said to me (after offering me half a velveeta cheese sandwich on white bread with lettuce and mayonnaise, yummy)

was, "Why do you hate your mother?" I remember thinking, "But I don't." I was wrong. I did. I do.

Two and a half years ago, a month before JMax killed herself, R visited us for 10 days. She had invited herself some months before; I had agreed, because I wanted her to see that someone loved me. I had not been in that close proximity to her for many, many years. Having her in my house brought everything back.

Many parts of me hate her with a white-hot, murderous intensity. The closer she gets to me physically, the stronger it gets. I'm just beginning to piece together the reasons for this hatred. To dismantle the family myth: that she is Good and I am Bad. To understand that she hated me first.

To defuse the anger and frustration evoked by her coldness and controlling, R made me the scapegoat of the family, which included S, my sister, 18 months younger, B, my brother, 7 years younger, E and R. I acted out the family's anger and frustration with her, and they acted out their anger and frustration on me. (E was a partial exception, see below).

Just one example of how this scapegoating worked. When I was about 20, R read a diary I had left among my things at her house and found out I had previously had sex with a 'boyfriend.' I was living 3000 miles away in New York City at the time. E came on a work-related trip and told me how R had been crying and depressed and in bed for days. He was angry at me and held me responsible for her pain. Shortly after this R found out in a similar way that S had had sex with *her* boyfriend. S then wrote me an angry letter about how could I hurt my poor, self-sacrificing mother like that. I wrote S a long letter back defending myself and only at the end of writing it did I stop and realize, Wait a minute, what about you?!! S's reply was, basically, "Oh, *all right*, if you want to make a big deal about it like you always do."

This is who my family, at R's instigation, trained me to be: someone available for others to hurt when they needed to lessen their own pain. I don't have the right to object. I don't have the right to be treated fairly. I'm not supposed to feel pain. And I certainly don't have the right to be loved or nurtured. The shame I feel about how I was treated as an infant merges with the shame I also find in myself about how willing my 'family' was to use me to discharge their own anger.

I have often watched myself *help* other people get angry at me for something someone else has done. A part of me says, well I'm strong, I can take it. I'm very quick to say, it's OK, it doesn't matter, very quick to forgive. I remember E saying to me when I was a child, "You don't hold grudges." I was proud at the time. I'm working on unlearning it now.



I have a poor sense of how to defend myself, since I was taught the opposite. I often freeze when attacked and act as though nothing has happened. I'm an easy target, and I've been scapegoated often in my life. Of course, one of R's fondest complaints about me is that I don't know how to defend myself.

I am (at least) two people: the real Fox, who is quite wonderful, and the one my 'family' created, who appears when triggered by something that reminds me of my childhood. People who know one of me are often shocked when they encounter the other.

Another piece of my puzzle that I have recently identified is that R programmed me (and still tries to) that I am someone who has bad luck, someone to whom bad things mysteriously happen. For example, things were pretty bad between me and JMax before her suicide, and I called R to say her visit might be off and JMax and I might separate. Her immediate and only response was, "Oh, J, you always have such trouble with your relationships." When I had a car accident that totalled my car, her response was "Oh, J, you always have such bad luck with your cars." Etc. etc. etc.

Because I had to learn to live with someone who was so controlling, there are many contexts in which I'm good at 'working around' and adapting to others. To this day, when I am doing something I want to do, I feel like I am sneaking it in, trying to find a time when no one is looking. This stress was a constant condition when I was a child. And sometimes when I am with others, especially if it is their space rather than mine, I lose my activeness, I get drowsy and spacey.

R looks sweet and harmless. Probably she is harmless to anyone but a small child. And she did work so hard "for" all of "us". I thought that I was Bad for hating her. For a long time I thought I just hated her because we were alien spirits, like from different species, different planets. I was frustrated beyond endurance (except that I endured); she blocked and interfered with me at every turn. I thought being Bad was the price I had to pay for wanting to be myself.

I was in denial about how she really treated me. I am still "surprised" when her behavior doesn't fit her image. I was "surprised" when, instead of saying something supportive, she told me what bad luck I had with my relationships. The reality is that she frequently criticizes and tries to look down on the people around her; in particular, whenever she has access to me, she belittles my ideas, feelings, and how I do things, she complains about how my voice drops, how I slouch, etc. etc. etc.

The 'family' story is that I made her life hell. I was "surprised," therefore to read, some years ago, the letters she wrote E every day for four

years when he was overseas. The letters were full of detail about everything we did each day, including what she fed us (tons of sugar!) and things I or S said; they contained little about R's thoughts or feelings, nor do her letters today. Far from being a hellion, I was according to the facts in the letters a wonderfully vibrant and normal child who loved to play with other children and had a tantrum about once a month. What is also clear from the letters is that R did not like me, did not trust me, and did not believe things I said to her. She felt persecuted by me and wanted to get away from me a lot—a function I imagine of my intense fear of abandonment, which she had caused, and her own need to control.

In one letter she wrote disapprovingly about how I let a neighborhood girl pick on me. E wrote back, "It sounds like J has an active inner life," which is an example of who E was in my life. After he came back from the war, I had some companionship. We would sit up at night and talk, he enjoyed talking to me. When I would get upset, cry, and go outside at night, because I felt the others hating me, he would come out and sit with me and put his arm around my shoulder and tell me he loved me. I remember him saying once, "What a wonderful daughter you are." (As I became less a "daughter" and more a peer, I was not quite so wonderful.) Without his companionship—flawed as of course it was—I would be much more deeply wounded than I am.

Yet, I must say that R and E wanted their children to have better lives than they did. And because of their efforts, we have had. And unlike some of the parents described in this issue, they never threatened to disown me. (Although *she's* not dead yet.) As distressed as R is about my being a dyke, she put JMax's picture up on her mirror with the pictures of S's and B's het partners. She has helped me financially when I needed it, without major hassle.

R thinks she loves me. And I suspect she has treated me better than her parents treated her. But *I think* she hates me. And you know what? **I am not like her.** I have never treated anyone, I would never treat a child, the way she has treated me. I frequently find myself recreating in my own head the criticisms and anger R directed at me. I say them to myself or imagine others saying them to me. Like Carolyn Gage, who says in this issue that she could not imagine a powerful female figure, I cannot imagine a benevolent female face looking at me with pleasure, interest, or love. In some of the deepest parts of myself, I believe the Goddess hates me. I have been practicing projecting interest and affection onto the female faces in my life. This makes me immensely happy.

I have struggled constantly writing this with the fear that you, the reader, will not believe me. That you will act as my 'friend' did years

ago: "Get over it, nothing so bad happened to you." All I can say is, I lived the first six years of my life with Absolute Absence, and I have never known anyone else who has. I have sometimes thought I have found her, but I have always been wrong. I would love it if she would read this and write me.

Writing this has brought me to the conclusion that R has had little or no effect on my being lesbian. R is the *only* female from whom I physically recoil. I protected the most precious parts of myself from her, including my love for women, from my earliest days. My capacity for intimacy, too— although, of course, damaged, and hidden more often than I would like—is largely intact. The way R treated me did convince me that being a mother was awful and that I never wanted to be one (good). It also made me think that I hated children, that they were all as awful as R thought I was (bad). I lost touch with the many wonderful parts of me that she had driven underground. It was encountering my sisters' two daughters when they were infants—seeing how wonderful they were, how healthy, vibrant, charismatic even— that put me on the path back to those parts of myself that hold much of my power and joy.

"Motherhood" as I experienced it with R is a horrible and unredeemable institution. Horrible for the mother, yes; to have as your life's work raising your own replacement is no life at all. But also horrible for the children. Don't we often fall into the error of thinking that the children benefit from the mother's 'self-sacrifice'? Surely that is impossible. The mother is oppressed, the infant girl is in her power. Even if the mother doesn't take her anger out on her daughter (girls are always an acceptable target), how often can she be expected to know how to nurture that very spirit which has been damaged or destroyed in herself? And how cruel it was that, as if by a toss of the dice, I was handed to a woman who would be almost my only adult contact for my first 6 years and who was particularly unsuited to raise me. I was deprived of the experience I needed most: emotional connection to other beings.

In my lesbian world, a girl will be raised by many older children and adults, some of whom will love her terribly and some very little, but none of whom will devote their life to her 'care.'

This paper is for me the most terrifying and the most liberating thing I have ever written.

This paper may be copied by lesbians for non-profit purposes.

Stalking Guilt

Joyce Trebilcot

Guilt

Guilt is self-punishment.
Gnawing one's own arm is
The ultimate sin.

My mother says
I want to hurt her.

I hide from the cops
in a house with a cat.

I stole thousands of dollars once
to give the guilt a peg
and pay the rent.

My mother wants
to control me.

I regret nothing
and constantly flee capture.

I

At what moment of girlhood did I decide to foil my mother and myself? To be neither me nor whom she wanted me to be? Was it in that last moment of the birthing—last moment of solitude, independence—before she claimed me here and I recoiled, shrinking back even then, to a quiet, floating, musing state of my own, my own—?

Or was it later? When she left me in the crib crying, screaming with anger because, on doctor's orders, she did not pick me up? I was lonely and determined to survive; I learned to be lonely.

Or was it still later, when it became clear to me that Angela, my mother, had nothing to do but care for him, her husband, and me, the only child—nothing in her life but being a good wife and mother, which meant that she deeply needed me to be what the neighbors admired?

II

How did it happen that I not only put misery in her life but in my own as well? How did it happen that I find myself now, at the second Saturn return, her dying in another city and me with sand in my mouth and palpitations and fantasies of leaving, quitting, closing up, going away, abandoning my most unsatisfactory world? How did it happen? Did I simply decide that since I could not, would not, be what she wanted, I could not be what *I* wanted either? Was my life the price for spoiling hers?

III

I search for a new memory that will tell me. A child, a girl, decided to fight parental power. Daddy was always smiling in the background. He liked to see us opposed, females in conflict are reassuring to men. Did I fight mother to please him? Erotically position myself as independent, sexual, scholar—versus the homemaker—with him, smiling, in the background? I cried no tears when he died. "What a relief," I thought.

IV

It won't be long now until Angela, the mother, dies too. Then I will be entirely relieved of the burden of parents. I will have no living relatives. I have longed for that. To be in the womb again. Alone, where they can't get to me.

V

Is there no way out from duty? For surely it is my duty to suffer in payment for what I have done to Angela: the illegal abortion in high school that she and my father had to arrange—forty years later she still keeps bringing it up with horror and sorrow, to her it is the central fact of my life; my refusal of marriage, motherhood, even, for many years, career—which made me incomprehensible to her; drugs; poetry; escaping the U.S., living as far away as I could get (the U.S. of the fifties, who would not escape if she could?); a crime, prison—. Do I really believe that even now I must pay for all of this, pay for Angela's pain, by not doing what I want? By being blocked, isolated, immobile?

VI

Or is all this a cover for some lack in me? A manuscript sits on the shelf and I cannot finish it because I do not want it, do not want those

ideas scoffed at by wimmin. (No. I made that up, that's not central.) Because I am tired, can't sleep, can't write, can't handle being afraid of an earth quake coming and needing to rearrange my books and all the distractions I invent so as not to get on with this work wherein I make no progress but just keep reliving the same images.

VII

So now I say no more memory. I have already remembered all the memories. A new approach. Enveloped in envy of other writers, unable/unwilling to talk with men, isolated in my room above the New Madrid fault, I rush through these words without tears, wanting to get to the conclusion, the explanation, the solution, to understanding.

To be able to work. To let Angela die. To forgive. "I forgive you for all you did, Angela, mother," does not ring true. "I forgive you, Joyce," to myself, is not true either.

VIII

I hold Angela responsible because she was older, because she was the mother, because she was supposed to understand what was going on and know what she was doing. But she was tied up in her woman's deprivation and narcissism. She had no idea of her place in the world. She had very little courage. Her life consisted of a man, a child, a house.

I cannot forgive her for not rebelling. Why didn't she go out and do something for herself besides taking that course on Japanese flower-arranging? Why didn't she even have a friend?

IX

But I want to reject patriarchy, to reject men's system of guilt and morality and rules and good and bad rather than to forgive her or myself within the system. To forgive is to play by the boy's rules. Still, if forgiving is a way of getting rid of guilt—

X

Angela was so much a part of that system that SHE WAS TRYING TO MAKE ME FEEL GUILT. Of course. That's obvious, my mother *wanted* me to feel guilty for not being the daughter who would make her life make sense to her. What she wanted from me, if she couldn't control my daily life—and she couldn't—was guilt. She wanted me guilty. All those things I did, the travel and adventure—she thought were terrible things done

deliberately to hurt her but to me they were exciting, done partly for me and partly to show her my freedom. She insisted that I either conform or feel guilty. She wanted me to feel guilty.

I am amazed by this idea because I have not yet purged myself of the image of her that she worked so hard to create, the image of the *good* mother, the *kind* mother, the *benevolent* mother—the very same mother who was working so hard to make me feel guilty. She wanted me guilty. And still does.

That desire was imposed on her by the system in which she had her being: men's reality, men's values, patriarchy. Patriarchy caused my pain and hers.

What a surprise.

XI

To get free of this connection to Angela. I will not forgive her or refuse to forgive her. Rather, I will understand that we were two females made by men in *their* interests. I will make now, even at this late time, a clean separation—like a bear cub who takes nourishment from her mother but then goes off on her own, and neither child nor mother expects more of the relationship. I will remember that the family is a primary mechanism of pain in patriarchy.

Story

I have always resented my mother
for trying to control me

But maybe it wasn't my mother but
my father

Trying to control me
A "thumb" at a peculiar angle
between my legs

Feeling tingly

And then being abandoned
screaming and screaming

mouth open wide, flat out

This piece may be copied by women for non-profit purposes.

Mary Poppins and My Childhood in Hell

Kate Moran

In September of 1991 I began remembering clearly things about my childhood that I had not remembered before. Clues had been appearing for several years and I began to admit to myself and a few other dykes that I had survived Satanic Ritual Abuse. Sexual abuse, physical abuse and mind fucks were interwoven with Satanism, myths of monsters, and sadism. My memories are from a child's perspective, so I don't know the details of how some of the more bizarre logistics were worked out. I can't tell you how much power they have in the world. It could be a world-wide powerful organization, it could be 13 sickos who fucked their kids. I'm not sure what exactly were religious beliefs vs. what was just sadism. I don't know whether they did things while wearing monster masks to scare us into not telling or because they got off on it.

They adopted me as an infant and from that point on their power over me was total. They were my family. They owned me. They had all the power in my world.

In this article I plan to focus on my mother's sexual abuse of me. I will talk about the secret abuse in the family, the facade we showed the outside world and who we are today. I also will talk some about how I survived.

It is hard to tell the truth about what my mother did. I hated my father, and now he's dead. Alive or dead I've never hesitated to talk about how horrible he was. But I loved my mother and I've protected her as if I were the mother and she were the child. She's been vacant, confused and unaware so much of my life. Neither of us sure if she was Mary Poppins or not, she seemed magical and beautiful in my childhood that was otherwise filled with horror. But despite her romantic image she was not my lover. And despite her confusion about the world, she was not my child. Acting out the roles of lover and mother made me feel powerful, important and loved in a family where I was none of these things.

The first flashback I had in September of 91 was of my mother going down on me. I am 5 or 6 and tied down outside, covered with blood and other gross stuff. I can't see anything, there is a hood on my head.



Around me I can hear the moans and groans of sexual activity. I'm cold and scared until I feel something between my legs that feels funny, but good. I forget the horror of where I am as I begin to orgasm. Suddenly they rip the hood off my head and I see my mother's face between my legs. Blood around her mouth, she has a crazy, demented look in her eyes. I am horrified and filled with shame. Frozen, cold and sick—real me goes far away.

I believe this ritual was part of my initiation into the Masonic/Satanic cult of my mother's family. Their technique was to gradually destroy all the good in my life except for one person, in my case my mother. Then by dramatically removing that person they left me with no concept of good. They did that by having my mother publicly rape me. After that I did not look for anyone to save me: I went along with whatever happened and figured it was inevitable. Besides, I didn't perceive it happening to real me anyway. My mother's brother pimped me some to his friends, I think, and made some porn of me tied down with his hunting dogs raping me. Mostly I remember him playing Russian roulette with a gun in my vagina, and telling me he would kill me if I ever told.

My father's group initiated me into Crowley-style Satanism by bringing an Indian foster child home. I loved and cared for him for two weeks before he was sodomized and stabbed to death by my father. I was made to drink his blood, but it did not bond me to the cult. I hated them.

Meanwhile my mother's other assaults were much gentler and more covert. Grabbing my butt, patting my butt, she always said I had the cutest little baby butt and how could anyone resist patting it, grabbing it, spanking it or sticking needles in it? I assumed my father was not fucking her; I knew his lust was for ritual and young boys. I hated being reminded of her unmet needs for a man while many nights she held and fondled me. I was so hooked into her needs I didn't have a chance of knowing my own. The self-hate, doubt and confusion over whether I wanted sex with her made me hate myself and lesbians a lot. But I was a child and whatever choice I thought I had was an illusion. Mother-daughter relationships are not lesbian, and the illusion that they are equates our love with predation.

With my mother there was illusion, she was gentle and manipulative. With her mother, Grammie, there were no illusions. She raped us. Hard and sharp her nails ripped up my vagina, leaving my cervix raw. Burning hot water shot up my ass. She left me sore and raw with painful urinary tract infections. I always kicked at night when I had to sleep with Grammie. No one asked why.

Once when Grammie came to visit, she babysat my brother, two other little girls, and me. She forced us to line up and lean over the potty seat. Suppositories lubricated our assholes so she could run her fingers in and out stretching us for what was to come. She mentioned enemas, so we all ran and hid under the front porch with the toads. When the parents came back they all laughed and said Grammie had misunderstood the word *cookies* and thought we said *suppositories*. They gave us cookies and we came out from under the porch. Bad choice. Toads are cooler than parents.

What Grammie was preparing me for was sodomy. I was sodomized many times. Both my mother's family and my father's gang joined together for a ceremony "consecrating me to Satan," where I was gang-raped by 13 men. I was tied to a sawhorse and while they sodomized me they chanted that I would never do good and everything good I touched would be destroyed. Another survivor told me that this inter-group marriage of my mother and father and the programming of us children was called "zipper programming" and was supposed to hold the different branches of Satanism together.

Now you may wonder what a family looks like that holds an international Satanic Cult together. We lived in a suburb of Lincoln, Nebraska. My father never made more than $29,000. He made that the year he was Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Before that he was Chair of the Music Dept. Most of the other people that I remember sexually abusing me were also music professors of dubious talent. My father actually had only a masters degree; his specialty was teaching education majors how to direct high school musicals. He was Choir Director at the Cathedral of the Risen Christ and friends with Bishop Flabin. The Director of the Boystown Choir co-celebrated his funeral mass in 1984.

My mother was the Scottsbluff Homecoming Queen, Job's Daughters Honored Queen and an Alpha Phi. In the early 1950s she was a stewardess who flew for TWA to Asia, Australia, and the South Sea Islands. She married my father and worked as a high school music teacher before I was adopted. After I was adopted my mother didn't have a job until I was in high school, when she became an LPN. Both my parents liked to pretend we were better off than we were. Then my mother would get real freaky and tell me we had no money and were going to be destitute. They had 20 to 30 credit cards all charged to the limit, but we never belonged to the country club or went to Europe. I never had to do without and was only starving because my father didn't want me to be fat.



Now I am fat, I make under $17,000 a year working two jobs. I have type II diabetes and hypothyroidism. I work four overnights a week and I'm tired a lot. I'm part of Lesbians for Lesbians, and we've organized two Lesbian Liberation Rallies, some coffeehouses, and put out a newsletter, *Lesbian Outlook*. I also coordinate the separatist tent at the East Coast Lesbian Festival. I still call my mother and beg for money when I can't get by, and so does my brother. My brother's minimalist opera, *The Manson Family*, is out in CD and he's been produced at the Alice Tully Theater at the Kennedy Center. *Time* calls the opera "the most terrifying depiction of mental instability in opera since Wozzeck." My mother is very proud of both her children.

When I talk to my mother on the phone she says inappropriate things. She had a quadriplegic female patient at the hospital and she told me she fantasized the woman was me as she bathed her. "I washed her frontey, remember we used to call it that Katy. And her butt, you know you had the cutest butt in the whole world." "Stop, mom," I say, "Stop thinking these things and stop telling me about them." She treats me like I've spoiled her fun, I try and keep from retching.

Or I talk about my father and she says, "He was a good man." I talk about how he beat me, which walls he threw me against, and how I would remove the doorknob from my bedroom door as a kid so I could sleep safely. I tell her how my father would sodomize both us kids and say he was "playing the monster game," so when my brother drew pictures of bloody monsters in school no one ever understood why. Child guidance suggested my parents take Parent Effectiveness Training. So not only was I being brutalized but my mother began talking like a dork. It hasn't stopped since. She has read every pop psych book that comes out. Still clueless after all these years.

When I tell my mother these things she appears not to remember and asks "Where was I?" I answer "away" or "too messed up on tranquilizers from your shrink" or "too terrified and abused yourself to notice." And I remind her that when we were little and she would try to save us from beatings she was punished or humiliated and we would be hurt worse in front of her. As I got older I would manipulate my father so that I bore the brunt of my father's wrath, especially when my mother and I would get in trouble for talking to each other about my father's abuse. She would later tell me how brave I was.

She still tells me how beautiful and brave I am when I talk about the abuse, although she doesn't remember it or admit it's true. But when I urge her to remember and think, she tells me she has a happy life now and doesn't want to think about bad times. My father is dead and she

wants to enjoy her TV and going out to eat with her friends. The last time I had this talk with her she said, "You know when Johnny [my brother and a satanic high priest] was here we didn't talk about these things. Actually we didn't have much to say at all. Why do you think our family is drifting apart?"

And I say, "When was Johnny there?" She tells me, nine months ago, around the same time I had been planning to visit. My planned visit was in response to her phone call.

A year ago, I was remembering the sexual abuse and hadn't wanted to hear my mother's denial, so I had been screening my calls. But my gut told me something was really up so I took her call. She said she had cancer, a rare and "aggressive" type in her gluteal (butt) muscle. 98% of the people who have it die in the first year; 98% of those remaining die within three years. My mother was scared; she missed me and wanted me to come home. Do I love her or do I just love a fantasy that I had been pretending for years was my mother?

I agonize, I can't care for her while she's sick and go through her emotional manipulations. I can't imagine not seeing her before she dies. I don't even know if it's physically safe for me to go. Another sep RA survivor says she will go with me (although she thinks my going is a bad idea). My job will give me emergency leave. I call and suggest coming in a month.

My mother says it would be too stressful to see me. I'm too much trouble. She doesn't tell me she has already bought my brother a ticket. She calls me for months with horrible gory hospital stories. She tells me it would be easier to test my blood sugar if I got an open tube into my heart like her. And finally she "slips" and I figure out that not only did she jerk me around about coming to her death bed, she welcomed my brother. And frankly I have always known I was second choice in her bed anyway. I just "forgot."

Why do I talk to this woman? I do what she does. I forget. She forgets my brother broke into her house and threatened her, refusing to leave until she asked him to live with her. She thinks she asked him to move in. I forget she raped and used and set me up for 20 years. I remember the feeling I had as a child that no one loved me but her. Forgetting enabled me to survive. Real me went away when the bad things happened, and the parts that were left behind are just beginning to be part of who I am. If I had not dissociated I would not be who I am today, and so parts of me think that maybe if we try one more time mom will remember. And surely this time, after I've been so good, she'll choose me. I forget what she's choosing me for.



Although I forget sometimes, I have survived. The dissociation and repressing of memories I did as a teen and young adult allowed me to come out and have my first sexual experiences with women and not associate those experiences with the sexual acts my mother and Grammie perpetrated upon me.

When I came out at 19 I had no idea what lesbians did in bed: I believed I had no sexual experiences with women. That way the first time I made love as a lesbian the experience was mine. My mother did not take that from me.

I survived because I was lucky. Many women and Lesbians have appeared at the right time. When I was in first grade I walked home with Eileen, because she was the most beautiful little girl in the whole world, and I protected her from the boys that wanted to beat us up. Her parents in turn were kind to me; her 4'11" 200-pound Lithuanian grandmother fed me and told me I was pretty, and when I was beat up by my mother and brother in high school, I could run there at 3:00 a.m. and be taken in. I don't think I would be a kind and loving person if they hadn't nurtured that part of me.

When I came out I lucked into a nest of Separatists, and so came into a small community of strong good dykes. Julia Penelope has been a friend for almost 11 years and Sarah Valentine for just a little less. Their friendship strengthened me so that I could face my past and their humor has helped me through the remembering. Having Lesbian Friendship of this strength and duration makes me very fortunate.

Alix Dobkin broke the silence for me surrounding ritual abuse and made me take my abuse seriously. She gave me the information that other dykes had given her. This gave me back the truth of my life. Finally, without Anne's friendship, the friendship of another sep who has lived the kind of nightmare I did, I never would have had the strength alone to live on and keep fighting. There have been many times that I have called her wanting to forget, deny or die rather than face who I am and what they did to me. But we are both lesbians of strength and integrity who have survived and ARE NOT LIKE OUR MOTHERS. We are not sadists. We do not hate ourselves. We have broken the tradition of perpetration that generations of women have conspired and participated in. We are speaking out and getting strong. Beware sadists—We are the women our mothers never were. We will fight back. We will change your world.

This paper can be copied by lesbians for non-profit purposes.

Talking about Evil*

Anne

So why talk about evil? For me it's pretty basic. I am a survivor of incest and cult ritual abuse. On some fairly fundamental levels I know evil. The question then becomes how do I bring that knowledge into my present day context and into your present context in a way that is useful/meaningful?

Since I get bored just talking to myself, the first problem area seems to be how do I talk with others about evil? The issue of graphic vs. non-graphic description and/or discussion quickly comes up. This is a matter with few fixed rules, and I don't see the problem getting talked about too much. What I do perceive is survivors treading carefully around non-survivors and non-survivors treading carefully around survivors with the requisite number of blunderers and stampeders tossed in. While this situation is understandable, it is beginning to irk me. So I'd like to take a few minutes to raise some points.

I think what needs to be understood as a framework of the discussion is that talking at all is dangerous for survivors of cults. Generally there is intense programming to ensure silence. Breaking the silence can easily trigger those programs and memories. Just to complicate matters, though, I need to mention that there is another aspect to the framework, and that is that *not* talking is dangerous for survivors. Remembering ritual abuse and not being able to talk to anyone about what happened and is happening is no good. It replicates, to a certain extent, the past. However it doesn't do any good to talk to people who can't or won't perceive what you're saying. So unfortunately CRA survivors are forced to educate people into adequate listeners/conversationalists. Politically, too, talking seems necessary. Cults require secrecy. Why give it to 'em?

To summarize the framework then, talking appears necessary both personally and politically. The only hitch is that it can get you hurt emotionally and physically or, not to be over dramatic, it can get you dead. With this in mind, let's return to the issue of graphic vs. non-graphic.

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*This paper was first presented at a Society of Women in Philosophy meeting.

Presenting clear, detailed graphic examples to illustrate and/or support your points is generally considered useful. And in feminist circles, drawing on your own experiences for those examples rates positively. OK, this seems reasonable. The problem is that my topic is evil and my experiences with it include severe physical, psychological, and sexual torture. Or should I say, include electroshock, cutting, burning, needling, hanging, confinement, sleep and food and water deprivation, cannibalism, drugs, spending time with body parts, animal and human sacrifices, suicide games, constant exposure to life-threatening situations, incest, rape, sodomy, gang rape, gang sodomy, prostitution. And I could go on.

So what happens when the level of detail or graphicness increases? For me, the intensity of the visual images increases. Detail has a way of bringing things home. And my brain usually goes one or two steps more detailed than what is expressed. This can lead to getting stuck in memories or triggering "Don't tell" programs. Now, I happen to have excellent distancing mechanisms, but employing them can defeat the purpose of talking in the first place.

And then there is you, the audience. My being graphic could trigger some of you, could cause flashbacks. Yetch. Or you could simply get grossed out, shut down and stop listening. (I don't enjoy watching people turn green and then tune out while I'm talking to them.)

But there are problems with not being graphic. For one thing, at what point does glossing over details become collaborating with the silence rule? Cult ritual abuse is not pretty, and it shouldn't be prettied up unquestioningly. I don't think it is a subject people should be comfortable with; but on the other hand, I worry about desensitizing people by being too graphic. It is difficult, too, sometimes to talk non-graphically. I have thoughts and images in my head that I must process through several filter systems before I can utter them in more palatable and generic terms.

What really makes me question the use of non-graphic speech though is some of the terms I hear people use when they describe cult ritual abuse, terms such as "unimaginable" or "incredible" abuse. Now, I've heard well-meaning dykes use these terms trying to discuss RA and I appreciate the efforts they are making towards getting the issue known. But imagine for a moment, if you will, that you are a survivor listening to these statements. A major portion of your life has just been described as unimaginable or incredible. Do you think that you would chime right in, or perhaps you might be inclined to slink your incredible self away?

What makes something that is real "unimaginable" or "incredible?" Ignorance seems an appropriate place to start. That ignorance shuts down/shuts out community members. That ignorance perpetuates our

communities' inability to deal with cult abuse on a political and/or a personal level. That ignorance angers me. And if what it takes to make this stuff imaginable is inescapable graphic detail that insists on visualizing in the mind and twisting in the gut, then perhaps we need to be graphic.

Now that I have successfully not resolved the issue of graphic vs. non-graphic discussion, let me move on to the next issue. That issue is the presentation of self. I am referring to the "I think," "I feel," "I am blah de blah" statements that are so common to feminist discourse. I believe that the purpose of the I statements is to admit to and define a subjectivity that then clears the way for more accurate and honest discussion. We attempt to identify our relevant experiences and acknowledge their relation to our perspectives and theories. In short, we try to explain where we are coming from, who we are in relation to our topic. Obviously I subscribe to this mode of thinking. I find it necessary/relevant to reveal that I am a survivor of incest and CRA in discussing evil.

I am aware, however, of a danger in doing this. The danger is that now that I have identified myself as a survivor, I risk you finding me too weird to deal with because my experience (or what you think my experience is) seems so outside your own experience. And you therefore conclude that what I have to say about evil is not relevant to your own lives. A curiosity worth paying attention to, yes, an interesting tangent, possibly, but relevant or meaningful?

There exists another piece of important information about myself that is relevant to the topic at hand. And that is that I am a multiple. I developed multiple personalities in order to survive the abuse, in order to survive intimate dealings with evil. So I cannot honestly talk about evil and simply say, "I think," "I feel," "In my experience," etc. It is a collaborative effort. This causes some problems. Problems with language, for example, with the use of "I" statements. Now the adults went to graduate school and we can use "I" appropriately and pass. But that is exactly what it is—passing. And I'd prefer to put my energy into more productive pursuits.

But being an out multiple does pose some problems and raise some questions about the communication of ideas. For one thing, when it comes to the subject of evil, some of the folks in my system have direct memories of cult ritual abuse and some of us don't. What then does it mean for me to say that I remember x, y, and z, when in fact that is a memory that another personality has shared with me, or one which I may only have access to third or fourth hand? What constitutes my experience, my perspective? What constitutes me? I don't intend to try to answer these questions here.



What I am trying to communicate here is that a multiple wrote this paper and that that requires you to listen in a way that is perhaps different than you are used to. Like I said, this paper is a collaborative effort, so perhaps it will make more sense to you if you think of it as written by a collective and presented by one or more of its members.

Of course, for the sake of veracity, you might also want to imagine that the collective is composed of folks of varying ages, some quite young, that some of the members think this paper is a really bad idea, that even those that think it is a good idea don't agree on what is to be said, and that basically it is your usual collective that agrees on nothing except that the process is taking too long.

With that said, on to the main topic. I think/feel that evil exists, and some parts *know* that it does. We want a way to talk about something that exists and has affected us and others and that continues to affect us and others. Past experiences effect present behavior and present experiences effect present and future behavior. In short, evil can have a profound impact on our lives and communities and so I believe that we need to talk about it.

I realize that so far I have not defined this "evil" that I keep referring to. That is deliberate. For me this was not a process of defining a concept, of creating an intellectual abstraction so that then one can go and look to see if one can find it in the "real world." Instead, it's trying to label, set parameters for, define, question something I am quite sure is there because we *recognize* it. A slippery it. An it that changes according to context and perception. Nevertheless there remains a family resemblance, a communality, a connection, an IT.

OK so there's an it. Why use the term evil? Why not use yeck, yuck, ughness, blick, yeecher or other equally descriptive terms? One simple reason is adult academic pretensions (although I personally am campaigning for ughness). The other reason to use the term evil is to latch on to a social history that tells us evil is something to be avoided. The problems I perceive with the term evil are that, one, it is a term oppressors use to refer to groups such as women and lesbians that they hate, and, two, it has xtian religious connotations. Those are not two uses of evil that I wish to evoke here.

When I say that we recognize evil, I am talking about a recognition that originates in a sense perception. We can sense, feel evil. Evil exists for us as an energy that we recognize. Look at the alternative terms for evil proposed just above. They imply visceral physical reactions. And as with any other sense I/we can be mistaken. One can sense part of the energy, a particular ingredient, and make an incorrect leap. So what



is sensed? It is particular, though not uniform, combinations of pain, suffering, fear, enjoyment, willful ignorance, intentionality, and hunger.

Listen again to that list of ingredients—pain, suffering, fear, enjoyment, willful ignorance, intentionality, and hunger. This list is meant to suggest that evil is necessarily interactive. In other words, evil cannot be created without a perpetrator and a victim. The energy that is released between victim and perpetrator, that is what can be detected at a site where atrocities have occurred. What you sense in an evil person, I believe, is both their energy and some of the victim's energy.

If evil is necessarily interactive then it only makes sense that someone couldn't be born evil. Although fetuses can definitely hurt their mother, a fetus lacks the physical and cognitive ability to be an active perpetrator.

So how does someone become evil? I really don't know. Does doing an evil act make one evil? At what point does doing evil acts make one evil? Like I said, I don't know. But I do think that someone who is truly evil is someone who has lost the desire and/or the capacity to stop. I am talking about someone who needs to hurt others, enjoys it, knows no other way, or simply does so out of habit or expediency. The first two refer to passionate evil which is basically a perpetrator who gets emotional satisfaction from hurting others. The latter two are cold evil. The pain and suffering of the victim(s) is not the main point of the exercise—habit, expediency, or profit are. Cults churn out both types. They create them out of sadism and/or habit and in order to perpetuate their own existence.

(The rest of the paper is graphic. 30 second breather.)

I think it is worth looking at what cults do to perpetuate their existence, for two reasons. One, I hope that in the process what we mean by evil will become clearer. Two, I hope you will recognize that, while cults put their own bizarre twists on things, the bases of their techniques are hardly unknown or not practiced outside of cults. There is a reason that a large percentage of cult types go into psychology and medicine.

So how do cults take a newborn baby and raise it up to be an active adult cult member, to be someone who abuses others? Well basically they do really evil things to the kid. They teach the kid that it has no inviolate personal boundaries. Sexual assault begins at infancy, as do forced feedings and enemas in order to generate baby piss and shit for rituals. They teach the child that the ones with power over it and that it depends on will hurt it, both deliberately and at random. They place the child in constant jeopardy and hence in constant fear. They work at getting you to distrust your own perceptions. They do this in part by lies and drugs. They tell you someone is dead, and then you see them very much alive later on. Or you see someone unmistakably killed and disposed of and they insist that so and so simply moved out of town.

They will torture you and ask why are you crying, saying there is nothing wrong with you even as you stand in your own blood, chained to a post. They lie a lot.

And a major lie they begin early is that you, the child, are responsible for all the bad that happens. They assign you tasks that are impossible and result in pain when you fail. You are punished for breaking rules that you didn't know existed, for being born on the wrong day, for picking the wrong number out of a hat. Conversely, you are also taught that you are irrelevant. That what you want and need is irrelevant. That you aren't significant enough to remember to feed, to unchain. That you can literally be left hanging while the lawn gets mowed. They will pick victims at apparent random, torture you, toss you back all without ever looking directly at you or speaking to you. The message of both those practices is consistent—you are shit.

Another basic technique is to isolate the child. First they isolate you from your own body. This is easy enough. If they inflict enough physical pain over a series of times, you are bound to learn to dissociate before you learn to walk. At the same time, they are teaching you not to trust the very individuals you are dependent on for survival. Next, to protect themselves and to keep you isolated, they teach you not to talk to others about what is going on. This is accomplished in a myriad of ways. Obviously if you are discovered to have talked, you are punished. You are told that so and so is sick, tortured, or dead because you or somebody else talked. They threaten you with their physical and emotional power, they threaten you with magic. They program you to hurt yourself or to commit suicide if you violate the rules. And they deliberately do things in such bizarre and horrific ways that if you do talk, either people think you are making it up or they are too scared to respond.

They also isolate you (and convince you that you are bad) by systematically destroying what you care about. They will kill your stuffed animals and your pets. They will give you a younger child that you are to look after and protect. Then they will torture and/or kill that child. They try to resign you to the fact that no matter what you do or don't do, you or somebody else gets hurt.

As horrible as all this is, cults don't stop there. They force you to participate. As a cult kid, you are raised in a cult environment. You watch and participate as a victim from infancy. You light the candles, you clean up the mess. You are force fed the victim's blood and/or organs. You have to choose who gets hurt, otherwise everyone gets hurt. You can't take the pain anymore, so they hurt somebody else. You can't stand watching somebody be tortured to death, so you kill them.

And all the while, you are a kid. And kids imitate what they see. So you imitate it.

Let me go back to the beginning of this section for a minute. Does doing an evil act make one evil? At what point does doing evil acts make one evil? At what point does perpetrator status become *the* identifying factor? I don't know. How does someone become evil? I still haven't answered that question either, for not everyone who goes through what I've outlined (and more) turns out evil. Nor do I wish to imply that evil is completely forced on someone.

Evil can be chosen as a survival strategy. And it doesn't happen all at once. The cult obviously works to desensitize children to horror. They force you to remove yourself emotionally, at least in part, from the situation. As a kid you can actively contribute to that process in order to maintain some semblance of balance. It is a natural response to push away what you can't handle.

One of the kids wrote, "Lots and lots of death. Big deaths and little deaths. Death you're supposed to care about and don't. Don't, won't, don't. And little itty bitty deaths that somebody has to care about because nobody does. And I can care if I'm careful 'cause THEY won't notice. I hate Them. But if they die, I'll be all alone and what if they die—I think about it a lot, and I don't care. Dead is dead. Then I'll know I'm bad. So I'll watch the littlies that nobody else notices. It's really really hard. Cutting is a kind of little death. It makes me feel good because I can mourn the little cuts. I can't with the big deaths. They'll kill me. So just little ones I can feel and know I'm still here."

Another one of my kids dealt with having to spend time in close contact with dismembered body parts by playing counting games. She would count the drops of blood, the number of fingers or toes, etc. It was an attempt to reduce the horror to countable items. Turning yourself and other people into objects helps make the unbearable bearable. The entire cult situation becomes a gigantic physical, psychological, and sociological experiment. It becomes curious, interesting, even entertaining in a fucked up sort of way. You see dissociation only works up to a point. Somebody has to operate the body. Somebody has to think, make decisions, to act, if you are going to try to minimize the damage to yourself and to others.

Another one of the folks wrote, "There were elements of The Game [cult] that I liked. There is nothing like having your life, or the lives of those you care about, in jeopardy to wake you up. You have to stretch, contract, juggle options, appear resolute, be flexible—all simultaneously. What can I say, it's a rush. And I played to win. To do that, I had to be



present, and to accomplish that I had to enjoy it—at least in part. Let me give you an example—the gun games. One way I survived and stopped them was to up the ante. Six people one bullet? Make it five bullets and grin 'Who wants to play?' A bluff? Not really because bluffs can be smelled out and called . . . but maniacal certainty—who wants to fuck with that?"

Cults force kids to make choices between really shitty options. And the more the kids have to participate, the more they believe what the cult has been telling them all along which is, "You are bad, you are different from other people, nobody but us will ever understand you." This, of course, further isolates the kids, making them more psychologically dependent on the cult and thus increasing the pressure on them to adopt strategies that will allow them to survive in the cult.

As I said earlier, the basis of the techniques and strategies used by cults are not unique to cults. Look around. Look at the limits on options. How many of us have jobs in institutions that we hate? But we have to eat and it's better than some other job. We pay taxes that supply the money to bomb the hell out of people we've never met or we risk jail. We know the media lies, but we rely on it for information. And how many times have you heard people refer to voting as a choice for the lesser of two evils? And some of us profit. Whites profit from racism—products are less expensive when they are made by people who aren't paid a decent wage.

The list goes on and on. And it is demoralizing. How many products can you boycott? How much can you think/feel about the genocide of the Kurds, the slaughter in Yugoslavia, Apartheid in South Africa, environmental destruction, starvation, homelessness, crack, incest, ritual abuse . . . before it is just too much? It is too much. So as a society we push things away, we break them down into manageable portions just like the little kid counting toes. As a society we ignore cult ritual abuse, excusing ourselves by labeling it as "too much," "unimaginable," "incredible." Instead we focus, even rivet, on a few individual "monsters" such as Charles Manson, Hannibal Lecter, or Jeffrey Dahlmer. We can comfort ourselves with the thought that these individuals are aberrations, are clearly Other.

Yeah, and the Holocaust was an isolated incident. Pretending evil is extraordinary is just that—a pretension. A comforting, even necessary pretension for some, but still a pretension. Everything that I have outlined in this paper, and a hell of a lot more, happens every day. Evil is very ordinary. Our ignorance of it is what is incredible.

This paper may be copied by women for non-profit purposes.

And In This Corner*

Bridget Collins

Hmmm . . . A lesbian has invited me to write a column on class. Dear, dear. As a white trash woman in Lesbos, I'm used to being told to shush or to being simply ignored. When I was first asked to write this, I thought, "Uh-huh, sure. She'll invite me to write, but I bet she doesn't print my stuff, or I won't turn out to be what she's looking for, or I won't be, no offense, right for the part. Uh-huh. Sure."

Frankly, I'm not used to having a lesbian forum from which to speak about class. White trash women have been excluded from the classism discussion. It has essentially been a dialogue between the middle and the working classes. Sometimes, we get mentioned when working class speak for us as if the two classes have formed a coalition. The thing is, I've never heard a poverty woman take it upon herself to speak for the working class, and nobody asked me if I wanted to be in coalition with anybody. So, I've pretty much assumed that Lesbos was more concerned with addressing the relationship between the working and middle classes rather than actually addressing classism. Obviously, classism is a caste system, and just as obviously, poverty is the bottom rung of that caste system. If poverty is excluded from the classism discussion, the process has been mis-named, and is in fact a kind of cross-class couple therapy.

So, with my faith in Lesbos' concern for classism a little tarnished, I begin this column. You gotta keep trying, right? By way of introduction, I'll tell you that I am a poor white trash woman, born and raised. Now, I'm not crazy about that appellation, but the fact is, it's the only one currently in existence for us. Generally, we are rendered invisible. In the dogma of political correctness, our invisibility was codified. There were lesbians of color (for whom race and class were deemed inextricable),

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*Editor's note: I have asked Bridget to take over responsibility for the class column that JMax was doing before her death. The column, with commentary from Bridget, will be a regular *LE* feature. Dykes of all classes are invited to send in observations, experiences, responses, stories, and brilliant ideas.—*Fox*

working class white lesbians, middle class white lesbians, lesbians of wealth, and white poverty was lost in the shuffle. I always figured that eventually somebody would notice that we were being omitted from the classism discussion. After a decade, I decided to stop waiting.

Fox asked me what I thought of the preceding *LE* issue which dealt with incest. Talk about learning to swim by jumping into the deep end! Well, here goes.

I continue in the belief that addressing incest/abuse issues before a solid class perspective is in place is a terribly dangerous thing for white trash women to do. We were the "them" it was supposed to happen to. The society at large was so certain that it was happening to us that we became a point of reference in defining incest. No help came. Our pain was deemed affordable. When I have talked in Lesbos about this aspect of my life, it has served to reinforce the stereotype, and/or women have been appalled at the extreme brutality, saying things like, "I didn't have it nearly as bad as you." They may have found some comfort in that, but I did not. I emphatically try to dissuade pwt women from speaking out of class about the abuse in our lives, not because I am invested in keeping the secret, but because, in the process of telling, we get abused again. With a class perspective, the experience is grueling. Without one, it is devastating.

This is not to say that I want to discourage white trash women from talking about their experiences with the families of their hearts, regardless of the individual class backgrounds of those involved. Love is a great healer, and love that reaches across walls is a pretty potent herb. Even so, love won't preclude the need for tedious exposition and clarification.

Recently I was talking to a middle class woman, telling her that a difference between abuse at poverty and at other classes is the never-ending-ness of it. She said that she knew a few middle-class women who'd experienced unrelenting abuse. Initially, this cramped my brain, and it took me a while to realize that we were talking about two different things. I meant that white trash girls are assumed to be fair game for anybody who wants to molest, rape, or cop a quick feel. The guy at the grocery store, the visiting uncle, the mechanic, teachers, men you don't know, boys you do know, ANYBODY. The betrayal of incest for pwt women is that, even in our own homes, among our own, we are trashed. The constancy of the outside trashing is supposed to stop when we get among our own. The class difference here is that middle class women are encouraged to expect that the whole world, including their homes, will be reasonably safe. For pwt women, the expectation is that the

world is full of unwelcome groping, but that home should be the one safe space. While I have no doubt that women from other classes experience a never-ending dread of the next time the abuse will happen, pwt women are violated in the one and only place that abuse isn't supposed to happen. This is not to suggest that the pain of one class is greater than the pain of the other. The weighing of our pains, one against the other, is a ludicrously fruitless endeavor if our purported aim is to heal it all. The circumstances do differ however.

When I was a teen-ager playing at being a hippie, I was talking with some other teen-aged hippie girls. They were from the middle class. The conversation was about whether, if you really loved a boy, you would go all the way with him. I wasn't saying much because, honestly, the question seemed a little weird to me. They drew me into the discussion by asking, "What about you? Are you a virgin?" I was stymied. I didn't know how to answer the question. Were they asking whether I had ever given myself to a boy or were they asking if I had ever been taken? They laughed at me, taking my confused hesitation for sexual naivete. I had the good sense to neither confirm nor deny, and to let them think what they would. It was a moment though which afforded me a life lesson. We were not looking at the question through the same eyes. They expected to eventually make a gift of their pure bodies to their own true loves. I expected to eventually make a gift of pure love with my body. A few years ago, Madonna's song, "Like a Virgin," brought the memory of that teen-aged conversation back to me. I understood the longing for a lover who would touch me as if "for the very first time," a lover whose touch would make all the groping others irrelevant.

In many ways the poverty experience is unique unto itself. If you are being raped, there's no point in screaming for help. It won't come. If a poverty child is being molested or beaten, the questions of whether they should tell, whether anyone else knows, make no sense. Of course people know. The walls are too thin and the rooms too crowded for secrets to be kept. By ignoring poverty in the classism discussion, the particular aspects of what poor women survive are also ignored.

Simply put, the particular ways in which abuse manifests at poverty have not been examined, and therefore we cannot expect to heal with the current prescriptions for survival. Currently, the assumption is made that abuse is exceptional, and especially so if it happens within one's home. That is markedly different from the experience in which abuse is prevalent in the whole world, and so, when it happens at home, becomes the violation of one's only sanctuary. I'm not telling any secrets here. Again and again, women doing recovery work remark that they

didn't imagine that such things could happen to them because they weren't part of the stereotyped group that it was supposed to happen to. Their class status was supposed to afford them a measure of insulation from beatings, rape, incest, drug addiction, alcoholism, etc. As white trash women, we fit the stereotype of who it was supposed to happen to, so how can we ever be expected to meaningfully engage in this conversation? And doesn't wisdom dictate that we be at least a little suspicious when the conversation seems to indicate that we were the more appropriate victims?

Time and again, I have seen pwt women expose the scars of the abuse only to have the injuries inflicted anew. We enter the process hoping to stanch the bleeding, and instead have the wounds reopened. I do not believe this is a deliberate or premeditated act on the part of our lesbian sisters. It is simply the truth that, until pwt talk about the abuse in our lives, we are invisible. In an environment which does not acknowledge our whole human-ness, when we do talk about the abuse, we offer up the one piece of ourselves that is recognized. How can we respond when we are met with the intimation, "Of course it happened to you. It was supposed to happen to you. To me, it wasn't supposed to happen."

When I was a girl, there was a moment in my life when I had been knocked to the ground, and was being kicked by steel-toed boots. (Now, I am talking out of class. Can you hear me?) The man doing the kicking screamed at me, "Whad'ya think you're abused?" The memory lingers, not so much because of the physical pain of that moment, but because I believed that the man honestly did not recognize what he was doing as abuse. It was another life lesson for me. Abusers never think of themselves as such. Lesbians do not see how they participate in the abuse of poor women by ignoring every other aspect of our lives.

In the society at large, and in Lesbos, mirrors which reflect only pain are held up to our faces, and we are persuaded that is all that we are. Without the abuse we are nothing. When I have spoken of the abuse in my life, nobody interrupted, and my words were accepted as obvious truth. When I've tried to talk of any other aspect of the white trash experience, I've been challenged, minimized, ignored, called a liar, and the gag re-applied. The abuse is a given, taken for granted. My humanity is what is in question. While only the pain of our lives is acknowledged, we are left with two choices. Either do not heal and so, live with the pain, or heal and disappear.

White trash women are led to believe that we are little more than the sum total of our scars. That is not enough for a human being to survive

on. What there is to be done, what must be done, is to alter the class analysis to include women of poverty as whole human beings who breathe, laugh, cry, love, etcetera etcetera, etcetera . . . I would very much like to help in filling out the picture of us as something more than receptacles of pain. A woman can't survive with abuse as the crux of her self-definition. Pwt women have a life expectancy between 47 and 52 years. As I verge on turning 40, I am starkly aware of the fact that I am already older than my mother lived to be. The sense of borrowed time hangs like a shroud. I see other white trash women near my age succumbing to the weariness of their lives. We learn very young that the only respite for us is in serious illness or in death. In struggling to have poverty recognized as a crucial facet of classism, I believe that I am fighting for my life, and for my sisters' lives.

To date, the classism discussion has included only middle and working class women. This has forced many white trash women to call themselves working class. Simply because they knew that they weren't the class oppressors, they ascribed to themselves the only other choice offered, the title being associated with the class oppressed. That is, working class. Over and over again, white trash women "discover" their true class status. We have been made invisible even to ourselves, and whether or not we like it, Lesbos has contributed to this aspect of our abuse. (The guy in the steel-toed boots didn't think he was abusing me either.) To the extent that we have been recognized in Lesbos, it has only been by our disembodied pain and rage. We are more than that.

What I would like to do is to pass around photographs of white trash women, asking, "Have you seen this woman? Are you this woman?" That, I believe, is what's needed. First, allow room for the existence of pwt women to be acknowledged, for us to have some definition in the classism discussion beyond that of the working class's gagged sidekicks, beyond the role of "of-course" recipients of abuse.

While the whole weight of the class structure lands on the poor, it is the working class who are our hands-on oppressors. Maybe that is because the other classes wouldn't consider dirtying their hands by touching us. Whatever the reason, it is ludicrous that our most direct oppressors should now be designated to speak for us. (The guy in the steel-toed boots would have sworn, and would have believed, that I wasn't abused.)

In talking with other white trash women, I've attempted with them to come up with identifying criteria to assist women in recognizing what we, as white trash women, share. We've come up with a few things, but for the most part, it is like a goldfish trying to discover water. It would truly be a welcome gift to hear what other goldfish in this bowl have

discovered. These are some of the points we have found we have in common so far:

Counting the squares of toilet paper we use, and then folding and refolding the toilet paper to achieve maximum utility.

The tendency to assume a chameleon-like persona, complete with polydialects, i.e., we learn that we are transparent until we adopt the guise of one or another class or subculture, depending on where we find ourselves at the time.

Being astonished when siblings from other classes don't defend and protect one another.

The experience of being literally invisible to people who are standing only a few feet away.

Hyper-romanticism and intensely passionate love, loyalty, rage, and honor.

The use of the word "rich" to describe everyone who wasn't poor, including the working, middle, and wealthy classes.

Passing through our girlhoods knowing that "rape" was something that bad poor boys did to good rich girls, and that no matter how sexually abused we might have been, neither "rape" nor "abuse" were happening to us.

An affinity for wise-ass-ness, particularly in the face of the horrific.

Mostly, we know ourselves to be white trash because that's what other people told us we were, that is the dirty name we were called by people who sought to make us hurt. The irony is that, unless we are willing to use that recognizable phrase to describe ourselves, we must live without any acknowledged name at all.

This paper may be copied by women for non-profit purposes.

Madness, Social Disability and Access

Rachel Perkins and Celia Kitzinger

This paper is about lesbians who experience disabling disturbances of thoughts and feelings. These are not private individual problems, they are problems for all lesbians: problems that lesbian communities must address and accommodate. It is vital that our theories and communities accommodate us all, enable all of us to function and contribute to the best of our abilities, no matter how disabled we are. As lesbians and feminists we need to think about what access to lesbian culture and politics means for lesbians who are socially disabled, just as we have begun to think about access for lesbians who are physically disabled.

We speak as lesbians who have both experienced for ourselves periods when we have been disabled by problems of thinking and feeling and witnessed such problems amongst our friends and those with whom on of us (R.P.) works as a clinician in the British National Health Service. We draw upon all of these experiences in what we have to say here—both our own and those of other lesbians who have shared their experiences with us and helped us to develop our ideas. Some of those with whom we have spoken have given permission for their words to be used here, but preferred their names not be included.

One of us (C. K.) spent several months as an inpatient in a psychiatric hospital following a suicide attempt related to the traumas of coming out as lesbian at the age of 17. One of us (R.P.) has experienced two periods of severe depressive illness, the most recent of which rendered her extremely distressed and unable to concentrate, work, read, drive, go out, think properly or do even the simplest chores for six months. Even the most basic choices, like what to wear or eat, left her in a panic of indecision. This experience brought home to us the extent to which it is trivialising of profound distress to simply dismiss it as an extension of the everyday anxiety or misery all of us experience at some time:

> "Oh yes, I get off days too, isn't it awful." Or people who have never been with me when I've been depressed tell me that of course we all experience these kinds of things. (Ruth Elizabeth, 1982:15-16)

In apparently trying to break down the barriers between lesbians by emphasising the continuities of our experience, this type of response minimises and obscures the problems faced by some lesbians. To assume false equivalence is to deny the reality of difference.

Social Disability

Some women and lesbians we know, including those that one of us (R.P.) works with as a clinician can experience a profoundly different and often terrifying reality, that is typically not shared by others. As one woman said to us:

> Rachel, they're back (THE AIR BUBBLES). At first I always believed they were part of every day, then you didn't seem to know what I meant. I realised I was the only one who had them—bubbles hitting me all the time. Well they're back anyway, hitting me from every side, and my head is empty, empty as a shell, all my thoughts drained out of me while I was asleep. All mixed up, day, night, whispers all around my head, lots of water, shoes don't seem to fit, little men, colours, it's all going on, all at once—it's killing me. What do you want from me, you stupid voice. SHUT UP, please don't torment me any more, there can't be a lady, I haven't got a knife, I don't want to kill her, so leave me alone voice. My own private hell. Thoughts running riot, mixed up, fast, tormented—what's that about oranges? What the hell is going on here. I'm trapped inside my brain—no way out. I truly can't try any harder. If only I could convince the world of that. Please stop the noise in my head. PLEASE.

Another woman may believe that a rat is sitting in her brain and looking out of her eyes; that the television broadcasters are putting thoughts into her head and taking away her own; that everyone is trying to poison her; may continuously hear voices talking about her, making her do things against her will; or experience an overwhelming and terrifying sense of foreboding—a knowledge that something terrible is going to happen, the nature of which she does not know, but for which she is personally responsible. At least at times, such experiences leave the lesbians who have them in a world that no-one else understands, believes or



experiences. Problems with thought and feeling like these are profoundly disabling: they render some lesbians unable to cope with the demands of everyday life without support and lead to behaviour that may be deemed inappropriate by other lesbians.

We suggest here that such problems of thinking and feeling might usefully be thought of as 'social disabilities.' Whether temporarily or permanently, they present problems in negotiating an able-minded social world in much the same way as physical disabilities present problems in negotiating the able-bodied physical world.

> My world is like having two or more different levels of what is right and what is wrong. Should I be pulling myself out (*when I can*) to face the everyday motions of life there in your world? Having to keep it all up is very difficult. I want to say slow down, have a rest, yet reality goes on and I feel as if I'm being smothered by life itself. My world hurts. It's scary. Never ending and painful. When I'm in my world I know that I'm going far away, and although I know this, I can't prevent it. To me it's all so real, and I honestly believe it to be true and genuine when I'm there.

The concept of disability is a useful one. There have been arguments that we should use terms with more positive connotations, such as 'physically/socially challenged.' We believe that use of such alternatives tends to deny the extent of such problems. Bev Jo, Linda Strega & Ruston (1990) make a similar point in relation to hidden physical disability:

> We find that most well and able-bodied Lesbians want to deny hidden disabilities and assume that if we just try hard enough we'll be able to be as physically functional as they are . . . Some well and able-bodied Lesbians seem to have taken the term "physically challenged" to mean that disabled Lesbians can overcome any and all physical limitations if we try hard enough to "meet the challenge."

This argument is particularly important in the area of what we are calling social disability, because serious problems with thoughts and feelings have often been denied (both by the world at large and by lesbian feminists) with the assumption that disabled lesbians could behave 'properly' if they really wanted. Our use of the term 'social disability' is designed to highlight both the involuntary nature of the problems and the need for social change within lesbian communities to accommodate them.



Serious disabilities of thought and feeling often attract labels like 'madness' or 'mental illness': lesbians often find madness hard to deal with. When Lesley (to use her own words) "went crackers" she was "very disappointed" with the response of other lesbians: "I think that we are seen as 'other' and apart" (quoted in Yvon Appleby, 1990:2). Nancy, hospitalised after a painful break-up with her lover when she was jobless, moneyless and "hearing voices," describes how:

> Women in the women's movement, in the lesbian movement, women I had known for a long time and worked with, started treating me differently after I had been in the hospital . . . They had been my friends, but now they would look at me as if I was crazy. When I tried to talk about it, I was afraid I was being paranoid. (Judi Chamberlin, 1977:75)

In an article called "Deprivatizing Pain," Ruth Elizabeth (1982) describes a similar experience when she tried to discuss her clinical depression in a radical feminist group, and was met with "silences, accompanied by looks of incomprehension":

> . . . women pretend that my depression doesn't exist. So they never ask me about it and somehow communicate that it's not the sort of thing they're interested in talking about. . . . It makes me feel split, as if I lead a double life. An important part of me remains hidden, privatized, a personal problem I have to deal with on my own. (15-16)

She describes her terror of parties, her anxiety at being away from home for any length of time unless she is "psychologically well prepared and feeling exceptionally strong." Other people, she says, sometimes see her as "unreliable" or "erratic," failing to appreciate the amount of time and energy she puts into doing very basic daily things:

> I'm fed up with feeling always on the fringe of women's things . . . I want my struggle to be seen as important too, as something which affects all of us in a fundamental way, something which is an integral part of the building of our movement. (Elizabeth, 1982: 15-16)

As Elana Dykewomon says (1988), "a radical analysis of what is called madness has to be a major cornerstone of lesbian theory."

Feminist Analytical Approaches

Feminist theory has always pointed out that much of what is considered 'madness' is in fact ordinary and 'normal' behaviour for women.

Madness is an invention applied to dissident women to invalidate deviant words and actions, and to reinforce conventional images of femininity. In her ground-breaking work, *Women and Madness*, Phyllis Chesler argues that 'madness' is a direct result of the male-defined notion of femininity, and illustrates her argument with chilling quotations from women hospitalised for violating heteropatriarchal prescriptions. The pathologisation of lesbianism has been a prime example of this. In other cases, however, while the labels may be oppressive and inappropriate, the disabilities are all too frighteningly real. There is nothing sacrosanct about the processes of thought and feeling that somehow render them immune from disability.

A second tempting approach, as Ginny Cook (1985) says, is to romanticise madness. But if women's madness were a rebellion against traditional forms of femininity, then there would be "millions of women in this country who are at least passively aligned with the feminist cause." Madness is usually far from glamorous. It is mundane, often stereotypical, frustrating, disturbing, anything but an exciting voyage into the recesses of the human mind. "Psychiatric illness is usually a sign of powerlessness, rather than revolutionary strength and activity" (Cook, 1985: 103), and "neither genuinely mad women, nor women who are hospitalised for conditioned female behavior are powerful revolutionaries" (Chesler, 1972: 56). Severe and disabling mental distress of this sort is not some romantic revolutionary stand, not an escape from oppression nor a higher plane of understanding and creativity.

Another common thread in feminist theory has been that madness is caused by (hetero)patriarchal oppression. It is undoubtedly the case that much of what has been labelled 'madness' is a product of oppression: self-starvation, alcohol abuse, anxiety, and depression can all be understood in these terms. The damage wrought upon us by heteropatriarchal torture must never be underestimated.

We cannot know how much of the disability of thought and feeling that has attracted labels like 'schizophrenia' and 'manic depressive illness' would exist in the absence of acts of heteropatriarchal oppression. Nevertheless, the reality is that many lesbians today *do* experience disabilities of thought and feeling that cause profound ongoing distress, lead them to behave in ways that others think inappropriate and unusual, and often render them unable to cope with the demands of everyday life without support.

Sometimes these disabilities are always present, sometimes they disappear completely after a time, but more usually they fluctuate leaving the lesbian relatively able to cope at some times, extremely distressed and disturbed at others, and seemingly unpredictable and unreliable to those

around her. This very variability is seriously problematic for all concerned. As one woman said to us:

> I can be fine for weeks, months sometimes, but I always have to live one day at a time. I plan things for next week, but I never believe that I will do them until the time actually arrives. I never know when they're going to come back—the voices, the ideas. That's the worst part. Knowing that they will come back but never knowing when.

Whether transient, episodic or continuous, difficulties of thought and feeling can be profoundly disabling.

At present, it is often impossible to be accepted as a bona fide lesbian if you have long-term social disabilities. If you behave in unusual and disruptive ways, if you express strange beliefs that others do not share, you cannot really be lesbian. Just as the heterosexual feminist movement tries to sanitise its image by dissociating itself from lesbians, so able-minded lesbians all too often withdraw from lesbians who behave in strange, unpredictable ways. To give an example (from R.P.'s experience):

> An old school friend of mine came into a lesbian bar where I was drinking with friends. We hadn't seen each other for over a decade. She sat down and we talked. After a short while, she asked if I watched the television news. I said I did. She said, "Oh well, you know then." "Know what?" I asked, a little puzzled. She explained in detail how the newsreader sent out special messages to her, told her to do things that she thought were wrong, told her that people were trying to kill her . . . My friends helpfully suggested that this was not true, that she must have been mistaken, that she shouldn't worry. She became angry and suspicious, accused them of not understanding (which they didn't), of being "one of them." It was not long before she and I were the only ones left. The friends I was with simply drifted away, and spent time afterwards laughing about it, saying the woman was crazy, that she shouldn't have been allowed in, asked why I had bothered to talk to her.

Severely socially disabled lesbians know well the consequences of withdrawal. As one woman said to us:

> I'm alone. My world hurts. It is never-ending and painful. My thoughts run riot. All my friends have gone—they didn't understand, they didn't believe me, they thought I was stupid, mad, silly, they kept saying "don't worry"—well I do worry. I can't always be like they

want me to be. Don't shut me up. Don't shut me out. Listen to me. Don't be so ignorant. Please help me.

Therapy Is Not the Answer

Exclusion of socially disabled lesbians is nowhere more evident than in lesbian/feminist therapies of the type offered at women's therapy centres by lesbian and feminist practitioners. While varying in approach, lesbian/feminist therapies share a common focus of 'empowering' women, healing the wounds of patriarchal oppression. We believe that such therapies are inappropriate and oppressive for lesbians and feminists generally (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). They are particularly irrelevant for socially disabled lesbians.

First, entry qualifications for such therapies are really quite high—certainly well beyond most of those with whom one of us (R.P.) works. Such socially disabled lesbians are excluded from feminist therapy because they are seen as too disturbed, difficult, violent, lacking in insight. They could not get themselves across town at the right time without help, let alone engage with the therapist in a manner considered appropriate.

Second, such therapies are based on the notion of 'cure'—getting rid of problems. It would be oppressive to assume that all physical disabilities—disabilities of sight, hearing or mobility for example—could be resolved, made better. This assumption is equally oppressive to lesbians with social disabilities. These disabilities leave lesbians either continuously or periodically unable to cope unaided with the day-to-day demands of life in an able-minded world.

Access for Socially Disabled Lesbians

Lesbians with physical disabilities have difficulties to a greater or lesser degree in negotiating an able-minded social world. Like physically disabled lesbians, the extent of disability—the extent to which it is possible to function effectively and contribute—is determined by the demands of the environment. Disabilities can only be defined in relation to the social or physical environment and the demands that it imposes.

Sometimes disabilities can be reduced by drugs. Many lesbians with diabetes, or painful long-term illness such as cancer, benefit from drugs. The drugs do not 'cure' the problem but they allow the person to function more effectively. Similarly, disabilities of thought and feeling can sometimes be alleviated by drugs. Sometimes they cannot. Sometimes the costs of drugs, their negative effects, outweigh the benefits, and the ways in which mind-altering drugs have been used to sedate and control

women who contravene heteropatriarchal imperatives have been widely documented (e.g., Chesler, 1972). However, drugs are not inherently good or bad, their 'goodness' or 'badness' must be judged in terms of the extent to which they facilitate access, enable the woman to function and cope better. If drugs help you think more clearly they are a good thing, if they dull your senses to the extent that you do not know what is going on, they are a bad thing.

However, in thinking about disability our central concern is about access. For physically disabled lesbians the way in which the physical world is organised is of primary importance: changing the demands of the physical environment to improve access by providing such things as ramps, lifts, braille, and signers is critical.* For socially disabled lesbians what becomes paramount is the way in which lesbian friendships, relationships, and communities are organised. The expectations we have of each other and the extent to which lesbians can support, accommodate and include those who do not always behave in ways they expect take on central importance. Disabilities of thought and feeling are not individual psychological problems. They are political problems, problems for us all. Consideration of disabled access does not mean addressing the weak part of the person. Quite the converse. By trying to ensure access, lesbians enable all those who are disabled to function and contribute to lesbian politics and culture.

Sometimes access will involve the provision of mundane practical supports. When one's internal world is confused it is often impossible to do the ordinary things of life like getting up, washing, dressing, shopping, cooking, going out without an ally, someone to be there, to help.

But the most important form of access for someone who is socially disabled is access to social relationships with others. As lesbians, we badly need to extend and elaborate lesbian feminist theories, like those of Janice Raymond (1986) and Sarah Hoagland (1988) to encompass lesbians who have major difficulties of thought and feeling. At present, most theories on friendship and relationships assume able-mindedness, assume an ever-present capacity for thoughtfulness. This excludes those lesbians with disabilities of thought.

How can we accommodate into our theories those of us who have disabilities of thought and feeling? How can lesbians go on treating one who has behaved in disruptive, difficult, aggressive, unacceptable ways as a valued member of their communities even when she may at any

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* We do not mean to imply that physically disabled lesbians need only physical access. Even though they may not be socially disabled, they are often not included socially by other lesbians.

time do the same things again? How do these lesbians deal with their *own* frustration, feelings of being used, let down, cheated, embarrassed? Such feelings need to be addressed politically.

Some Suggestions

We are not pretending to offer a set of answers here, but we would like to suggest some directions that might be useful.

First, it seems important that the more able-minded abandon the arrogant perception (Marilyn Frye, 1983) that seeks always to understand by drawing parallels with their own experience of the world: what they would feel, what they would think, what they would do. If they expect someone to behave in ways that make sense in their understanding of reality they are going to be angry and upset when she does not. Instead, they must accept that a socially disabled lesbian's reality is profoundly different. They may be unable to share her perception of reality, but at least they can try to understand what this reality means for her, to comprehend her behaviour in the context of her world and her experiences.

For example, a woman with whom one of us (R.P.) works believes that her nose controls the weather. She will not go out when the weather is good because she believes that if she does it will rain, and she becomes distressed when people complain about bad weather because she knows she has caused it. For years she has experienced the ubiquitous imperative of patriarchal psychiatry that extols all mental health professionals 'never to collude with a delusion.' The effect of this arrogant denial of what for her is an everyday reality is to render her alone—disbelieved by the vast majority of those around her. Nowadays if anyone challenges, or fails to take seriously, this belief, she becomes extremely angry and accuses them of failing to understand what is really happening—an entirely reasonable response. Whilst it would be wrong to lie to her—I cannot agree that she controls the weather—I can acknowledge that for her this is a reality. I can understand the distress that this reality causes her. I can sympathise with her distress when it rains, avoid complaining about the weather, accept that she cannot go out when it is fine, and provide her with practical help getting the things she needs when she cannot go out.

Second, if someone's internal world is chaotic and confused and she is battling to negotiate two worlds—a terrifying reality and the world as others know it—she is likely to be relatively insensitive to the rather subtle cues on which others rely so heavily. How often does a lesbian make explicit her expectations—expectations like 'not monopolising the conversation,' 'not butting in while others are talking'? The raise of an eyebrow, the shrug of a shoulder, tone of voice, simply will not do. Clear explanation, and regular reminders, of what she feels, means, needs,

likes, and dislikes, are essential—and would avoid a great deal of the confusion that arises in a variety of social situations.

Third, there are likely to be behaviours that no amount of understanding will make acceptable: someone hitting me for example. Instead of totally withdrawing from those who do such things, maybe some form of 'partial withdrawal' is an ethical option: withdrawing not from the lesbian, but from certain aspects of her behaviour. When I remove myself from violent or abusive behaviour from another lesbian I am not *necessarily* refusing ever to see her again. I may avoid being with her at times, or in situations, where she is likely to be violent. This would at least allow the possibility of continued connection between us. If I withdraw totally from a disabled woman who behaves in ways I do not like, then she has nowhere to go for help and support but heteropatriarchal psychiatry. Most women and lesbians entering mental institutions, seeking help, do so not because they are forced, but because they have nowhere else to turn for support: compulsion by another name.

Fourth, when a lesbian is particularly distressed, she may need a safe, supportive, non-demanding environment in which she can be cared for.

Heteropatriarchal psychiatry is not the answer for women who are distressed and disturbed, but at the moment it is often the only form of asylum available. Lesbians and feminists talk only of the degrading, negative effects of hospitals—often making it even more difficult for other lesbians to use them when they badly need the safety they afford. The provision of alternative sanctuary—alternative respite and relief from the demands of everyday life—cannot realistically lie with any one individual. Helping and caring for someone who is very distressed, very disturbed, is not easy. It is often more than anyone can handle alone. Therefore we need to think collectively about how to provide for the needs of such lesbians. At present we are sometimes able to achieve this for short periods, but only in a rather haphazard, and not a very safe, way. We know of lesbians who, when distressed and disturbed, have been 'handed round' a series of friends for one or two nights at a time. Similarly, during one of our own (R.P.'s) depressive illness, admission to a psychiatric hospital was prevented only because friends organised a rota to ensure that she had someone with her. While such efforts have undoubtedly been helpful, they can hardly be said to provide the degree of safety and security that is really needed. We must provide safe, tolerant environments—asylums that are a genuine alternative to psychiatrists, psychologists, prisons, and mental institutions—and which are within, not apart from, our communities (see Quinn, 1984). As psychiatric survivor Judi Chamberlin says, what we need are "true asylums":

> . . . places to which people can retreat to deal with the pain of their existence . . . These asylums would not simply be more humane mental hospitals, they would be true alternatives to the present mental health system—voluntary, small, responsive to their own communities and to their residents. (1977: 5)

Some women will need such asylum for short periods of time, others who are more permanently disabled (possibly as a result of dementia, brain injury, or persistent severe disabilities of thoughts and feelings) may require such an environment on an ongoing basis.

Often asylum is seen as a place rather than a concept—the *Collins Dictionary* defines asylum as a shelter, a sanctuary, a safe inviolable place of refuge. It seems to us more useful to consider asylum not as a place, but as relief from ordinary expectations and demands. Such a conceptualization allows consideration not only of places to which one can retreat, but also of the various forms of partial asylum that may be possible. It allows us to consider a more permanent, organised system to provide relief form some day to day activities—someone else shopping, washing, cooking for you. We can also think about providing relief from some social expectations—not being expected to work, or to do as much as others, or to behave in the prescribed manner. These forms of partial asylum may be achieved via practical help in ordinary situations, or by places of refuge within ordinary situations: places to retreat to for a few hours to get a little peace and quiet.

Conclusions

Whether or not our problems are a consequence of heteropatriarchal oppression, it is ableist to assume that all of us, all of the time, will be capable of meeting the demands of everyday life. To acknowledge the possibility that at some times some lesbians will need care may seem to abrogate their integrity, or to validate the idea that someone has a right to dominate (Sarah Hoagland, 1988: 120). Yet without some concept of respite for those whose distress or cognitive disabilities render them temporarily or permanently unable to cope, can we really say that we have a responsive, attending, caring community?

Those of us with disabilities of thought and feeling do not need psychiatry or a 'feminist' psychology that individualises and privatises their problems and attempts to enable them to 'fit in' to an able-minded world. As feminists and lesbians we need a politics of social disability parallel to that which we have begun to construct around physical disability. Instead of defining social disability out of existence—handing over those lesbians whose disabilities we deny to the heteropatriarchal

institutions we deplore—we need political analysis. As psychiatric survivor Judi Chamberlin argues:

> We must begin to turn toward the people we now isolate—the troubled (and troubling) relatives and friends we both love and fear. It will not be easy. The mental hospital system has developed precisely because this is a job we would rather leave to others. (1977:239)

The tasks may not be easy but they are essential. Acceptance and inclusion of distress and disabilities of thought and feeling are of central importance not only to lesbians who experience such disabilities but also to those who do not. As feminists and lesbians we have to acknowledge and explore able-minded assumptions, consider what access to lesbian politics and culture might mean for those of us with social disabilities, and build on existing feminist theory to include all of us.

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A Commentary on "Madness, Social Disability and Access"

I hope Rachel and Celia's paper will stimulate much-needed discussion (and action). I would like to start this off by raising the issue of the relationship between psychological disabilities and traumatic abuse.

Disability of all kinds is highly correlated with sexual and physical abuse because perpetrators are more likely to assault the disabled, as well as because abuse can cause disability. So we can expect a spiral: disability leads to abuse leads to disability leads to abuse; or abuse leads to disability leads to abuse leads to disability and on and on. We can expect abuse and trauma to be major factors in the life of just about any lesbian with a psychological disability. Even when abuse did not cause the original disability, it compounds it.

It is becoming clear that girlhood torture, in addition to being **the** cause of multiple personality, also causes behaviors *which are easily labelled as* schizophrenic, psychotic, paranoid, or psychopathic. I was immediately impressed, on reading Rachel and Celia's paper, with the similarity between the women's descriptions of their inner experience and descriptions of cult torture. When one of us says they are coming at her with knives, or telling her to kill someone with a knife, is it possible that they **did** come at her with knives and they **did** tell her to kill someone? When she believes the TV news commentator is telling her to kill herself or others or hears voices that tell her the same thing, is it possible they **did** program these voices into her over and over again, that they **did** used everyday events as triggers to set off these messages, and that they **did** and perhaps still **do** send her coded messages?

Among other symptoms that cult torture produces, in fact is often specifically designed to produce, and that are also often seen as symptoms of 'madness' are: feelings of foreboding that something awful is going to happen and you are responsible for it, the sense that you are destined to die, images and terror of bugs and rats and snakes, the belief that others do not understand what really goes on in the world, the belief that many of the people around you want to hurt or kill you, altered states of consciousness, dissociated consciousness, and distorted bodily sensations.

Does girlhood torture cause 'madness'? Or does it 'just' cause distress that can sound and look like 'madness'? I have heard that there is good evidence that 'schizophrenia' has a genetic, i.e., inherited, base. But is this always the case, or can some forms of schizophrenia be caused by trauma? Whatever the eventual answer to these questions, I think it's

clear that, for the present, we must always considered the possibility that what looks like 'madness' may *instead* be memory or may *also* be memory.

Along a similar line, I want to float the hypothesis that serious suicidalness and suicide, i.e., the contemplation of and the actual act of destroying the life of one's physical body, occur only in someone who has experienced the traumatic physical invasion of her body, as from rape, beatings or torture. I find most of the reasons conventionally proposed for suicide absurdly inadequate.

The issues here are fundamental: How much torture is necessary to produce the pain and disability we find in ourselves? This question should stay in the forefront of our consciousness.

Fox

Guidelines for Authors

Lesbian Ethics is a forum by and for lesbians. If the author agrees that her work can be used by non-lesbians this is noted at the end of the article. Any other use must be cleared with individual authors, who can be contacted through ***LE***.

LE is a journal of radical lesbian ethics and politics, with an emphasis on how lesbians behave with each other. We welcome essays, reviews, letters to the editor (of no more than 1000 words) and responses to material which has appeared in ***LE***. ***LE*** does not publish poetry or fiction. ***LE*** does not publish material being published elsewhere, but we don't mind simultaneous submissions as long as you advise us of the fact when you send in your article. Depending on where we are in the publishing cycle, we may take up to 9 months to respond to your article.

Contributions should be based on lesbian experience, should cite lesbians—with an adequate reference to the source of the material cited, should cite male authors only in extreme circumstances, and should use the variations of the words dyke, lesbian, woman in preference to human.

See the Editor's Introduction for information on the focus of the next two issues and deadlines.

Write to inquire about deadlines for articles. Type all manuscripts double-spaced. We will love you if you can send it on a disk (MacIntosh or IBM 5-1/2). Include your phone number for editing purposes. Send an SASE if you want your manuscript returned.

WHOOOOPS!!!!
Tamarack's contributor's note in the last issue said she is a "lesbian feminist." What she actually said on the phone was that she is a "lesbian separatist."

Notes on Contributors

Anne. I think I've said too much already.

Carolyn Gage is a lesbian playwright living in Santa Rosa, California. She has just written *Take Stage*, a manual on directing and producing lesbian theater.

Celia Kitzinger is author of *Social Construction of Lesbianism* (Sage, 1987) & co-author of *Changing Our Minds:Lesbian Feminism & Psychology* (NYU,1993)

Carla Duke. I am a vegetarian, lesbian separatist living in Oakland with my lover of 17 years and two cats. I have chronic fatigue and life is a daily struggle.

Kate Moran. A lot of parts of me grew a lot and worked together in new ways to write this. Publishing it I'm sure will change me too. I'm happy in Massachusetts now. I love to dance.

Noel Furie is a member of the Bloodroot Restaurant collective and lives in Bridgeport, CT with June and 5 cats. She is delighted that Bloodroot has just published their third cookbook, *The Perennial Political Palate*, for vegans.

Rachel Perkins is coauthor of *Changing our Minds: Lesbian Feminism and Psychology* (NYU Press, 1993) and works for the British Natl. Health Service.

Sid (a pseudonym) is a reluctant essayist.

Theo. Kramer is 32, an Aquarian who has diabetes, chronic fatigue & red hair. She longs for a world where women treat one another with greater gentleness.

Vonceil Smith is a clinical psychologist in Tuscaloosa AL. A large, diverse, supportive community flourishes there. Thanks for the help, Elizabeth & Sandy.

Announcements & Ads

Lesbian Ethics ad rates: (discounts for multiple issues)
Classified: 20 cents a word, $3 minimum.
Display: 3 x 2-1/2 $15, half page $25, full page $50.

GOLDEN THREADS, a contact publication for lesbians over 50 and their younger friends. World-wide. Send $5 u.s. for sample copy mailed discreetly, or SASE for free information. PO Box 3177, Burlington, VT 05401-0031.

MAIZE, A Lesbian Country Magazine: What's happening on Dyke lands plus thought provoking discussion of values, community building and economic survival. $10/4 issues. $3.50 single issue. P.O. Box 130, Serafina, NM 87569.

Women's Review of Books. Not just a guide to good reading—a monitor of contemporary feminism. Subscriptions $17/year. Wellesley Women's Research Center, Wellesley, MA 02181.

What Lesbians Know about Cancer, a new newsletter. Suggested donation $20/6 issues, less if you can't, more if you can. Louder than Words, P.O. Box 90934, Washington, DC 20090.

Announcements

Linda Strega, co-author of *Dykes Loving Dykes* is recovering from an operation for cervical cancer, adenocarcinoma. She has only public welfare-based health services and needs donations to cover her surgery and alternative health care. Make checks to Lisa Hubbard, 434 41st St., #1, Oakland, CA 94609.

The Pagoda Temple of Love spiritual/cultural home and retreat/guest house for lesbians, has been given a $30,000 renovation. It is now gorgeous and fully accessible. $15/lesbian/night. Swimming pool, theater. For info about performing and visiting: 2854 Coastal Hwy, St. Augustine, Fl 32095. (904) 824-2970.

Calls for Papers

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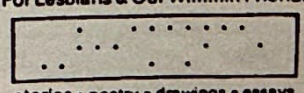
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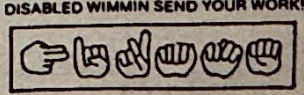


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