

A DAUGHTER'S RESPONSE TO HER MOTHER'S BOOK

by
Marci Rubin

The phone rings and I answer with a simple hello. "What's wrong?" asks a voice I'd know instantly anywhere, anytime. "Nothing," I answer, knowing full well my response will not be believed. It's my mother calling. And she knows.

I left my parent's home at 18, am now 52, and for that entire 34 years have not answered a phone call from my mother when, if I had a problem, large or small, her normal "hello sweetie" didn't give way to "what's wrong?"

I used to rail about her thinking she knew what was going on with me. I thought it unfair that she never once got it wrong, even when I wasn't fully aware of my own thoughts. And I felt it intrusive because there was no place to hide, even though she asked only out of concern and never forced me to talk. Today I relish those calls. They symbolize for me the true constant my Mom has been in my life. As she gets older I sometimes fear she'll call when I'm down and she won't recognize the wistful tinge in my hello that's not heard by others. Then I realize that someday she won't be calling anymore and am immediately cheered by the knowledge that for now she's still here.

It was with trepidation that I began reading this manuscript. What if I had fundamental disagreements with what she wrote? But as I read passages about me or us, I was continually astounded at how well they portray our relationship, and how often I wanted to say, "Yeah, Mom, you got it right."

Some people who read the manuscript early suggested our relationship sounds too good to be true. I think they miss the point. A strong mother-daughter relationship doesn't mean one without turmoil, that things are always perfect, that the mother doesn't worry about the daughter, or that the daughter doesn't need to rebel in order to find and validate a self that's separate from her mother's. But rebellion and rejection are quite different.

Others suggested the book would be better balanced if it included examples of our struggles -- what occurred during the times things between us were strained. But any examples would simply be stories -- vignettes of events that have no long-term meaning. They provide no insight into a relationship the crux of which is so deeply imbedded in us both -- so internal. Stories of arguments and disagreements don't go to heart of our relationship -- our absolute, unconditional love for, and trust of, the other.

But perhaps they do show some of the ways that our love and trust were manifested:

On New Year's Day when I was 13, Mom returned home from a two-day visit to Berkeley and told me she was going to marry a man who lived there. I cried and yelled "It's not fair, I don't want to leave my friends." Mom tried to hold me, but each time she came near I'd pull away. She didn't shut me out or ignore my pain. But she was clear that this was her life and a chance for happiness she was not giving up. I remember her telling me "You probably can't understand how important this is to me, but he was happily married to a woman who died. If she hadn't died, they would still be married. He knows how to make the kind of commitment I want." So typical of Mom not to try giving me reasons why I should want to move but instead to tell me clearly why she was taking this step. She always spoke to me and with me, not at me.

After the wedding, Mom, her new husband and I took the very long drive up Highway 99 from Los Angeles to Berkeley. I cried in the backseat as loud and as long as I possibly could. At first Mom tried to talk with me, but soon left me alone, knowing nothing she could say at that moment would make me feel better. Finally, I gave up crying and decided that if I were obnoxious enough this new husband would tire of it all and send us packing back to Los Angeles. So every few miles I announced a new reason to stop -- I'm hungry, I have to pee, I'm thirsty -- in an endless cycle. About half way to Berkeley I realized Mom had joined me in the game I was playing. She co-opted my thunder, and in doing so allied with me in an unspoken test of her new husband's willingness to work things out. And most important, by her actions she assured me absolutely that she hadn't abandoned me by getting married.

As I read the manuscript, I found myself engaged in an ongoing dialogue with my mother, both external and internal. We talked about the book, about my thoughts and feelings, and how much more I understood her after reading it. But it was my inner dialogue that engaged me most -- notes scrawled in the margin of the manuscript and conversations in my mind -- a mental point-counterpoint of the different lives we led as daughters.

"As far back as I can remember, my relationship with my mother has been filled with conflict and acrimony," Mom writes.

"As far back as I can remember my relationship with you has been filled with love and trust," I respond.

"I'm assaulted with memories of the loneliness and heartache I suffered in my mother's house, of her displeasure and disapproval that were tattooed on my body and my soul," my mother goes on.

I shudder at the image and respond, "I'm overwhelmed with memories of the safety of your house, of your open arms always ready to hold and comfort me, of your smile and unconditional love even when you disapproved."

Mom writes about her trip to Boston when I was scheduled for a breast biopsy, our discussions about why she should go and her guilt in leaving. After reading the manuscript I realize she understood in her head but not her gut that I could let her go because I knew she would stay if I asked. Having no doubts about her love or commitment, I had no need to test them.

While Mom was writing the book, she worried sometimes that she was making my grandmother worse than she actually was. But in fact she does no injustice to her mother. My grandmother was alive for over 45 years of my life. For that entire time, I cannot recall hearing her utter a kind word about anyone, and especially not her daughter. In reality, Mom's attempts to understand and explain the anger and hatred that was so pervasive in my grandmother's life make her mother seem a better person than she was.

Mom's descriptions of her mother and their life together present a compelling portrait of the importance of the mother-daughter relationship. For even when the relationship is marked by as much distance as there was between my mother and grandmother, even when there's virtually no basis for any kind of communication, the struggle to create something more remains an important part of a daughter's life. Hence Mom's concern that she not do her mother an injustice, that she shouldn't make her seem so bad.

When the time came to move my grandmother to a nursing home, I accompanied Mom to Florida to make the arrangements. I was surprised by how small and frail my grandmother had become, and saddened that this once tower of strength and fierce pride was so diminished that

she could no longer care for herself and no longer noticed. I watched Mom care for her, saw her longing to love and be loved by her mother, saw her still cling to some hope that her mother would embrace her daughter. And I'll never forget those moments when my grandmother was lucid and clearly knew who we were. Not one passed without her complaining to God, "How could you take my son and leave her?"

Mom broke through the limitations of her upbringing with a vengeance. She is truly a transcendent child – a product of her past and of a future she alone created. She writes as if she had no choice in the matter, but choice is the essence of a human being. The path Mom chose was not easy. To take it took courage and left deep psychological scars -- her feelings of not fitting in no matter how many friends she has or how successful she is, her fear of being abandoned, her guilt about abandoning a family she had no choice but to leave behind, and her self-doubts as to whether she really was a good mother. I watch my beautiful, intelligent, successful and popular mother go through this world leaving her mark in so many important ways. And I'm saddened to see the price she paid for her past, to realize that she cannot see the same person I see. I asked her once if she thought she was a half-empty or half-full glass person. She laughed and said, "Mostly, I expect the glass to be taken away."

Mom took the best parts of her mother, her strength and determination, but refused to accept the parts rooted in anger and hatred. In so doing, she allowed herself to be the mother to me that she so badly wanted for herself. She spared me from being a victim of our shared past, from the hardship of having to break the patterns myself and the devastation were I not able to do so. She gave me stability, love, and most importantly the knowledge that I am not alone. For me the glass has always been there and always half full.

I recently spoke to a group of women lawyers about dealing with gender issues in the workplace. At the end one woman asked, "How do you have the courage to speak out like you do?" Without thinking I blurted out, "Oh that's easy -- just be born to my mother." As I sought to explain my very unprofessional answer, I saw clearly that even as an adult I continue to draw on our relationship for my strength and courage. And I recognized how lucky I was to be born her daughter.

Thank you Mom for who you are, your foibles and your great qualities. You are the most important person in my life. I wouldn't change one moment of our 52 years together, not even our struggles. You are my mom for everything that means...and that is all you need to know. You write of your mother "I don't want to live and die as she did." Trust me on this one -- you haven't and you won't; it's not in your being.

I love you.

Marci Rubin
October 2000