

# **SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD**

Prologue

(She really did do the best she could)

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I want to begin by saying that, although I am writing a book about our relationships with our mothers and how they profoundly effect our subsequent identities within future relationships, I really don't believe in mother bashing. Really, I don't. Particularly because I am a mother, and practically all mothers are extremely sensitive in that area. I think that the psychoanalytic beliefs that were prevalent during the mid twentieth century did great injustice and harmed many mothers. Mothers do not cause psychosis. Nor do they cause autism. Poor mothering is simply not responsible for every single emotional problem on the part of the child, as was then believed. What a terribly unfair indictment! Many mothers were made to suffer unfairly and needlessly. And, consequently, their children suffered as well due to the damage that was done to their mothers' self esteems. It often undermined the loving devotion and support that mothers would have otherwise given to their at risk children.

In fact, I don't really believe that our mothers have the ability to cause mental illness at all. A heavy burden has been placed upon mothers by believing that a mother's ability to nurture entirely determines the ultimate wellbeing of the child. This belief totally excludes the role of the child's individual nature and the role of the father and/or other significant people and factors in the child's environment. I will even go as far as to say that, short of being monstrously abusive or abandoning a child to such abuse, I don't believe that mothers really have the power to cause mental illness at all. Probably the majority of true mental illness is biologically and/or genetically based.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to notice that even very tiny infants each have their own individual personalities long before the environment has taken hold on them.

When I was young, a first-time mother, some of my friends and I formed a book club in an attempt to keep our minds from melting. We would read a new book each week and then get together to discuss it. We began when our children were each three months old. Of course, they would join us at the meetings. It was amazing to observe how each of our children was so completely different from one another! I don't think that we even had enough time on earth with them as yet to have profoundly affected their personalities in any way. One was high strung, nervous and cried a great deal. One seemed laid back, easy going and demanded little. Mine was highly social and already flirtatious. How could we account for these differences? Nature. It was the nature of each child that we were witnessing.

Jerome Kagan has written a wonderful book entitled, "The Nature of the Child," where he discusses the importance of each child's own individual temperament. It is a ground breaking book in that it takes the ownership off of nurturing as the sole determinant of a child's personality and debunks the beliefs of the old psychoanalytic school. Nature versus nurture continues to be an ongoing debate. We tend to swing from one belief to another and then back again. "Bad blood" becomes "bad parenting" becomes "individual temperament" and then perhaps it will be back to bad mothering again. I sincerely hope not!

I believe in nature as strongly as I believe in nurture and I know that there are many questions that remain as yet unanswered. However, there is one thing of which I am absolutely, completely convinced! I unquestionably believe that the way in which a mother responds and connects to her own child's individual nature and the relationship that they forge together is paramount in influencing that child's future relationships. Inadequate mothering can and does profoundly influence our self esteem and ability to trust others. After all, it is our very first and deepest love affair; or at least it should be. Was that relationship required? Was the mother able to fall in love with her "real" child in return and relate and connect? For our purposes and for the purposes of this book, by the use of the term "mother" I am implying the "primary caregiver" who may, at times have been fathers, grandparents, foster parents, etc. I am using the term "mother" because, more often than not, our mothers are our primary caregivers.

D.W. Winnicott, a famous psychoanalyst who began his career as a pediatrician in the early part of the twentieth century, coined the phrase “good-enough” mother. I love him for this. Winnicott doesn’t say that mothers have to be perfect or meet their child’s every need. He simply states that they have to be “good-enough.” Winnicott says that, initially, the “good-enough” mother almost completely adapts to her child’s needs and desires. However, gradually, she adapts less and less to the child’s demands according to her assessment of the growing infant’s ability to deal with the mother’s failure. Through the child’s eyes, that “failure” is the mother’s inability and unwillingness to continue making her child’s desires the center of the universe. It is Winnicott’s belief that a “good-enough” mother is one who relates to the child with “primary maternal preoccupation” whereby the child ultimately develops a healthy sense of self. In other words, the “good enough” mother creates an environment in which the child is ultimately able to feel “good-enough” about being themselves.

Furthermore, Winnicott’s believes that if there are too many interruptions in the mother’s ability to be there for the child, the child will develop a fear of annihilation. With mothering that is not “good-enough,” we feel a deep seated anxiety of not existing. This deep seated anxiety is very primitive and pre-dates any understanding of the fear of death as we know it. The child believes that, if the mother isn’t there, they have no self. Their very identity is linked to an awareness of the fact that the mother exists! Children who do not get enough “existence” from the mother are, therefore, psychically terribly at risk.

If a mother is unable, for whatever reasons, to provide what Winnicott terms this “holding environment” for the child, where the child is central and omnipotent, the child will not develop a healthy sense of self. They may develop a “false self”; a self that pleases the mother but is not the child’s authentic self. In other words, the mother does not form a relationship with the “real” child and therefore a healthy sense of self in relationship is never achieved. Real intimacy is never actually formed. Real intimacy implies being able to be one’s real self with someone else and to trust to expose one’s authentic feelings to them.

If being one's real self with one's mother is not possible, it is unlikely that it will be readily achieved with others as we mature. In fact, Winnicott feels that the role of the therapist while one is in therapy is to attempt to once again provide this safe "holding environment." In this therapeutic "holding environment" one hopefully can risk to have another opportunity with the therapist to have a "good-enough" relationship which will help to finally meet their neglected needs and to have their real selves risk to emerge and be accepted.

What does this all mean? It means that we must ask ourselves whether or not we were we able to pretty much be ourselves with our mothers. Were they there often enough? Did they relate to who we really were as opposed to who they wanted us to be? Did they successfully meet enough of our needs for us to have been able, for the most part, to trust them? Were we able to count on them and to feel loved for who we truly were and not for who they needed us to be? Did we have to develop a false self; a self that wasn't angry or needy? Did we have to take care of them instead of vice versa and were our own needs left unmet?

If the later was the case, we probably have not trusted anyone enough to bring our real selves to them either. We may not even know who our real selves are and therefore our relationships are not authentic. We become what the other wants us to be, or what we believe they must want, as opposed to who we really are. Perhaps we are compliant when, deep down, we yearn to rebel. Maybe we become caretakers instead of acknowledging our deeper needs to be taken care of as well. Often, we submerge our true or real natures in order not to threaten others because our mothers may have felt threatened by us. Sometimes, we feel like perpetual children and think of the other as the adult or the authority- and on and on it goes.

Maybe we have incorporated some of our mother's negative feelings towards us in to our own psyches and have formed what is known as a "negative introject"; a part of ourselves that has taken in to our psyche's our mothers' negative feelings and that judges and dislikes us the way our mothers did. We can almost hear her voice inside our heads telling us that we are inadequate, unlovable, show-offs, etc., etc. Perhaps this introject has become over whelming and has caused poor self-esteem and self loathing. Remember the

expression "...only a mother could love..." What if even our own mothers couldn't? It is like Hitler's having invaded Norway. Someone else is in charge of us, bullying us and running our psyches and we haven't freed ourselves from their tyranny.

No parent sets out to be a poor parent! I believe that all mothers hope that they will be good mothers and that their children will love them. Sometimes, in fact, mothers who are not "good-enough" cannot bear to acknowledge that fact simply because it is so important to them to be good, loving parents. Unfortunately, they therefore remain in denial and never grow or make the changes that are necessary to provide "good-enough" mothering. Having worked for The Department of Social Services many years ago, and having seen children taken away from the most damaging of environments in to the foster care system, I have witnessed the abject grief of such addicted or alcoholic or psychotic mothers, who cannot understand why their children are being taken from them. They cannot bear to know that they have not provided "good-enough" mothering or an adequate "holding environment."

Mothers do not set out to screw up their children. It is never their wish or goal. I have a magnet on my refrigerator that has a picture of the ideal Dick and Jane type family; a mother, father and their two children- a boy and a girl. Each are dressed immaculately in sweaters and trousers or skirts. They are all smiling lovingly at one another. The caption below reads, "They always planned to ruin their children's lives...and by and large they succeeded." Everyone laughs. The reason this magnet was made at all; the reason that people, like myself, buy it is simply because the concept is so ludicrous. No one, absolutely no one, consciously sets out to ruin their children's lives. When it does happen, it is because they simply couldn't do any better.

That is why this book is subtitled "What if your mother *couldn't* love you." It deliberately does not say that she didn't or wouldn't love you. If your mother couldn't love you, it is because she couldn't love you. It is because she was too disturbed herself to be able to provide "good-enough" mothering. It is not because she had the "good-enough" mothering to give and simply chose not to deliver the goods. And she didn't give real love to your siblings either. That is a fantasy and a fallacy. Something must have stood in her way, and that is what this book is all about.

Inevitably, when we start reading a book about mothers or we read articles on mothering, if we are mothers ourselves our attention quickly shifts from our own mothers to ourselves and we begin to worry. “Was I a good enough mother?” “Did I fail my child by not being there “enough?” No mother is or can be perfect. We all mess our kids up to one extent or another. We have just got to accept that! Even if we do have symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depression, etc., this does not necessarily mean that we were automatically not “good-enough” mothers.

Our mothers may even have managed to have been “good-enough,” despite their difficulties. When I first began telling people the title of this book, they all answered with “that’s me! The title is about me!” I do believe that we all feel like motherless children at times. But it is a question of to what degree? In this book, I am referring to mothers who were so impaired by their disorders that they were largely unable to connect in a healthy way. They could not be there for us enough. If there were any connections to them at all, they were fleeting at best. I am talking about impairment to such a degree that the bad far outweighed the good .

If you were that kind of mother yourself, I doubt you would ever have bought this book, don’t you? Would you really have bought a book that looks at mothering in any form or way? Would your mother have bought it? Furthermore, if we are able to look at aspects of ourselves in this, we might become even more understanding mothers. We very well might be or have been “good-enough” mothers, despite the fact that we were depressed at times or had ADD.

But the trick is to understand how can we look at this and realize the impact of it on our children without falling in to overall self-indictment? It is important to remember that when we become overwhelmingly self-indicting or self-loathing, it inhibits our capacity to make change. It is totally non productive. We can’t gain knowledge or insight this way. And we always want to make it a little better, right? “Good-enough” mothers want to have the closest and most honest relationships that we are capable of having.

This book is about the various and severe difficulties that may have prevented our mothers from having been adequate enough and the specific effects that this has had on

our development. It is about the profound effects that a lack of early, healthy connectedness to our mothers has on our development. If our first love affair was unrequited, how can we heal from this very early and most intense rejection? Hopefully, the book will be helpful in facilitating the grief, acceptance, and forgiveness that is necessary in order to go on to love again in constructive and fulfilling ways; love again as our real and truly lovable selves and not as others would have us be.