

Healing From the Loss of Your Mother

By Joan Elyse Schiff MA, LMHC OTR/L

In P. D. Eastman's children's book entitled, **Are You My Mother?**, we are told the story of a baby bird who falls out of his nest while his mother is off hunting. The first thing he does upon falling to earth is to go to search for his mother. The baby bird imagines he sees his Mom everywhere; in a dog, a cow, a cat, etc. At one point during his journey, rather dismayed, he stands his ground and states, "I have a mother. I know I do. I will find her. I will. I will." The baby bird with no other option in sight is swept up by a "Snort" (a dump truck) and returned to his nest just in time to be gracefully reunited with his mother.

The women I have seen in Motherless Daughters Therapy over the last fifteen years are not this fortunate. They do not live in a story book world where everything is magically made whole. Some have mothers who are/were emotionally absent or even damaging. Others have mothers whose lives were cut short and died during critical developmental times of their daughter's lives. Like the bird in P.D. Eastman's story, the women try desperately to find a replacement; "looking for love in all the wrong places," as the old song goes. By the time they pick up the phone and make the first contact to see me they've realized their attempts to seek solace on their own have failed. While they have made valiant attempts to mother themselves, construct their own lives, and become stringently independent; motherless women feel a chronic sense of longing, of something not being quite right.

Upon entering into individual therapy or groups, these motherless women take the first courageous step to allow others into their world and care for them. This arduous yet productive journey is not without pitfalls. Many tears can be shed recalling events and memorable moments; all the while missing Mom. The women still hold out hope that one day their Mom will walk through the door, answer the phone, or visit them in a dream. Other times they search for signs and signals that their mothers are watching over them. The women may experience a sense of shame accompanying being motherless. Motherless daughters are not like their peers in so many ways. They can be wise beyond their years yet imagine they are inadequate at being a woman or even feel childlike. Quite a bit of time is spent on identifying as a motherless woman, thereby decreasing the sense of alienation. They discover that other motherless daughters are willing to lend a helping hand and share a piece of their hearts.

During the initial phases of therapy the woman and I envision mourning and grief as an ongoing upwardly spiraling process. If necessary, we revisit significant points of departure, including: funerals, long periods of caretaking for ill mother, and episodes of neglect and intrusion by other family members. Upon telling their stories the women experience a lightening of their loads. In the safe atmosphere of the therapy room talking about death, loss, and the fear of a foreshortened life like their Moms' is not taboo. Frequently, the loss of their mothers was just the beginning of a series of traumatic events

and disruptions in their lives. With a remaining parent ill equip to handle their own grief the motherless daughter is left on her own to “figure” out life. Episodes of self destructive behavior, engaging in abusive relationships, and difficulty functioning are not unusual for motherless women. As the women share their struggles they no longer perceive their behavior as “crazy” but as coping mechanisms to protect themselves and make sense of their unpredictable worlds. They learn others have gone through similar experiences.

The next step involves an elaborate history taking, assessment, and education. The women learn about the mothering process and begin to develop a framework for understanding how the lack of nurturance and guidance impacted their lives. The gathering of history surrounding who their mothers were/are including: her likes and dislikes, view of the world, life roles and more, becomes the jump-off point for the women to determine for themselves the kind of woman they would like to become and to some extent already are. Motherless daughters are sometimes surprised to find out that their mothers were neither good nor bad. In many cases, the women realize that their Moms did not have adequate mothering themselves. They weave together the chosen and the not chosen, the hurts and joys of their lives and arrive at an integrated picture of their mothers. Hence, as the motherless daughter begins to accept her Mom as a woman with her own struggles, they are able to let go of unrealistic expectations of themselves. They begin to feel compassion towards their Moms and towards themselves. Anger over their Mom’s death or not having a present, caring mother lessens.

During the concluding phases of therapy I help the women develop an elaborate program of self care. This entails incorporating flexible boundaries, diminishing self defeating behavior, and rebuking negative self talk. They learn to nurture and comfort themselves; living their lives from their core values and beliefs. Fear of appearing and acting needy wanes while they gain confidence in their ability to trust their own judgment. It becomes okay to have needs and wants, to invite people into their lives, and make commitments. As the women instill a healthy self concept they feel more hopeful about developing a life and legacy of their own choosing.

It has been my privilege over the last fifteen years to be part to these women’s lives. They have rewarded me greatly. I’ve received pictures of their newborn babies, pieces of poetry, thank-you notes, and updates on their lives. It’s been one of those learning together, rare mutual endeavors.

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