

Sandra Miller: I Am the Resurrection

I Am the Resurrection

I am the resurrection. This is a heartfelt statement, not an intellectual or overtly theological one. Memories float across my consciousness, and the departed family and friends that people them live again. About ten years ago in a conversation with my friend Kris, what came up for me is that one of my purposes in life is to remember a number of women who would otherwise be forgotten, and to hold differently from anyone else the memories of those women. When I use my favorite wooden cooking spoon or choose buttons from my collection to include in jewelry or sculpture, my friend David's mother, Esther Stone, lives again. When I stop to appreciate the little watercolor that hangs in my living room, or ring the Pegasus bell sitting on the altar, a woman my own age who in her depression drank herself to death, Kit, lives again. Everyday I see the yellow powder case that holds my bangle bracelets, my ex-lover Jim's mom Gene lives again. Every time I stir preserves into my tea, my Aunt Ana lives again. Every time I see a woman with too much rouge and lipstick on, my Aunt Goldie lives again. Every time I roast a chicken, knead bread dough, or prepare a big meal for loved ones, my grandmother lives again. And for the last two months and two days every time I feel the hole in my heart and the waves of grief wash over me, my mother Annette lives again.

One of the ways in which I am the resurrection of my mother is very surprising. At her funeral, the Rabbi in speaking his remembrance of my mother said that she used to drop in on him

to chat. Everyone was stunned, especially me. I cannot begin to tell you how out of her character that seemed then, and still does. My mother was never religious, never went to temple with my grandmother and me, went only on High Holy Days after she married my stepfather and, though she was active in B'nai B'rith, did not know much about her faith. I could not have told you that she believed in God, and frankly, for years I had been worried about the state of her soul. Because of what he said, I made an appointment to speak with the Rabbi and what I found out stunned me again. My mother dropping in on him for several years, and when I asked him why he thought she had come to him, he said, "to be known." Had I heard correctly? My mother had wanted to be known? Suddenly I was like Saul when Ananias laid his hands upon him; the scales fell off of my eyes and I could see. I am my mother's daughter.

The Rabbi said that sometimes she would ask him a question, but he rarely had the opportunity to answer her. She would interrupt with a story, sometimes about her travels, sometimes about not a whole lot. All the years I asked her to tell me stories of her life, or what she was doing in the here and now, and got nothing except what my dad was up to, or how she was mad at him or one of my aunts. Not to mention how dearly I wanted to be known by my mother, but for all the complicated reasons that made it impossible for her to make herself known to me, she also could not know me. Seekers has often heard me say that I moved three thousand miles to be part of this community so that I could be known. Therefore, while my mother was still alive, our lives had a mirror quality unknown to the other. It feels to me that as long as I continue to be open and honest in my life, to seek places to be known, I am the resurrection and in me, my mother lives on. In reading you what I read at her funeral, perhaps some of you will carry a small memory of my mom along with you and be a piece of her resurrection.

My Mother's Eulogy

I loved my mother more than words can say. Jewish tradition demands that a eulogy be honest; it should paint an honest portrait of the deceased, and reflect the realities of their life. All this has been weighing on me since my father called me with the news, especially during the long hours of travel across country. What could or should I say? I stand here today with a hole in my heart, and in the Jewish tradition also thanking God for her life.

My mother was not an easy woman to like. Many people have difficult lives, and my mother was one of them. Some of us have better skills for dealing with life's challenges than she did, but her woundedness left its mark over the years. My mother suffered from depression and cared so little for herself these last years that she neglected to get proper medical care. I spoke with my mom most weeks by phone but she never let on how badly she was hurting. Until my dad showed me a paper that he had written up for her to use when talking to the doctor, I was unaware of her condition. She didn't call the doctor, and today we are gathered here to say goodbye to her before her 76th birthday.

There was a time when the demons were not so active; a time before most of you even knew her. I remember a time when laughter came easily to her, when dancing was a joy in her life, when friends were numerous, and when her heart was tender and open.

I remember baseball season Sundays watching Sandy Kofax pitching for the Dodgers on television with her, with popcorn

and the inevitable tickling session that followed. I remember a weekend trip to Big Bear to play in the snow with her friends from Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, and stopping for hot chocolate on the road. In 1952, she and some other women friends were very daring and went off for a big trip to Mexico. I remember her meeting my Bubbi and me in Chicago when I was seven or eight, and taking me from there to the wilds of Winnipeg where we went nine pin bowling, laughed at hailstones the size of golf balls, and scared her friend's family out onto the lawn because we took a bath while it was thundering and lightning. I remember a particular trip to Disneyland with our cousins the Glantzes that was just a barrel of fun. I remember going to May Company on Crenshaw and shopping for my first bra with her, and how she laughed.

And I remember how happy she was when she met my dad, and the yellow dress she wore at their wedding at the Bagel on Fairfax.

I have many memories, good and bad that no measure of time will ever erase. Today I pray for my mother, a woman with a tender, hidden, and wounded heart that finally just stopped, bringing us all together today to mark her passing.

From Anita Diamant's book, *Saying Kaddish*, comes this poem credited as "after a poem by Zelda, adapted by Marcia Falk"

Each of Us Has a Name

*Each of us has a name
given by the source of life
and given by our parents*

Each of us has a name

*given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear*

*Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls*

*Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors*

*Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing*

*Each of us has a name
given by our enemies
and given by our love*

*Each of us has a name
given by our celebrations
and given by our work*

*Each of us has a name
given by the seasons
and given by our blindness*

*Each of us has a name
given by the sea
and given by
our death.*

My mother's name was Annette, and I miss her terribly.

My mother was a complicated woman. I am a complicated woman.
Our relationship was complicated. My grief is complicated.

My mom's death was so unexpected, but should not have been. My mom's heart stopped because her calcium level was through the roof and her potassium level had bottomed out. Some of you may recognize that as symptomatic of the advanced stages of cancer. In my mother's case, it was undiagnosed. As I mentioned in the eulogy, she was so depressed she didn't follow up with the doctor and tell him everything that was going on with her despite the fact that my dad had written up a piece for her to read him, which I only learned about when I got to Los Angeles. Here's what my dad wrote:

When the doctor calls, tell him you have no strength in your frail body. That you cannot get up without a big effort from the couch or toilet. Tell him how you have to scoot to the edge of the couch or toilet and with big efforts and many tries you are sometimes very lucky and get up without falling back. If you fall on the floor, you have to wait for someone to come and help you get up because you have no strength to get up by yourself. How you have no appetite to eat and when you do eat it is very little. That your whole body quivers and how bruised you are. That it is very hard to hold something, such as a dish or TV controller without dropping them. What does he suggest you do for them?

I had no idea. My mother never said a word, and I rarely spoke with my dad. When I went to Los Angeles in May of 2002 for the birth of my second grandson, I thought I would see my folks, at least over lunch one day. Nevertheless, every day I called them my mother made some excuse or other why they could not meet me, like my dad working for two days on their broken dryer. I was sad and angry. When I went back that August, and again between Christmas and New Year's just this last year I decided not to deal with that hurt and did not even tell them I was in town. Now I know that my mother did not want me to

see her in that condition. I hadn't seen my mother for two and half years until I saw her in her casket, and I can tell you that she didn't look like the perpetually overweight, large personality woman I had known.

Over the years, occasionally my mother would let something out about her true feelings. My dad was often out and she would get lonely. I would ask her why she did not spend time with her friends and she would say that she had no friends. That always hit me hard because my mom used to be very gregarious, had many friends, and liked to party. Definitely symptomatic of her depressed state. But at the gathering after the funeral, which was attended by so many more people than expected, many people came up to me to tell me how much they would miss my mother's friendship. One of her neighbors, who is also a member of the temple said she had many months ago run into my mom sitting out in the courtyard of one of the local shopping centers and had stopped to talk to her. My mom wasn't feeling too well but she told Jackie that sometimes she just had to get up the strength and get out of the house for awhile, and sitting here made her feel better. Therefore, Jackie, who was there twice a week while waiting for her son's piano lesson to be over, would seek her out and sit with her if she was there. Jackie told me my mom was sweet to her and she enjoyed her company. There were other stories with a similar feel, but my mom felt friendless. The stories were another laying on of Ananias's hands; they opened my eyes to how much I did not know about my mother and added to the complicated form of my grief.

Just two and a half weeks after my mom's death the last homework assignment for the Psalms class was to write your own psalm, and I wrote:

*God, oh my God,
my life is in your hands.
You have chosen my path,
marked it with joys and sorrows,
work and rest.*

*Your grace and beauty
glow in gilt edged, back lit clouds
against an azure sky.*

*Your grace and beauty
are aflame in the blazing orange sunset
highlighting winter's bare trees.*

*Your grace and beauty
flow in the grief laden tears
of an orphaned daughter.*

*My life is a mystery to me.
You are a mystery to me.
Yet my days are filled with your love
and it is you I will praise
all of my days.*

In my attempt at psalm writing, I recognize aspects of the Jewish Mourner's Kaddish, a prayer of consolation in the form of a psalm. Nowhere in the Kaddish does it talk about death. It is a bittersweet song of praise to the Holy One, especially transcendent in the Hebrew incantation, which takes one out of oneself. I found it very comforting to recite in community every day of the first seven days of mourning called Shiva, and still find it comforting to read Anita Diamant's translation by myself:

*Exalted and hallowed be God's greatness
In this world of your creation.
May Your will be fulfilled
And Your sovereignty revealed*

*And the life of the whole house of Israel
Speedily and soon
And say, Amen.*

*May You be blessed forever,
Even to all eternity.
May you, most Holy One, be blessed,
Praised and honored, extolled and glorified,
Adored and exalted above all else.*

*Blessed are You,
Beyond all blessings and hymns,
Praises and consolations
That may be uttered in this world,
In the days of our lifetime,
And say, Amen.*

*May peace abundant descend from heaven
With life for us and all Israel,
And say, Amen.*

*May God, Who makes peace on high,
Bring peace to all and to all Israel,
And say, Amen.*

A prayer worthy of our times and not just my grieving. A prayer that speaks of blessing God and God's blessing us.

As I said, my grief is complicated. Many of you [will remember](#) that my relationship with my father has been one of the most damaging and painful aspects of my life. He is not my biological father, though he did adopt me, and one of the ways that I was able to make the space I needed to find it in myself to forgive him, was to distance myself emotionally from our relationship. When I talked about him outside of the family, I called him Sheldon. Since my mother's death, I have

come to call him dad again, which is one of this grief's blessings. A part of me feels like I should give this equal time to all that I have already said today. My dad has changed. He has opened up to me in his vulnerability in unexpected ways. He has asked for my advice and has taken it, and he tells me how he is feeling and he tells me what he is doing to heal. He has even acknowledged my Christianity without much ado. My dad is also a broken man; sad beyond what I could have imagined, not very healthy, and simply easier to love because of all that.

The blessings beyond that have been abundant. My dad's sisters, Evy and Sally, have been very supportive which is reflected in a little piece of writing I wrote the night of my mom's funeral:

"I'm in LA to bury and start grieving for my mom, and I am having a different family experience. Maybe not deep in knowing or being truly known by intent, but actions, stories in the third person, affection and love shown have given me a new perspective that fills some needs. I have a connection to my dad's family that holds love more deeply and tenderly than the past would have suggested. The wounded part of me recognizes that part of what I am experiencing is approval for how different I am from my mom, and that still makes me sad the same way it did in the past."

It is complicated grief. This week's lectionary, Psalm 30, contains the lines that Billy and Mike turned into the beautiful chant for this Easter season:

*You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy*

While I cannot say that I am clothed in joy all of the time, I have found many reasons to be joyful, and indeed, I had occasion to dance. The Seekers' overnight marked a change in my grieving from carrying inside me a bolus of grief that felt like the first hours of screaming and uncontrollable sobbing following the news of my mother's death, to something less heavy and less defined.

Wanting to be a good sport, I was going to participate in what was billed as dancing on Friday night. When it started out with the hokey pokey, I quickly left the circle and sat with Pat and Deborah who were simply observing. Then Kate Amoss started to teach the Electric Slide, which unbelievably I knew. That did not get me out of my chair in and of itself. It was after she'd gone through the steps and put on the music – "I Feel Lucky" – that I found my feet tapping, and suddenly without consciousness I was up there Sliding away, and laughing, and feeling alive. My mother would have done the Electric Slide, and once again, I am the resurrection.

Through the precious blessing of this community's overwhelming support and music, God has turned my mourning into dancing, and I feel very lucky.

Amen