

Sandra Miller: Today is Mother's Day

Seekers Church

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Today is Mother's Day, a day our culture celebrates with cards and flowers, gifts and dinner out. But I find myself wondering how Mary would view Mother's Day, as I myself struggle with all that it is, and isn't, for me. Would Mary spend the day in fond remembrance of her own childhood? From Mary's Song in Luke we know that she felt blessed by the Mighty One for having been chosen to be the mother of our Saviour, but would she count the blessings or the costs of motherhood?

Out of those unanswerable questions, for me the question that begs to be asked is, what is at the heart of being mothered, or being a mother? This is a question that has come up for me over and over again in my life. I believe the answer is truly being known.

Fortyish years ago George Clayton Johnson dubbed me Pipsqueek and inscribed a copy of his Ocean's Eleven to me "A good girl in a bad world, but neither as good nor as bad as she may think." In one intense day spent with me in company with my mother and step-father he knew more about me than my mother did. The inscription still fits all these years later, and it is also true that my mother still doesn't know who I am.

I try but still don't find easy comfort in the words of Psalm 139:

"O God, you have searched me and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise;

You perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down;

You are familiar with all my ways."

It is indeed wonderful to know that God knows me, but clearly I wish the words were also true of my mother. And beyond that, I wish the words were true of myself as a mother, and for my daughter when she thinks about me.

I am known to very few people and I stand before you today asking you as my community to help me grow into a time when I can say, "O Seekers, you have searched me and you know me" and to that end I am willing, if petrified, to bear witness to a piece of my story and tell you about my experience of being mothered and motherhood.

My mother grew up believing she was an unwanted child and never had the kind of bond I ache for with her own mother. My mother had a son out of wedlock an unknown number of years before I came along that she gave up for adoption and can not bear to think about to this day. And, my mother married a man who told her that he didn't want children and would leave if she got pregnant. I've never met my father. She moved back in with my grandparents. This was both blessing and curse for both of us.

What I remember most about my earliest life is being bathed in the love of my grandfather, and being surrounded by flowers and music. I could write pages about my zady (grandfather in Yiddish) and his rose and vegetable garden where I was always at his heels. Or drives in his old green Model A through the Sepulveda tunnel out to the truck farms in the San Fernando Valley. And going to the Jewish Musical Dramatic Society on Saturday nights for singing and dancing. I also remember going to shul on Saturday morning, and wanting to sit with him downstairs but having to go with my grandmother up to the balcony behind a curtain to sit, and not even being able to see him. And there was the red step stool my grandfather made me so I could stand at the stove and help my grandmother cook. My mother is conspicuously absent from these early memories. She was in her early twenties, single and beautiful and liked to party.

But my grandfather was in a car accident when I was about 6 that hospitalized him for the rest of his life. Life changed for all of us.

My memories of the next five years are filled with my grandmother bathing me in love and taking on my mothering and fathering. There was still the Musical Dramatic Society on Saturday nights, and Rachmaninoff on the hi-fi.

There was Sing Along with Mitch and Lawrence Welk on TV. And there was going to baby-sitting jobs with her so that she could buy season tickets for us to the L.A. Philharmonic, the Greek Theatre, and The Hollywood Bowl. There was gin rummy with Eva Binder and her other women friends. There was walking hand-in-hand as she went door-to-door collecting for every charity known to mankind. And there was her learning to drive so that every Sunday we could go out to Camarillo to visit my grandfather at the State Hospital, complete with picnic lunches in the downtown Camarillo Park. I could go on and on and paint my bubbly as the picture of perfection but I can't. She was also very demanding of me. How she managed I'll never know, but there were ballet, tap, and piano lessons. There was Little Miss America competitions. There was Brownies. And there was cooking and sewing and gardening and cleaning and learning to be the perfect hostess and guest. I was being groomed to be the wife of a successful AMERICAN Jew.

My mother is not quite so absent from this part of my life. Mostly she is still out there working and partying, but there are the Sunday afternoons watching Sandy Kofax pitch on TV with a big bowl of popcorn and my mother tickling me until I cried. And the one time she had a party at our house and I sat under the dining room table watching in fascination. And the few times she took me with her out to Long Beach Naval Base parties in the NCO club. And the only vacation she and I ever took together when we went all the way to Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada when I was 9. And the time she took me to "her woman" at May Co. to be fitted for my first bra.

But the other side of these memories is the endless screaming fights between my mother and grandmother. I knew the fights were because of me.

Life changed drastically again when I was 11. My mother met my step-father. My grandmother and step-father didn't take to each other very well, and while I was very confused about the tension between them, he filled a big hole in my life I hadn't known I had and I put him on a pedestal.

After they were married we moved out to "The Valley" and I no longer saw my grandmother every day – phone calls when I got home from school had to do. I missed her terribly, but I was a very busy girl. My mother not being the

domestic type, it fell to me to do most of the housework right from the start. My step-father expected me to get straight A's in school, and on Saturday's his visitation rights with my step-brother, who at 1 year old was terrified of my mother, meant I was Mark's primary care-giver once a week.

Think about what this might all mean for my mother. She has married a man who she thinks will be a good provider for both of us, who has now transferred a great deal of his affection and attention to me and away from her. Once again she has taken a back seat to me, and you can guess what happens. I am caretaking everyone and everything, and my mother is jealous on so many levels I still can't bear to think about her pain and inability to deal with it, and now she and I are having screaming fights all the time. I can't remember a single moment of joy from this period with her. I can remember the time she got so mad she threw a kitchen knife at me that landed in the doorjamb next to my throat. I cried on the phone to my grandmother a lot which just broke her heart. My grandmother died shortly before my sixteenth birthday, which left me nowhere to go when my step-father sexually abused me at seventeen. To this day my mother still doesn't know about the one time he crossed over the line by rationalizing that he was teaching me how to prevent getting pregnant. I still struggle with forgiveness for my mother for not protecting me from my step-father – but then, she didn't protect herself from his verbal and emotional abuse either. He broke her, and he managed to make her "less than" to me. For that I struggle for forgiveness for him and myself.

Suffice to say I got pregnant at 18. I didn't tell anyone until my sixth month but I had already managed to get kicked out of the house. My mother was beside herself with guilt and unable to support me in any way. Jerry and I were in love but we couldn't get married. Even if abortion had been legal, it wasn't an option. Keeping my child would have meant moving back home, and I just couldn't – for my own safety and sanity, let alone the safety of my child. I put her up for adoption and had just a wonderful social worker. She saw my strengths and weaknesses and was willing to break rules for me so that I might get on with my life feeling good about having made the best of a bad situation. My OB/GYN had known me since I was 5

and with the social worker's blessing registered me as married at the hospital so that I could be in the maternity ward. That meant that I could see and be with the baby until I was released, and I could name her. I named her Jadine. I bought her a teddy bear and when I went in to sign the final papers she had pictures of her with it for me to keep. I came away from the experience knowing I had done the right thing.

Through the years I never regretted my decision, but I did wonder where she was, and how she was, and, and....When the law changed that allowed the records to be opened if all parties consented I wasn't ready. We both reached milestone birthdays in 1989; my fortieth and her twenty-first, and we both wrote to the County of Los Angeles Department of Adoptions. May 16th marks the 12th anniversary of the beginning of our reconciliation, and June 7th is the anniversary of our first meeting face-to-face. Within the first five minutes we both made the same hand motion at the same time in conversation – I knew her then as my mother had never known me. We had a great visit complete with fun stuff and my telling her my story I just told you. She went through a rocky period after that, and I found myself legitimately in the role of mother for the first time – telling her that she was out of line but that when she was ready to have me in her life in whatever role she wanted, I would be available no matter how long it took. It didn't take long and we built up a wonderful relationship. I'm not mom to her, but we have a bond that is very strong and very deep. She has a generous nature, and has taken every opportunity to honor who I am in her life, and thereby given me every opportunity to lesson the scars around my loss of not being her mom. I walked down the aisle at her wedding, I was with her for the birth of her first son, and in just a few weeks I will be with her again for the birth of her second son

And the end result of this being unknown as both daughter and mother has manifested itself in my life in my desperation to be known, my not knowing

how to go about being known, my being desperately afraid of being known, and therefore sabotaging my being known. In this I have been my mother's daughter.

My dear Deborah sent me to my first Faith at Work event, led by Marjory, in August 1991. In December 1991 I visited Seekers for the first time and celebrated Christmas at the Dragoos'. That very first visit here I knew I belonged. It took me 11 years to grow enough into myself, to accept God back into my life, and to accept Jesus as my saviour, so that I could stand before you today with fear and hope and courage to paraphrase Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

Ever since I heard about your faith in Jesus, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of Christ, the glorious Creator, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know God better and in knowing God we may know each other better.