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What's in a Name?
An Intergenerational Reflection on Naming Our Daughters

My mother was only eight years old when her mother died of breast cancer. Today, at age 72, she has finally reflected on those pivotal eight years that shaped her entire life, her self image, her role as a woman, daughter, wife, and most importantly, mother. At age eight, my mother's development as a woman essentially stopped. Her identity became fossilized at that moment. At age 72, my mother finally realized the life-altering impact of this event. But this isn't just a story about a child losing her mother at such a young age, tragic as that was. No, this story continues on, weaving its legacy through three more generations. The critical incident that brought the grief to the surface is the birth of her first granddaughter. This event was the catalyst that required her to remember, and re-story her relationship with her dead mother, her daughters, and her male and now female grandchildren.

How does one mother when one never had a mother to watch and model? What impact does that have on the children and grandchildren of the motherless daughter? Drawing heavily on my mother's diary entries, these are the questions this paper hopes to highlight.

> Our self-representation, the way we define who we are, . . .what we remember, what we stress as significant, and what we omit of our past defines our present. And since the boundaries of our self-definition also delimit our hopes and aspirations, … that history affects our future. (Lerner, 1997: 199)

This is not my story. It is not from my memory. I share this diary only as an observer at most on the periphery of this story. And yet, this memoir has lived a silent life of its own, casting its shadow not only on the child and woman who wrote it, but on myself, my sister, and most importantly on my niece—the most recent, and perhaps the last, in a matrilineal line born of loss.

The year was 1942 and my grandmother lay encased, literally, in a body cast, a war-era attempt at stabilizing her body ravaged by breast cancer that had metastasized into her bones. She wrote on June 24, 1942:

> I had a bad shock last week. I wrote Marion Hilliard my Toronto doctor asking her what I might expect from the future and she told me bluntly in a typewritten letter. She said I'd been living "on borrowed time" for months now and that unless a miracle happened I would have months not years ahead. I "can take it" as regards myself, but not in regard to the children. For five days I cried every time I thought of them and looked at them. I'd wake up in the night worrying about such trifling things—whether whoever looks after them would keep their dresses the right length, what coats they'll wear year after next. And then there were long hours wondering about them during their adolescence. I've always felt I could help them so much more then than as children because I understand that age better. And now I won't have an opportunity. That was the hardest part to face.… And along with all that we are sure we live on in our friends and in our families and the memories they have of us. But children who lose their mother at 8 and 10 don't remember them very clearly. (Griffith)

She died from cancer on September 28, the day after her 48th birthday. My mother was only eight years old then and today, at age 72, she finally reflects on those pivotal eight years that shaped her entire life, her self-image, and her role as a woman, daughter, wife, and most importantly, mother. At age 72, my mother finally accepts and faces the life-altering impact of this event. At age eight, my mother's development as a woman essentially stopped. Her identity and her image of motherhood became fossilized at that moment. Everything she became in the 64 years that followed was a direct result of that event, a manifestation of an identity not yet completely formed. But this isn't just a story about a child losing her mother at such a young age, tragic as that was. No, this story continues on, weaving its legacy through two more generations.

I start in the present, in June 2005. My sister, Bona Elizabeth, gave birth to her first child, a girl, Georgia. This was naturally a joyous event for our family. My sister was older, 42 years of age, and the child was perfect. I was younger, married, and divorced, and already had two children—both boys. While my children were loved and adored by their grandmother, it became obvious that there was something significant for my mother in the fact that my sister, the first born, was giving birth. For her eldest daughter to give birth to a daughter only added to the intensity of my mother's investment in the birth. For many years, I had seen from the outside this urgency in my mother for my sister to marry and give birth.

The naming of a child has always had significance in many cultures. In the West, young parents often take great pains to select a name that creates the framework for that child's identity throughout his or her life. In other cultures, the selection of a name is even more important: the Jewish culture includes names of ancestors who have passed; in African cultures, names often have deep religious meanings that are intended to impart fortunate life events on the child; and in many cultures a specific ceremony takes place that publicly announces the child's name and family affiliation. In several African and Latino traditions ancestral connections are named as a way of placing the child in the flow of time and grounding him or her in the family line. In this case, my grandmother Bona, begat my mother Bona, who begat my sister Bona, who begat Georgia. There was much discussion about the naming of this girl-child—would she be "Bona" to continue the tradition set forth through the previous three generations? It was decided early on that no, she would not continue with that name primarily because of the difficulties experienced by my sister with such an unusual name. Other ideas and suggestions abounded and my mother, the new grandmother, was no exception in having specific desires for a name. To her credit, she tried to remain neutral and respect my sister's independent choice but my mother also had strong wishes in her heart. My sister and her husband seriously considered "Frances" as an honour to her matrilineal heritage. As this was the name of my great-grandmother who started the "Bona" line, my mother accepted this. My mother writes:

> *They had not fully decided on a name out of the final two choices. They had gone through so many combinations.... The choices were Frances after my Grandmother maternal and Georgia after [the father's] mother.... I heard them say Georgia was a possibility, but it didn't really register. I was sure they'd pick Frances to honour the maternal line of Bona and me! How presumptuous of me.* (Duncan, personal journal, June 18, 2005)

Three days after the birth, we gathered as a family at the moment my sister and her husband formally introduced their first child to the family: Georgia Elizabeth Margaret. I was unaware of the critical incident that occurred between my sister and mother in that moment—not Frances, not Bona. I missed it, but my sister did not: my mother's face fell in obvious disappointment. As I walked with my sister to her hospital room, she said, "Mum hates it," in a voice laden with deep pain. Georgia is the name of her paternal grandmother and thus ended that matrilineal line started so long ago. This is how my mother describes her experience at that moment:

> *I just stood there stunned and just looked at Bon and couldn't even mask my feelings. I've always been easy to read and Bon caught the look and it crushed her so badly that she told Sarah that her baby's first day on earth is forever tarnished.... I feel she is of me and mine.* My line, my heritage, and

> my body. *Bon's whole pregnancy had been a journey for me—something so deep that I feel almost betrayed. No. No—you [meaning the father's family] can't have her—she's mine and Bon's—she belongs to us, not to Georgia [the paternal grandmother for whom the baby was named]. She is of me; of Bon; and of my Mother.* (Duncan, personal journal, June 18, 2005)

What becomes clear and is intriguing here is that my mother, a highly educated and aware woman, did not understand what had happened. She felt a deep and piercing sorrow in her soul that her mother's line, through the naming of the child, would end here. Yet she did not realize that the mere look on her face imparted a crushing blow to her relationship with her own daughter, and subsequently perhaps with her granddaughter. Even in the days that followed, while some frank discussion was able to pass between mother and daughter, there now lay a huge gulf between them—one that was perhaps unbridgeable. In subsequent months my mother continued on this journey of grief that forced her to uncover why the birth of Georgia was so critical to her and the name so important. While she had tried over the years to heal the wounds of her mother's death, never before had it impacted her own life and relationships so profoundly. She discloses in writing how the loss felt:

> *Georgia's name is the lightening rod to a whole range of feelings of mine—jealousy—which makes me ashamed and sick at myself.… I know she is not my baby—but she's my Bon's baby.… I have a sense of ownership that I feel has been thwarted. I now have to share her with Bon and others*. (Duncan, personal journal, June 18, 2005)

Indeed, never before had she been compelled, or allowed herself, to delve into that loss in an emotional way. I would submit, in hindsight, that to her the end of that name so closely associated with her own mother was perhaps the re-death of my grandmother Bona. She candidly writes, "And through Georgia's birth I was forced dramatically to deal with the continued strong cords that bound me to my mother. The matriarchal line became the most important thing in my life and it had to be preserved at all cost" (Duncan, personal communication, January 31, 2006).

My mother continued to need forgiveness from my sister, knowing the pain she caused by ruining for my sister and her husband a momentous event in their young lives. She and my sister talked about the naming and my mother reflected on this in her journal:

> *I said something about Georgia's name and I said it was perfect for her and she said she sometimes wonders if they did the right thing with her name. I asked if that was because of me and she said yes. I again told her how terribly wrong I was and added a new insight—that I really did not realize*

> *until that time that my advice and opinion mattered so much to her. That my self-esteem has always been low and that they (she and Sarah) sort of had to tolerate me. Bon said, why wouldn't what I said matter? "You are my mother." The word just hit me—what did that mean for the girls? This was the stream from them to me as mother—not my flow to my mother as usual. I had no idea of Bon's relationship and love for me.… And then she said "I do forgive you, Mum … but it did hurt." My being forgiven was such an important step in my growth. I couldn't (wasn't able) to let go of the incident until Bon freed me with the words, "I forgive you." Then my spirit cleared and I could go on. Otherwise, I would have had to carry that burden with me with grief and pain. Out of that moment, I told Bon I had no real comprehension that my reaction would be so devastating for her. I was just her mother and my opinion wasn't all that important and she said, "but you are my mother and you matter."* (Duncan, personal journal, January 9, 2006)

It was in witnessing that exchange that I realized that my own mother had never truly learned what it meant to live the role of Mother. Why? Simply put, we learn to parent primarily by observation and modeling. She had never had a nurturing model, no natural mother past age eight, and no stepmother who lived with her and raised her to adulthood. Everything she did, as a woman, wife, and perhaps most critically as a mother, was intellectualized, following the directions of distant relatives or societal prescriptives of what was the "right" thing to do. When powerful emotions entered into the relationship between mother and daughters, my mother frequently misstepped and caused deep wounds or was overly emotional out of proportion to the situation. It wasn't until the naming of Georgia that my mother had to accept the consequences of her own inappropriate actions over the years and confront her loss of her own mother on a deeper, emotional level. With the assistance of therapy, she had already been journaling her story beginning with her earliest memories, but it was the incident when Georgia was named that forced her to confront the far-reaching legacy of her loss and pain.

> *I never really thought about being a good mother (as mothers do today), never studied mother books etc. I just loved them and cared for them—I knew how to do that because of my nursing training.… My identity as a nurse and how that influenced my identity as a mother.… I never consciously thought of myself as a mother—I cared for them as a nurse and did it well (emphasis added). Being a mother has always been reserved for Bona Mills—not Bona Mary. Even when each of the girls was born I ached for my mother, but not to say I am a mother too—but to say, Oh, see, as your daughter I have been blessed to birth these girls.* (Duncan, personal journal, February 22, 2006)

My own field of study is adult education—specifically parent education—and early on in my experience I was presented with autobiography as a technique in qualitative research. I never dreamed I would be investigating my own family as an educator. Journals and autobiographies are established as academic documents, most notably in the fields of literature, psychology, and history. It is particularly through the personal observations of women that we now see historical periods and events in a whole new light, understand the inner workings and emotional development of women over the centuries, and have a whole body of classic literature that consists of the personal life writings of women both real and fictional. Though personal narrative has achieved prominence, most of us never think our writings worthy of publication. Published or not, the stories we tell ourselves profoundly shape how we live our lives. Our stories shape our identities.

Developmental psychology says that children become aware of their place in time and their extended selfhood by about age three. Prior to age three, children are learning and internalizing experiences, creating memories that allow them to function effectively in their daily lives (i.e. talking, crawling, walking, feeding, playing, etc). These memories are not part of identity-building and therefore are not retained in the same way as what is termed "autobiographical memories" (Eakin, 1999: 108). How many of us actually remember learning to eat or crawl? Autobiographical memory is in fact a particular type of memory function and is specifically designed for recording and storing episodes from one's own life. By age three or four, children have learned, through observation, that sharing stories is a key social event and an important ability in making one's place in the family and social order. By toddlerhood children have a more enduring sense of self, which is critical for the formation and retention of autobiographical memories. Children have observed that many stories are in fact interpreted memory, therefore autobiographical memory becomes not a recitation of events but a social and cultural construct, a reporting from the constructed self (Eakin, 1999: 108).

The development of this type of memory does not happen in isolation, however. According to Eakin (1999), noted educator Jerome Bruner places special emphasis on the role of the family. The role of the parent is fundamental to the creation of memory and identity. Developmental psychologists agree that it is a truly constructivist process because both parent and child must engage in the construction of autobiography. Parents do this through what has been termed "memory talk," which essentially is a supported conversation between parent and child, with the parent assisting the child in formation and interpretation of his or her own memories. It is not a purely one-way dispensation of information from parent to child (Eakin, 1999: 108). Given this, the question then becomes, what happens to the constructed self when the parent is no longer there to teach and scaffold the memory talk and no replacement is available to the child for that activity? In my mother's own words:

> *The other thing from yesterday was discussing my continued awareness of my again unresolved awareness of my role as a mother to Bon and Sarah. There continues to be a gap between eight years of age and when Bon was born and I was 29—the apparently "normal" growth of a young girl and woman in her slow preparation for menarche, puberty, adolescence, first love, —sex, marriage (oops!) and pregnancy was for me subtly (and not so subtly) damaged and undeveloped. So when I did by the grace of God meet [my husband], marry, and have Bon and then Sarah I was not naturally prepared psychically or emotionally for the joy of being mother. Me?—no—I'm the child—I'm the little girl who "lost" her mother; whose mother died (so life for me stopped); whose empty life labeled me special; who now had no model; no roadmap; no guide; no love to share with me.…It's only now that I see I was not complete, I shortchanged myself. I probably shortchanged the girls, but at the time I thought the lack in their lives was due to [other things].* (Duncan, personal journal, February 22, 2006)

In his work called *The Words*, Jean Paul Sartre (1964) investigated what children do with their life histories and found, among other things, that these stories continue to shape our lives as we grow. Sartre and others confirmed that we continue to create our autobiographies as we live them (Eakin, 1999: 109). The importance of narrative in the creation and development of identity is further elaborated in Eakin's research as he notes the work of developmental psychologists and neurologists who see a lack of self in people who have lost the ability to create their own narrative as the result of illness or injury. Kay Young and Jeffery Saver explain the "memory > narrative > identity" link by examining its absence, concluding that "Individuals who have lost the ability to construct narrative … have lost their selves" (qtd. in Eakin, 1999: 126).

As my mother noted in her journal, while she experienced eight years of familial history and shaped her identity around that, her mother's death was the critical incident that impaired any further identity formation, particularly within the woman/mother/daughter triad. Autobiography—the personal, life-writing process—is much more than remembering life events or recollection. It is indeed—if we dissect those words as re-membering or a re-collecting of events—an opportunity to reshape and recreate one's life in whatever form one wishes. If, as in this case, the relationship is abruptly ended, then those few memories have to serve to constitute a lifetime of experiences. The self-examination that is required in journaling or writing one's autobiography must effect a change on the events themselves:

> Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been. (Gusdorf, 1980: 45)

As my mother wrote about her earliest memories of her mother, the relationship they developed over the first eight years of life, and the feelings of intense loss she carried with her throughout her life, she was (and continues to be) able to grow beyond the identity of a motherless daughter she had carried with her for 65 years. In that moment of Georgia's naming, she again misstepped and caused undue hurt, but that moment was pivotal in her ability to re-story her loss and the life that followed, hopefully allowing her to look upon the roles of Mother and Grandmother with fresh eyes. No longer does she need to preserve the fossilized images of her own mother; no longer does she need to follow the intellectualized rules of how to "do" motherhood correctly for fear of her own ignorance. Perhaps now through re-creating her own identity through self-examination she can move beyond images and expectations frozen in time and truly know what it means to be a mother.

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