

ROBIN G. ISSERLES

Love and Loss, Joy and Pain, Birth and Death

In this short essay, I draw on two extraordinary, virtually simultaneous personal experiences—the death of my mother only a few short months after the birth of my daughter. I discuss both the contradictory emotional weight of both experiences, and how my new motherhood was affected by becoming motherless. I also share how the birth of my daughter both intensified my grief, and at the same time, brought enormous comfort, alleviating some of the pain of losing my mother. This is just one story about reconciling love and loss, joy and pain, birth and death.

When I was young and angry at my mom, she would take me to the “Mommy Store” located in the alcove at the top of the stairway which led to the basement of our house. It was there that I was supposed to pick out a new mommy, one of course, that I had to imagine was hanging on the yellow tiled wall that surrounded me. It worked wonders for re-directing my momentary frustrations, as well as teaching me a few lessons in appreciating what I have.

My mother brought a great deal of creativity to her motherhood. She was a first grade teacher for one year before I was born. And though she never returned to the classroom, she weaved her elementary education training into her mothering. The first poem¹ she ever taught me was one she learned in one of her college classes, and like the mommy store, taught me to value the present, given the uncertainty of the future.

I have little doubt that her orientation to life was a result of the experience of losing both her parents by the time she was 18 years old. With very little preparation or warning, her life was completely turned over and inside out, first, at nine when her father died of cancer, and nine years later, when she lost her mother after a routine operation went wrong. Parentless on the cusp of

her adulthood, appreciating and valuing what was known necessarily defined her approach to life.

How prophetic her own life lessons were, as it turned out, for I was 21 and my mom 43 when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer. Hers was a fourteen-year battle, beginning with the lumpectomy, then radiation and chemotherapy, followed by ten years of the relative, albeit anxious calm of periodic testing and waiting. The last four years were quick and intense, as the original cancer that had been dormant and undetected spread to her clavicle and her brain. I was pregnant when she opted to undergo a stem cell transplant that would replace the malignant cells with her own virgin cells. I remember helping her to walk again, after the intensive surgery weakened her body even more, taking baby steps with her as her body strengthened. She was undoubtedly motivated by the life growing inside me—her first grandchild. In hindsight, she pushed herself gloriously as her one last desire was to become a grandmother. And she made it, healthy enough to come to the baby shower, to dance with me during my early labor contractions. A few short months later, however, the cancer metastasized to her liver, and her death was quickly approaching. Ten days after her 57th birthday, my newborn daughter and I waited for the hospice bed to be delivered, as my father and brother drove to the hospital to bring her home to die. On their way, I received a phone call from the hospital and was told that my mother awoke from her morphine haze, whispered quietly, “I’m tired” to the loving nurse at her side, and closed her eyes forever.

My mother died the day my daughter turned seven months old. It was a peculiar experience—becoming a mother while losing a mother. The dependencies of new life and dying and the caregiving they require, combined with the emotional weight that each produces was palpable. Clenching my mother’s hand through her severe abdominal pain and holding my inconsolable daughter as she cut her first tooth—experiences so similar and yet so profoundly different—marked the beginnings of my motherhood. I was pulled between being needed, being the source of survival of these two live bodies, each at different ends of the life-death continuum. In the months following my mom’s death, as I would look at my daughter while I rocked her to sleep, I would see my mom at her weakest moments, lying in the hospital bed the day before she died, her pale face, hairless head—child-like.

Life and death are opposing forces and while philosophically we can claim the connection between the two and the inevitability of both, as well as the emotional work that each requires, there is something so contradictory to be going through both at the same time. The ways in which we construct, treat, and think about birth and death, seems to require that we are supposed to experience each separately and certainly protect new life from its opposite, death. So, caring for my newborn daughter, watching as she grew and developed

at the same time that I was caring for my mother, watching as she became weaker and further deteriorated made both of these experiences seem so much more alien than perhaps they would have been had one occurred with some temporal distance from the other.

For me, so much that new motherhood brought—joy, exhilaration, frustration, exhaustion—was experienced in the context of grief and loss. Certainly it was hard to be deprived of sharing the milestones—her first steps, her first tooth, writing her first letter, singing her first song—with my mother. All of these joyful transitions were tinged with the sadness and anger of my mom’s absence. Thus, when my daughter said the words, “momma” for the first time, as exciting as that moment was, I was reminded that I had ceased using that same word only a few months before.

I expected some of these difficulties, though I wasn’t quite sure how it would feel to experience these milestones without her. What I did not, and perhaps could not, anticipate was the difficulty of coming to terms with the fact that I will not have a relationship with my mother as a mother. All of the missed opportunities for deepening our relationship—that she will not see me be a mom, nor hear my daughter call me “mommy.” Or that I will not be able to watch her take delight in being a grandmother, and that my daughter will not see me be a daughter to a mother. It is these identities that connect us—daughter/granddaughter-mother-grandmother—yet such connections between us can only be made through memories that have already been created before my mother died, before my daughter was born, before I became a mother. That I cannot talk about motherhood—the fears, the joys, the work—with my mother as a mother has perhaps been the most difficult part of losing her. And it goes much deeper than questions like, “was I like that when I was her age?” but the more profound experience of learning how she felt about being a mother with the sensibility I have gained through becoming a mother.

At the same time, my connection to my mother is deepened by the fact that she too became a mother without her mother. So in a very strange way, death has made me feel even more strongly linked to her, knowing that we both became mothers without the light of our mother’s wisdom, knowledge, and mistakes. Retaining only memories of advice given when we weren’t ourselves yet mothers.

By the time my daughter turned eleven months, she started to resemble my mother, quite remarkably, in fact. Naturally, I thought that I was seeing this change in her because I so very needed to, though others who knew my mom saw it too. It was such a comfort to look at my daughter and see my mother, and as she has grown, the resemblance has become even stronger—it is in her expressions, mannerisms, even the way she runs. I still find myself watching my daughter, looking for another “sign” of my mother. But, while I have found

solace and even joy in this uncanny similarity it has been marked by such sorrow that my mother is not here to see it for herself.

Pulled emotionally in two opposing directions, love and loss, the joy of birth, the sorrow of death, my experience of motherhood is bound by these contradictions. And yet it is true that they are not so opposed. I have felt joy in places that are also filled with sadness and loss. As such, it has been both harder and easier to grieve the loss of my mother, as I myself have become a mother. Harder, because of the absence of her guidance at a time when my needs for her have intensified. At the same time, I was able to lose myself in my daughter and new motherhood when the pain of loss was its most difficult to bear. Nursing my daughter was such a source of comfort to me—the quiet of lying with her gave me some needed time to grieve, to allow my mind to flood with memories of my relationship with my mother. My daughter kept me company through this, and nourishing her gave me an ability to mother while I mourned the loss of my own mother. This, for me, has been the visceral experience of birth and death and the grieving that has brought me even closer to my mom and my daughter in such unexpected ways. And perhaps it has been the valuable lessons of the mommy store and the purple cow, that I have been able to reconcile my mom's death and appreciate all the tools and insights she gave me to mother my daughter, even in her absence.

I never saw a purple cow
I never hope to see one.
But I can tell you anyhow
I'd rather see than be one
(Gelett Burgess 1895)