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# **Spiritual Awakening Through the Motherhood Journey**

*Motherhood is an opportunity for creative spiritual growth and transformation in women. This potential lies latent in the intense emotional experiences inherent in mothering which are designed to be fruitful and to accelerate spiritual development. We interviewed first-time mothers regarding the revelations they came to via the challenging experiences of motherhood. Mothers described the lessons they learned as spurring a rebirth, as if they themselves were born, with new eyes, awakened to a reality of life which they had not known before. They spoke in intensely spiritual language even though at times they themselves did not acknowledge or realize it mirrored the basic spiritual tenants of compassion, patience, surrender, and Divine love. While listening to their collective voices, we could not help but hear the universal story of the hero myth. In deciding to mother a child, women are in fact spiritual heroines called to the daunting adventure of motherhood, where through a series of trials they are brought forth into a richer, more mature condition. When occurring against a cultural backdrop, however, that does not recognize nor honor mothering as a critical window for spiritual awakening, women navigate this journey unassisted and are at higher risk for dysfunction. It is time then to change the current myth of motherhood to a new conceptualization that recognizes spirituality as an essential and integral part of the mothering experience for the betterment of all mothers, their children, and the ultimate renewal of society.*

It is time to change the myth of motherhood. Motherhood is in fact an opportunity for creative spiritual growth and transformation in women. This potential lies latent in the intense emotional experiences of mothering which are identical in quality to those described by William James as essential to religious conversion: “emotional occasions, especially violent ones, are extremely potent in precipitating mental rearrangements.... And emotions that

come in this explosive way seldom leave things as they found them” (1985 [1902]: 198). These rearrangements, or new realizations in women, are precipitated by a series of unique transitional crises from conception onward, and have been described in a diverse range of writings from the scientific to the literary (Bondas and Eriksson, 2001; Leifer, 1977; Lederman, 1996; McMahan, 1995). The conflicts which new motherhood sets off result in contradictory feelings that are simultaneously negative and positive and equally strong (Luthar, Doyle, Suchman & Mayes, 2001; Weaver & Ussher, 1997). Despite the confusing anguish of a “persistent and painful warring” of antithetical emotions, maternal ambivalence is natural and purposeful (Oberman & Josselson, 1996; Parker, 1995). The joy and pain inherent in the day-to-day experiences of mothering are designed to be fruitful and growth inducing by ultimately accelerating a woman’s spiritual development (Madaras, 1999; Parker, 1995). When occurring against a cultural backdrop, however, that does not recognize ambivalence as the defining feature of this transitional process, nor honors mothering as a critical window for spiritual crisis and transformation, women navigate unassisted, conflict is exacerbated, and mothers are at higher risk for dysfunction. We studied a voluntary answering to the call to motherhood in order to offer an alternative myth, a new lens through which to understand the countless individual experiences of “becoming a mother” and their shared similarities. It is our hope that through reading the collective voice of motherhood via the women we spoke with, others will identify with the conceptualization of mothering as a journey of heroic proportions—and by doing so, will be provided with a context to realize their own spiritual awakening for the betterment of themselves, their children, and the ultimate renewal of society.

### **A spiritual stance toward conflict and change**

Universally, the religious and philosophical traditions have understood conflict to be the motor of transition, the very activity of Life, or Creation setting the world in motion and renewing it. For example, Heraclitus was one of the first Western philosophers to describe nature as ruled by an underlying law of change. As Daniel Graham (2002) asserts, Heraclitus debated that without the constant conflict of opposites, there would be, “no alternations of day and night, hot and cold, summer and winter, even life and death.... Conflict does not interfere with life, but rather is a precondition of life” (5). In Eastern Hindu thought, the universe is believed to come into existence through the creating of pairs of opposites and is maintained by their interplay (Coward, 1989). For the Christian and the Buddhist alike, conflict is the suffering inherent in the duality of all human experience, and cannot be avoided (Coward, 1989). Instead, spiritual disciplines employ this knowledge to turn discomfort into paths of personal transformation (Coward, 1989). Mystics seek a conscious relationship with God by using elaborate physical and cognitive techniques to prompt distress and revelation (Daschke, 1993). The daily tasks

or “acts of motherhood” are in themselves akin to ascetic exercises often marked by painful bodily sensations, distortions in time and space, and paradoxical thinking. In the Jungian worldview there is no spiritually neutral ground and motherhood, like the mountaintop, or the church pew, is no exception. Through motherhood women have the unique opportunity to initiate spiritual growth and awaken the saint or hero within whose “very being illustrates the possibilities of courage of spiritual generosity, rather than narrow concerns of the ego-self” (Oatley & Djikic, 2002: 106).

Spirituality or an enduring relationship with Creation is essential for the well-being of the mother and her child (Daschke, 1993). Relinquishing the small and finite demands of the ego, to something other than the self, or larger than the self, liberates women from the slippery slope of maternal ambivalence and lets them “get on with it.” Getting stuck in obsessive rumination, or identifying with one side to the exclusion of the other, inevitably leads to imbalance, stagnation, and illness (Aziz, 1999). Mothers find themselves unable to effectively resolve the crisis at hand, and spiral downward toward depression. A spiritual stance offers an alternative approach. By entering into a dialectical relationship with Creation whereby the conscious will is surrendered, guidance in the form of messages begins to rise up from the unconscious and all around. These messages can lead to revelations that spur movement forward, while teaching the basic spiritual tenants of compassion, patience, surrender, and divine love. It is in this seemingly irrational stance where the psyche integrates the experience, reorganizes, and evolves.

We interviewed first-time mothers regarding the revelations they came to via the challenging experiences of motherhood. Mothers described the lessons they learned as spurring a rebirth, as if they themselves were born, with new eyes, awakened to a transcendental reality that they had not known before. They experienced a “change of values in which the trivial and unsubstantial” was replaced by a bigger picture, or was “more clearly distinguished from what has true value in this life” (Matsu-Pissot, 1998: 323). As creators and caretakers of life themselves, mothers spoke to the spontaneous stirrings of compassion and acceptance, the pleasures of connection and community, profound unconditional love, sacred moments that seem to defy the limits of time and space, and a sense of unity with a protective guiding force. Women spoke to mourning the death of an old self and the conscious struggle of welcoming a new one that felt more authentic, more honest, integrated, and with a newfound agency. Our mothers spoke in intensely spiritual language even though at times they themselves did not acknowledge it or realize it to be so.

While listening to their stories, we could not help but hear the universal story of the hero myth. By deciding to mother a child, women are called to a great adventure, where through a series of trials they are brought forth “into a richer, more mature condition” (Campbell & Moyers, 1988: 152). A spiritual heroine is someone who has left familiar territory so that she may achieve something beyond the normal range of experience and come back to commu-

nicate it (Campbell, 1996). Women who answered the daunting call to motherhood and traversed the path successfully returned from their journeys replete with what Joseph Campbell (1996) refers to as the ever-present bliss of Creation to tell us about it.

### **The call to motherhood: a call and a response**

For Dereck Daschke, “consciousness cannot bring about its own transformation” (1993: 246). Left to its own accord, the self is comfortable and needs, “numinous energy ... to induce change by introducing images, ideas, and emotions which run counter to a person’s normal conscious functioning—a dream, for instance, or a vision, or a paradox” (Daschke, 1993: 246). When life confronts us to explore a larger reality, these symbolic catalysts arrive, “paralleling the universal themes found in religious and mythological literature” (Aziz, 1999: 67). Like the white rabbit in Wonderland, they are an invitation, a challenge, to take a creative leap and awaken to a new reality (Koestler, 1969). They are the hero’s call to adventure—and they require a response. The call and response, married in dialogue, are one in the same. In this sense, the moment a woman hears the call to motherhood, she has “conceived” her child. One participant described her ambivalence with whether or not to become a mother. The voices of her yet unborn children would beckon, and she would converse with them, until one day she responded affirmatively:

*I think there’s just never a reason, you just go with your instinct. You say Ok, now I’m ready... It’s probably biological. I’m calling it intuitive ... or you could say it is their spirits that it was their time to come. And I actually did, I mean, I did always feel that I could hear them and feel them, and I could talk to them and say, you know, “Just be patient with me, be patient, you’re going to come, your going to come.”*

Her first child arrived soon after. The idea of “aural insemination” has been illustrated for centuries in the story of The Annunciation in which The Virgin Mary conceives the Christ-child through the ear immediately upon hearing the divine decree: “Thou shalt conceive” (Lehnhof, 2002). Conception dreams are equally common in the great faiths of the world. Heroes and heroines are conceived by their mothers at night, while dreaming. The sacred child is said to enter the womb through an auspicious dream, as in the example of Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, who came to his mother among other things, as an elephant, a full vase of fragrant Mandara flowers, and the moon lighting the universe (Moon & Elder, 1991). Another participant described an analogous sign heralding her child’s conception: “I remember, lying in bed one night and having this amazing ... perfume, this incredible smell, and it was just something that I just felt incredibly peaceful and calming, and I knew then that I was pregnant.” Arthur Koestler (1969) agrees: we are quite literally our most *creative* when the rational mind is suspended and inspiration is received

through our senses during dreams, trances, or synchronistic encounters.

### **Surrendering to the signs**

The forces of Destiny begin to fulfill themselves from the moment of “conception” onward, with or without full cooperation of the conscious will (Campbell, 1996). Assistance in the form of advice, books, inner dialogue, and people pour forth for the mother-to-be, along with more signs that say “you’re on the right track.” Together they are what Campbell refers to as the guardians or supernatural aids who are “the benign, protective power of destiny” (1996: 71) that offer guidance throughout the journey. However, not all will grant the sensation of being pitched forward on the path or helped. In fact some may appear to do the exact opposite, stopping or thwarting progress. To the uninitiated mother, these contradictory experiences are difficult to process, as further attempts to move forward prove ineffective. The great myths of the world should then serve to remind that the very activity of Creation is governed by its own law of change and momentum. Its judicious pace is meant to keep mothers from ordeals they are unready or unprepared for and transmits the indispensable spiritual lessons of acceptance and surrender: the renunciation of perceived control and inappropriate expectations which only function to resist true spiritual growth (Campbell, 1996). Often, movement begins again once a mother has thoughtfully surrendered this ineffectual stance. This is exemplified in the story of one woman’s struggle with adoption:

*Interestingly enough the weekend that my daughter was born I didn’t know that I had become a parent. I was away visiting some friends ... [when] I said, “You know... it’s never going to happen. I’m just never going to get a baby. Nobody is going to want to give a baby to me. I’m a single mom.” So nobody is going to want to give their baby to me. It’s just not going to happen. And I’m going to make that spare room ... into an office ... that’s it. The day that I got the actual phone call about her ... I’m riding with my friend in her car ... and she said, “What do you want to do today?” And I said, “Let’s go buy me a bike.” ... I had another six months before I was going back to work and I thought that would be fun. I’m never going to get a baby. So let me have a bike. The phone rings and it’s a message from this guy [at] ABC... It was so far out of my head that this was ever going to happen that I didn’t even connect it with ABC adoption. Because of my work ... I often get phone calls from ... news organizations ... so I kind of scratched the number in a box because I don’t even have a pen that works and I call him back... I said, “Oh my God it’s the adoption agency.” They had been trying to get in touch with me and my phone at home, the answering machine was there with her kids, [who] had knocked out the cord so [it] wasn’t picking up messages. There were all these ways ... that things almost didn’t come together ... [but] it worked. And she was the right baby for me. And I waited for the right little girl. And that’s what everybody kept saying. But*

*it's so interesting for me that I had kind of let go of the idea. So I don't know if that's a sign, but I had completely thought this is never going to happen and I had let go of the whole idea. And then all of a sudden it arrived. And there she was. And then I became a parent like that [snaps fingers].*

### **Crossing the threshold spiritually**

With the “personifications of destiny to guide and aid” (Campbell, 1996: 77), like the hero, mothers must cross a dangerous threshold that divides the before and after. Beyond them lies darkness and the unknown regarding all the future may have to hold. Nevertheless, the adventure must move forward and cannot retreat backwards. The inevitability of the next transition is at hand. For the previous adoptive mother, she described crossing this threshold nearly instantaneously and without much preparation or emotional gestation, in one moment, with one set of words, she was changed forever:

*[W]hen you adopt ... you don't know when it's going to happen. I mean I had thought about it, but you don't have anything physical to tell you are going to become a parent. So when you are pregnant you have this time period that's adjusting and thinking. You already are a parent when you are growing that baby inside you. But when you adopt it's all of a sudden. Like you go from zero to 60 in one second [slaps hands together]. But when you adopt it's all of a sudden. You know, you just ... that minute I got that phone call I became a parent. And the first time I called the adoption agency and I sent them the money and did the whole thing and they said, “Ok here is the foster family that she is staying with, you can call her.” And I was like, “I can call her?” They said, “Yeah, this is your baby you can call her and find out how she is doing and talk to the foster mother.” And that was amazing. And the first time I called her I told [the foster mother], “Her name is Laura.” I'm going to cry. [And] she goes, [voice cracks] “Laura, your mommy is on the phone.” And I just went, “Oh my god, I'm a mom!” So that was the moment when she said it and that was really emotional. That was really ... still is. When she said that to Laura I was, you know, all the way up in New York, and she was all the way down in Florida, and I didn't even know what this baby looked like, but she was my baby.*

For mothers who conceive of their children bodily, there is the additional physical component to each changeover. In this instance they must cross the threshold through the process of giving birth. The preoccupation with safe passage across initiated during pregnancy, intensifies as the actual moment approaches (Waldenstrom, Hildingsson, Rubertsson & Radestad, 2004). Like pregnancy, but now exponentially more intensified, childbirth itself engenders great contradiction, pain and ecstasy, joy and fear, (Baker, 1992; Buckley, 2002; Monk, 1998; Spivak, Spivak, & Vistrand, 1994; Vaughn, 1983) and mothers must engage Creation to successfully traverse the experience. A spiritual stance

toward the suffering of labor facilitates a mother's ability to use the pain in ways that can even launch her into ecstatic states otherwise normally impossible (Ayers-Gould, 2000; Mander, 2002). During such deep psychic regression states Dmitri Spivak and colleagues (1994) described mothers as experiencing mystical "oceanic-like feelings" (317), absorbed in the polar emotions of joy and pain which are finally understood as one in the same (Vaughn, 1983). In another study Mormon women used paradoxical descriptions of childbirth because the experience was so distinct from any ordinary joy they had known (Callister, 1992). Comparable revelations were described by one participant:

*The first time was the most extraordinary ... it was more like I was out of body ... the actual physical experience of giving birth is so tremendous ... because it's also physical, I had an epidural for the pain, but you still go through enough pain and exhaustion, you know, and it's all new ... but it's the most beautiful thing that can happen in the world ... the experience of the vagina opening up and the child coming out, it's the vision of the tree giving forth and growing ... and everything, the images, the blood, the birth and rebirth, it's all so extraordinary ... it is an experience of the life-giving force. It's a tremendous thing, and we give it. We women are, we truly are a vehicle for life, [we] perpetuate it. That's on that level ... and then there's also that sense of belonging.*

In this sense, the pain of labour links women compassionately to the suffering of all human beings and teaches them again the one lesson shared by the major world religions: surrender. To help with surrender, women in traditional societies have historically called upon "gods, goddesses, totems, nature spirits" to ease the logical mind so that they can go "to the edge where thought ceases and the mystery is entered" (Rawlings, 1995). England and Horowitz (1998) shared one mother's experience with true surrender whereby the "thinking-mind plummeted into an immense silence" and she "felt bathed in love and well-being" (England & Horowitz, 1998: 9). One of our mothers stated a similar experience while birthing her child:

*Being a mom, having her, and going through the process of having her, you know, I like to think like I'm someone who's in control... I'm a control freak, and I like to control everything. And this was something that was so out of my control. The whole pregnancy, the whole delivery, and I don't think that I did anything, me myself. I don't feel that I was able to do anything to guide it. I felt like it was just all happening, and I was just experiencing it, and I was almost like just a conduit for all this, but something was helping it along. And something was doing ... she certainly did a big part of it too, it just felt like I was getting guidance from somewhere, you know, and I didn't know where, and I wasn't in tune to what that was, but somebody sure was looking out for me. And everything*

*went so well, and afterwards I was like "Wow! What just happened?" I just delivered a baby and it went really well! I don't feel like I had any sense of control over it!" You know what I mean. Usually you have a sense of control, and you say: "Look at what I did!" I didn't feel like I could even do that. It was more like, "Look what I was given", more than "Look what I did". Do you know what I mean? And that was so weird, and for someone who is used to being in control, and is a control freak, boy it blew me away. And I realized... I think that helped me realize, "I think there is something else out there", because I didn't do that, I wasn't in control of that and that was amazing. So something helped me there, because I wasn't doing that, you know? But I did it, and I was really amazed how everything kind of worked together to make it happen, and I was like, "Oh my god! I didn't know my body could do these things!" You know, and it did a good job. My body hasn't let me down, it just performed amazing things, it did a good job! And I had no control over it!*

Birth is dangerous to the ego which strains to control the event only to discover that it controls nothing. Looking at birth as a unique chance to commune with Creation creatively allows mothers to move beyond the narrow confines of their egos and experience a greater reality (Baker, 1992).

### **Belly of the whale: A call to character**

As Edward Robinson (1985) aptly stated: "once the creative imagination is committed to conceiving an order of reality that is 'wholly other,' nothing will ever look or be, quite the same again" (252). One participant described how everything changed after she had her baby:

*Something went on in your head, and all of a sudden you're aware of everything. It's like you're over-sensitized, and it's like this extra thing turns on, this extra button turns on and you become aware of everything, and it makes you really tired, because you are paying attention to everything. You know when you're listening real hard and you get real tired because you are listening so hard. That's what it felt like at first, and that's when I realized "ok I'm a mom, and there's someone who really needs you", and when you're looking at this baby and how helpless they are you realize "Wow! I have a big responsibility" you know, and that hit me. The first couple of nights home it really hit me.*

This awakening to the new realities of life at both the transcendental and mundane level is overwhelming and difficult to process. Now on the other side, mothers experience acute ambivalence when they realize the enormity of their new responsibility, how it is nothing like they expected and how deeply they long for their old reality. Instead of "conciliating the powers of the threshold" the hero is "swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died"



(Campbell, 1996). It is here within, where a mother glimpses the dark side of her nature as described by one mother: “during those first couple months when we brought [the babies] home.... I don’t really know if that’s ... just lack of sleep...[but] you lose your mind.” Another mother described in detail her devastation:

*I think that the whole time you’re pregnant, you know that you’re going to be a mother, but it really doesn’t hit you until you have the baby in your arms. And I think our little girl was probably about a week old, and I had already entered my post-partum depression, and my husband was sitting across the rocking chair from me, and I was nursing [her], and he was trying to talk to me and all I could do was cry, and I said to him, that “I will never do this again ... I will never, never have another child again ... because this is what happens”, and I looked down at her, and meant what happens is, this is what happens, and he said, “What does that mean?” And all I could ever think was I’ve totally ruined, or changed my life. I will never have another moment to myself; I will never sleep again; I will never be able to walk away free, and um, she will always be dependent on us. And I didn’t realize how enormous that responsibility was, when I was pregnant, but I realized how enormous it was when she was about a week old, and I had not slept for, you know, a week, and ... I think that was the first time I thought, “Oh, Gosh, I’m a mom,” and everything I do is going to affect this little one.*

However, the passage through the jaws of the whale is the identical task of death and rebirth, a life-destroying and life-renewing act. As Ananda Coomaraswamy says: “No creature can attain a higher grade of nature without ceasing to exist” (qtd. in Campbell, 1996: 92). Perseverating the suffering and not resolving the conflicts or denying it altogether, only serves to keep mothers stagnated in depression to incredible detriment. Down in the belly, the task this time is to give birth to her self. It is Creation’s call to character, prompting a surrender of the ego once again to a greater calling. Having had a child transform her life, a mother must now decide how she will define her new life and how she will live it. A mother can move on only by truly mourning her losses and letting go:

*At first it was ... I felt like, I felt like a part of me died. I felt like I was in mourning, and I was really sad, almost like grieving. I definitely felt like I lost, I lost myself ... it felt like somebody died, then I realized well, it’s not that bad, not that somebody died, it’s that this life I used to have that was all about me is no longer, and it’s ok, I was ready for that to change anyway. And then I got used to it, and it doesn’t necessarily mean that you lose everything about yourself, but you do lose a lot, a lot of freedom...but it wasn’t dramatic, it wasn’t like when [my daughter] was*

*born, "Woo she's born!" I didn't have a feeling like "Woo I'm born!", it was more of this ... over time acceptance of well, you know I was saying goodbye, it felt like I was saying goodbye to what I was, the woman that I was, and I was saying "I'm not losing everything, but losing quite a bit," but saying hello to something new. It took a couple of weeks of getting adjusted to that and accepting that, and you almost feel like you had to let it go. I felt like I had to let it go, grieve, say goodbye, and then I had to accept this new thing into my life. And at first I resisted. At first I felt like I was complaining, you know, just upset that this had happened, and maybe I was way in over my head, and why did I do this? I didn't know I would be giving up so much, I should be really excited and I'm not really excited, I'm kind of ticked off that I've got this bad and good, and then it went to accepting, and "you know what? I'm going to make this good. I will be able to get back some of myself with this, and I'm going to be different." It's a different life, you know, and now I look forward to it, but I had to say goodbye to the other stuff first.*

Like Jonah, a mother is not spit out to shore to continue on in the journey until she has authentically committed to her new circumstances (Barlow & Cairns, 1997). Her freedom must involve working directly with the fears that create a toxic imbalance on the one hand as the total avoidance of maternal responsibility, or on the other, hyper-rigid dedication. Either way, the anxieties of the ego "concretize the small self at all costs" (Trad, 1990). Mothers should use their vulnerability as an opportunity to delve deeper and resolve issues that they may have even been denying for most of their lives. Rather than resisting the task and creating a "labyrinth of hiding places" that spiral downward, dialoging with the fear (engaging Creation) is the only true liberation (Hart, 2000).

### **Road to transcendence**

In Constance Barlow and Kathleen Cairnes' (1997) grounded theory of the mothering experience, a mother's acceptance of her responsibilities manifests itself in an "emerging dedication" defined by "affective, cognitive, and behavioral engagement" with her child and the world. Engagement is "the intention to mother, committing to new life circumstances" and falls under the larger core category of "Expansion of Self" (Barlow & Cairns, 1997). Likewise Joseph Campbell (1996) describes the hero as finally grasping at this stage that she is not alone, but that there is a benign power present everywhere in the smallest experiences, engaging and supporting her. Women now speak of time in the presence of their children as joyful, with a profound appreciation of the "simple things." As described by Leanne Domash, for Donald Winnicott the expression of creativity (the expression of Creation) is at its height in the transitional space between mother and child (Domash, 1988). Whereas before these interactions may have engendered conflict, the transformed mother now

has new eyes that “turn crises into marvels” (Linthorst, 1993: 19). This newly expanded awareness automatically sees spiritually and appreciates life experiences from “a different angle- from the divine angle,” the angle Creation was pulling for all along (Linthorst, 1993: 19-20):

*But you also see things that are just, you know, that are wonderful? You go out for a walk ... like today we're leaving to come to school and we are walking up the street and there are piles of snow on the sidewalk where people shoveled and ... she was in her little snowsuit. ... just sat down on the pile of snow and just looked so happy. "The snow is really crunchy mom." And you know, she wants to play with it, she wants to taste it, she wants to experience it. And then in that, that is all new and wonderful. Although I've always ... you know, I've played with snow my whole life. So being able to experience those things.*

*A wonderful thing about having children is that you can see everything with new eyes, I guess. Like a thing that you may have become immune to, that it doesn't seem that interesting, you know ... you may walk past those hub caps, and he will kind of focus in on things. Like I took him to the zoo in Central Park ... we went to the penguins, and I kind of enjoyed the penguins, you know that sort of new experience. ... you know, re-experience things. ... What Andrew might be experiencing, when he sees these things ... like light and dark was a big deal for him.*

Another mother described how this worldview is now a virtue that has made her a better, happier person:

*My husband says I have an amazing amount of patience with her, and I'm not a patient person ... that's definitely ... one of the virtues that has improved for me. It was not my virtue. I like to speed through things, especially things that I'm kind of bored with. I get bored easy, well now, it's not like that. Now I actually want to take things slow and I want to sense it, and I want to see what it's about and that's really not me. Well it is me now, but it really wasn't me. I always wanted to be that way, but I am more that way now. Well, gee, when your day is centred around very simple things, you know. You know, I'm not running around doing these crazy things anymore. It's simple things like, "She held the rattle today. ... yeah!" It's like a big thing. This is such a simple thing ... and all of a sudden you're appreciative of these little things: "she noticed the light today," "she noticed this today." And you're becoming aware of those things, so I don't know, maybe that's why you become more aware of simple things, and more appreciative of simple things. You slow down a little bit. ... It feels good. It feels really good. People seem to notice it too. People say, "Boy you look a lot more relaxed." I have these little lines on my face that seem to have ... even*

*with the lack of sleep, they seem to have disappeared! [laughs] I guess they were tension lines.*

### **Freedom to live–life’s elixir**

“I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye sees thee” (Job 42:5 RSV). Grace, the Elixir, the gift of Creation to mothers is being returned to the present moment in their lives where they are no longer dulled to the world, but engaged (Campbell, 1996). Being present heightens mothers’ capacities for intuition, compassion, and connection. One mother emphatically described the change in herself as a radical one: “Well there’s been a shift in me. I am capable of greater love, less resentment, you know? So definitely, there’s been a radical shift in me and my approach to other people in my life ... and greater compassion? Absolutely.” An authentically engaged mother is one that is no longer commanded by the rigid, self-interested ego, but is rather operating from an authentic self that is a flexible, generous, self-renewing agent. Creation, the source of life and nourishment is now within the mother herself, and she and the “inexhaustible world fountain” are one in the same (Campbell, 1996). What fed her, now feeds her child: “[It’s] the loss of ego. Love is about giving of your self totally. When you have little beings who are totally dependent on you, you have no choice but to give completely of yourself, so that they will have a basis to start their lives... so they can stand on me until they can stand on their own.”

The descriptions of the changes experienced by mothers match well with those having achieved self-acceptance and expansion of consciousness through the therapeutic relationship of a spiritual teacher. A study on unconditional love revealed several themes that emerged in response to the experience of receiving divine love from a guru: transpersonal or mystical qualities, nurturance, psychological healing, finding ones’ authentic self-nature, the fostering of a heightened sense of understand or commitment to the sacred or spiritual, greater awareness of unconditional love within one’s own being, and a shift in perception of the self in relationship to the world (Matsu-Pissot, 1998). In the case of motherhood, the child can be thought of as the guru, who as a force of nature is a powerful ambassador of G-d’s love and expression. As Kahlil Gibran (1986) said on children: “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself” (17). The child as Creation is the first observer, and confirmer of the spiritual potential dormant in each woman waiting to be lived out. One participant wished all women could experience spiritual revelation through the journey of mothering a child:

*I have a friend who ... is a social worker and loving and very giving and all the rest and has a great spirit. I know that she would be the most amazing mother. I want her to have a child, I think, because ... it would give her that evolution of the spirit kind of like what we have been talking about. It is inexplicable. I want her to have that experience because she already has it*

*naturally, but it would just enhance it, almost like a quickie [laugh]. It is like the cliff notes to the meaning of life.*

At the conclusion of the hero-task, the wall of Paradise dissolves, and the meaning of life is revealed (Campbell, 1996).

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