

My Mother and Theory

How the Two are Inseparable

BY SIOBHÁN CONWAY-HICKS

We talked about how we find ourselves shaking off patriarchal dictates about what our relationship should be and instead forging our own, based on respect, love, and strength.

C'est en découvrant l'autre aspect de la vie de sa mère en dehors de son état de mère, que l'auteure a jeté les bases d'une réelle et mutuelle compréhension, la poussant à évaluer ce que les études savantes appellent "le savoir."

This article is about how I came to see my mother from a feminist perspective. Reading feminist theory, investigating my "motherline," forming my own theory, prepares me to mother against the odds. The first step is to know our mothers, a process which contradicts and opposes patriarchy by freeing mothers from the script demanded by

motherhood. As well, by beginning to know our mothers, we set out on a journey towards real-woman strength and realistic understandings of each other. Learning and listening to our mothers is important for the academic community. Knowing the motherline gives women the authority to reject theory when it is not reflected in their motherlines. This article explores how my discovery of my mother's life apart from motherhood contradicted and opposed patriarchy, created the basis for mutual and realistic understanding, and pushed me to evaluate what the university deems "knowledge."

This article was originally submitted as an assignment for a course on "Mothers and Daughters" taught by Andrea O'Reilly throughout the winter of 1996–97 at York University. I was to interview my mother and research my motherline to see what would reveal itself from the process. My mother and I, however, did not have a formal interview. I come from a long line of story-tellers, my mother being one of the latest. I have heard stories about her mother, Nana, and about my mother as a girl. When I took my first trip to Ireland, Nana told stories as we were cutting thistles, or making the tea. I learned about the family and Nana's mother and the neighbours. I didn't need an interview to begin to know my mother as someone other than my mother: the Irish are famous for reciting history. Around the hearth, history did not distinguish between family and country, public and private—it was all told in stories to those who might listen.

Instead of a formal interview, Mom and I talked about how our mother-daughter relationship has changed over the past several years. My mother has finished her master's thesis, graduated, and is teaching in Korea. I am in university now. Our lives are very different from five years ago, when we were spinning in reaction, recrimination, and guilt. I am no longer the teenager flinging mother-blame, hell-bent on individuation at any cost. My mother is no longer beset by mother-guilt, no longer spends her days and nights worrying that my sister and I would not get through our teen years without destroying ourselves. We talked about how we find ourselves shaking off patriarchal dictates about what our relationship should be and instead forging our own, based on respect, love, and strength. This is in opposition to the received wisdom, where mothers are to be eternal caregivers but at the same time told that they are suffocating. Daughters do not have to offer back in kind until they, too, become mothers and realize how thankless the job can be.

I write this outline of my mother's life with trepidation for there is no way that I can convey the complexity of another person. She herself didn't do that in her autobiography, as it focused on her attempt to reconcile the Church and feminism. Here I focus on describing who my mother is, apart from being a mother. Adrienne Rich describes the quandary of trying to convey your mother: "It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story, other landscapes would be revealed"; with each telling, I would add (Rich 221).

This is my telling. My mother's name is Sheelagh Conway.¹ We don't call her Sheelagh, she doesn't agree with calling your mother by her first name. Even now, it feels awkward for me to write about her as Sheelagh, though that is how I now think of her.

My mother lived in Ireland until she was 18. She then emigrated to England. But Ireland truly shaped my mother—she talks about that in both books she has written. Ireland made her Catholic, politically and spiritually,² made her an immigrant, and made her a story-teller. Nana made my mother gritty and resourceful, fierce in the face of poverty, and taught all of her children to be the same way. My mother says that Nana is from a long line, the O'Conner women, and we are an extension of that line. From them we inherit resourcefulness and the determination to survive. The "gift" has also been passed down, be it in the form of reading tea leaves or healing

hands. Of course, the stories of history are also passed on, as entertainment, warnings, illustrations of points, and for laughter.

England was where my mother found the feminist movement—and racism against the Irish. Since then, she has been active politically wherever she has been. This created conflict when she was arguing for the Manley government in Jamaica and the white colonial family she had married into were strongly against his policies. This

led, indirectly, to divorce. The rupture was foreshadowed by my great-grandmother in Jamaica,

a larger-than-life character ... warm and friendly and [she] expressed her views openly, to the consternation of my mother-in-law. On her bedroom dressing table stood dozens of family photographs celebrating weddings, christenings, and other family events. The position of a picture on grandmother's dressing table was a barometer of the status of that family member. Members with high status were placed at the front, those with

no status at all, including divorced wives, were removed altogether. Grandmother was often lonely, and I frequently visited her for a chat, or to read her a passage from her bible booklet. But one afternoon when I went in, I noticed that the picture of our wedding had been replaced with a picture of Jonathan only. The message was clear. (Conway 1984, 184)

At other times, such as in Windsor in the 1980s, my mother's activism has brought victory but not without draining her energy. For that reason, she advises me to pick the fights I'm going to fight. For instance, she now thinks that I should get through university before I question the status quo too loudly. Better to get the Ph.D., she says, and then start to speak—that way you get published for your troubles. However, if a friend needs me, I should be there, even if it means asking those troublesome questions. She is community-minded, which comes from growing up poor in rural Ireland. The neighbours stuck together or starved together. My mother is a befriender. At Christmas time, we'd always have three or four people over who wouldn't have anywhere else to go. She takes her commitments seriously and backs her words up by her deeds.

My mother was a student for a long time. Last year, she finished her master's, put university aside, and began to focus on her writing. She is good at whatever she does and has always graduated with high marks, including *summa*

cum laude from York. She now teaches at Seoul National University in Korea.

Somehow, my mother did all she's done and still raised two children on her own on welfare. As she said of her own mother, "I would like to thank my mother whose determination, tenacity, and sheer grit have energized me; I am my mother's daughter, as she was her mother's daughter" (Conway 1987) and, "Thanks to my mother for her intrepidity; she is one of the feistiest Irish women I know" (Conway 1992, 13). I feel the same way. She is also stubborn—and even intrusive if she thinks she can help. But then again, so am I.

So, you see, we began to know each other long ago. It is not a process that we always undertake together. Sometimes it is advanced by moments apart that connect us. A summer day I spent snooping in her old journals is one of those moments. I had picked up my mother's private journal because I was bored. I quickly put it down again when I realized that she was writing from outside her role as "Mom," and that I was *infringing* on her privacy. What I learned on my own strengthened our relationship. Other times, we explore together. This happened in place of the formal interview I was supposed to have with Mom. Knowing my mother better makes for a stronger and healthier relationship in three ways.

Firstly, learning about mothers works to free the mother-daughter connection from the confines of patriarchy. Said simply, greater knowledge about mothers contradicts and opposes the oppression of women under patriarchy. For instance, this greater knowledge includes a passing on and a recording of women's history. It binds women together in what Naomi Ruth Lowinsky calls the "motherline." This motherline comes from knowledge of the mother, but it creates a bond of strength between daughters and mothers. Under patriarchy's assigned mother-daughter relationship, there is no space for strength. The motherline creates strength because it

does not sever mother from daughter, feminism from "the feminine," body from psyche. The path to wholeness requires reclaiming aspects of the feminine self that we have lost and forgotten in our struggle to free ourselves from constricting roles; it requires that a woman make a journey to find her roots in the personal, cultural, and archetypal Motherline. (xi)

The motherline is elusive and hard explain (Lowinsky describes a walk along the beach with her mother and daughters to define the motherline). Patriarchy and its views on mothers conceals the way to the motherline:

Mother is the first world we know, the source of our lives and our stories. Embodying the mystery of origin, she connects us to the great web of kin and generation ... we are so full of judgments about what mother ought to be that we can barely see what mother is. (Lowinsky xi)

"I would like to thank my mother whose determination, tenacity, and sheer grit have energized me; I am my mother's daughter, as she was her mother's daughter."

Only in realizing that motherhood is false and restrictive can women fight its confines, rather than rejecting mothering. It's not the mother, it's the role.

When found, the motherline passes on wholeness and strength from woman to woman. Strength flowing between mothers and daughters means mothers do not have to condition their daughters to become wives, and in turn, mothers who must strive to meet patriarchal requirements in turn. Of course, "men have been able to give us power, support and certain forms of nurture, as individuals, when they choose; but the power is always stolen power, withheld from the masses of women in patriarchy" through the suppression of the motherline (Rich 246).

As well, women are meant to lose their identity to a generic "mother" assigned to them in patriarchal society. Learning about mother outside of the definition of "mother" leads to making the distinction between motherhood and mothering. This distinction contradicts and opposes patriarchy, for mothering means a woman mothers children as but one aspect of her life. Motherhood is patriarchal in that it defines a woman—she is nothing but a mother—and as the mother must adhere to the rules of mothering patriarchy has dictated.

Adrienne Rich distinguishes mothering and motherhood by saying that mothering means the woman is autonomous in being able to raise her children whereas motherhood means she has a patriarchal, condemning gaze watching her mother her children. The distinction is not easily made. "A woman may have looked at the lives of women with children and have felt that, given the circumstances of motherhood, she must remain childless if she is to pursue any other hopes or aims" (Rich 250). Not having children in order to escape motherhood brings no freedom either, as childless women are "seen as embodiments of the great threat to male hegemony; the woman who is not tied to the family, who is disloyal to the law of heterosexual pairing and bearing" (Rich 252). As Rich says, "Any woman who believes that the institution of motherhood has nothing to do with her is closing her eyes to crucial aspects of her situation" (Rich 252).

Under patriarchy, with or without children, women are defined in terms of reproduction, in terms of ties to the patriarchal nuclear family. To learn about your mother as a person is to commit insurrection, because it shows that women are not just mothers, and it prompts women to cast off motherhood in order to be whole. This means that women can still mother, a more healthy autonomous mothering, and also be and do other things without thinking less of themselves. This starts with learning of the fullness of women's lives. This fullness has been hidden within motherhood, and it extends to all women, for in this set-up, woman equals mother.

Only in realizing that motherhood is false and restrictive can women fight its confines, rather than rejecting mothering. It's not the mother, it's the role. Matriphobia³ is declared. Once we are strengthened and happier for seeing our mothers in ourselves, we are no longer fearful of who they are. We become angry at how we have been taught to see them. We no longer must turn to our fathers for strength. This contradicts and opposes patriarchy, for it is a rejection of the daddy's girl, of being male-oriented, objectified, and oppressed (Johnson).

A daddy's girl strength is a false strength, as it is based on women being possessed by men. Some call this marriage. Indeed, Mirian Johnson argues that gaining strength through men leads to being dominated and objectified by men. Woman-to-woman strength, the strength that reveals itself when women can recognize their mothers as strong, dynamic, and whole persons, is crucial in resisting domination.

Realizing that my mother is her own person, a whole person, the sort of mom who's provided mutual support and realistic understanding puts an end to mother-blame and mother guilt. It frees both mother and daughter. It is so "normal" to accept mother myths and engage in mother-blame that the underlying ideology remains concealed until the mother-daughter relationship's troubled nature is examined. Paula Caplan does this in *Don't Blame Mother*. The goal of her book is

to help daughters and mothers feel better about themselves, by understanding the nature of the barriers between them ... to heighten both daughters' and mothers' awareness of how they have been kept apart by the ways they've been taught to think about each other. (15)

The more we replace the patriarchal mother-daughter relationship with a more realistic one, "the better our connections with other women tend to be" (Caplan 9). Anger at mothers dissipates once we have more realistic expectations, for when "you expect someone to be perfect, sooner or later you'll criticize them for having any faults" (Caplan 25). This anger and criticism for not being a perfect mother is then confirmed by bad mother myths. Caplan suggests that it is time to question this hegemony by learning about our mothers as humans, thereby opening up the relationship to mutual strength and understanding.

Even feminist theory around the mother-daughter relationship has been influenced by patriarchy's hegemony. This comes out of the white feminist movement of the 1970s and its devaluing what was deemed feminine in the gender binary. Black feminist theories on mother-daughter relationships emphasize finding strength through each other and through community, because it is necessary to come together to counteract oppression.

Nancy Chodorow, a white feminist writing in the 1970s, speaks of mothers being too cloistering of their

daughters. Chodorow sees this as the unending cycle of the oppression of women. Her argument assumes that the white, suburban, middle-class nuclear family with the stay-at-home mom was the norm even at that time. Chodorow claims mothers create succeeding generations of oppressed women. She argues that there is a "crucial differentiating experience in male and female development (and this) arises out of the fact that women, universally, are largely responsible for early child care and for (at least) later female socialization" (Chodorow 45).

Chodorow has fallen into the trap of being daughter-centric and mother-blaming. Reading this sort of tract does not help mothers and daughters build better bonds. Examining my mother's life, reflecting about our family, I find her theory empty. It says nothing about our lives and, if heeded, would lead to weaker—or no—bonds between my mother and I.

Theory brings with it another problem: it must conform to the academic norm of valuing "rational" and "objective" "arguments" over "emotional drivel." In *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives*, Miriam Johnson argues that the father engenders daughters and sons more than the mother. The most male-oriented women would have been closest to their fathers when they were young—the daddy's girls. These relationships have sexual overtones, because all heterosexual relations have these tones. Her argument is so tight, with such proof that the daddy's girl relationship is sexual and a form of incest. The cold, "scientific," just-the-facts approach is easier to reject as untrue than to think of yourself as a victim of incest. With a concern for the reader's feelings about seeing these things in her own life, the piece might have been more easy to accept and therefore think about. When I wrote a review of this piece, I entitled it "The Hard Pill to Swallow" because it did nothing to soften the stomach cramp blow of emotions the reader might have and therefore ran the risk of being left on the counter even if it could produce clearer vision when digested.

Feminist theory, to an extent, is moving beyond this, as can be seen with such sentences as

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other. (Rich 225–226)

Amniotic bliss? This is a real valuing of the emotional. The reader, however, may not be in the same frame of mind. Once she becomes willing to value the emotional, reading "emotional drivel" can help her develop a better relationship with her mother, for she may begin to appreciate that which she was taught to devalue. A close relationship between mother and daughter is then promoted in place of individuation at all cost, which is what we are meant to do in our individualist culture. Similarly, women's stories have been ignored, and learning about

our own mothers draws attention to them, for it esteems what has been devalued.

It is in this vein the feelings and emotions surrounding women's relationships are becoming food for theory. Elsa Barkley Brown discovered this when she thought about,

how it was that I could get across the ideas which I thought important but which seem so evasive in our intellectual training [when she came up with a paper on] work, female networks and relationships, and women's struggle—but most importantly it talked about my mother ... [it was called] "How My Mother Taught Me To Be a Historian in Spite of My Academic Training." (74–75)

Starting with our own mother's lives, and getting to know them, affects how we formulate theory, for we learn to value the devalued, against the odds. It is the union of the personal and the political, the emotional and the intellectual. It is good to see that the motherline has important—maybe even all-important—implications for theory, just as reading or producing theory may affect the relationship (such as reading *Don't Blame Mother*). Bumping into theory which is useful for creating positive mother-daughter relationships is very rare these days. I would never have read any mother-daughter theories had I not signed up for a class on mothers and daughters. The patriarchal definition of a mother shows up as a given assumption in almost every course I have taken and is used as a foundation point for further argument. The feminist way of seeing mother was explored only in this one class, and until the mothers and daughter class I had not thought of seeing mother differently, or even of realizing that I had been seeing my mother differently from how it was assumed I would perceive her.

Finding the motherline offers many rewards. Firstly, it gives mothers and daughters strength and realistic understanding of each other. The discovered motherline also contradicts and opposes the patriarchal set-up. Finally, the motherline leads to a fuller form of academia, one in which the feminine is included.

Siobhán Conway-Hicks is an undergraduate Women's Studies major at York University. Her mother has just paid off a \$17,000 student debt in nine months by living and working in Korea. She has not inherited this ability with money from her mother, but she did receive her love of feminist learning.

¹I use my mother's name because women sometimes can go for a long time without ever hearing it. They are called "Mom" or "Mrs. So and So." They lose their personhood and become more susceptible to the roles which they are supposed to play, and which leave no space for the woman.
²Although my mother has left the Catholic church, "once a Catholic always a Catholic," for Catholicism is both a way of life and part of the Irish culture. As part of the culture, it politicizes and gives the basis for understanding.

³Matriphobia in this case is not fear of the mother, but fear of motherhood. Adrienne Rich first talked of matriphobia in this way.

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LEAH BENNETT

Written in Brown

I opened my bedroom door,
and knew something was wrong.
The smell of cinnamon
told me,
with it's silent voice.
I looked around,
brown lines danced
across everything.
Across a doll's face,
a line,
like a muddy stream.
Drawers open,
and empty,
clothes on the floor
covered with brown.
And on my pillow,
the weapon used,
a brown smelly felt.
A brother's anger,
written in brown.
And now my revenge—
in black.

Leah Bennett is the 15-year-old daughter of Kass Elan Morgain. She is also the younger sister of three brothers.

KASS ELAN MORGAIN

In Retrospect: An Older Man Becomes Transparent or, Peanut Butter Still Sticks to the Roof of My Mouth

You had asked me to come
to your place for lunch,
a suite in an old house
just a block from Beacon Hill.
You were thirty four years old;
I was seventeen.
You said,
"I can't believe I'm old enough
to be attracted to
someone young enough
to be my daughter."
Then you served me peanut butter
and lettuce sandwiches.

I was young enough
to be flattered by your words,
and didn't know what to say.
You had no chairs.
We sat on cushions on the floor.
I listened to you talk
while I chewed.
Your wooing went no further
than the sandwiches.
I left, intact.

I'm older now
than you were then.
I have a daughter of my own,
thirteen, and we were talking.
We were talking about
odd combinations in sandwiches.
I remembered that time,
the first time I'd ever had
peanut butter with lettuce,
the first time a man
"old enough to be my father"
had fed me a line.
I swallowed it then.
I don't now.
Peanut butter still sticks
to the roof of my mouth.

Kass Elan Morgain is the mother of three sons and one daughter, Leah Eden Bennett. Kass is also a daughter.