

Cultural Daily

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Standing in My Mother's House, and in Her Shoes

Claudia Gold · Thursday, May 9th, 2013

Entering my mom's apartment on Rexford Avenue in West LA is a reminder to breathe deeply. It takes me back into my childhood, to the oil painting on the wall of my mother posing in a black dress, ornamented at the top, carrying a clay jug on her shoulder, portraying Rachel at the well.

The white walls are now more like a museum. My eyes scan a painting by Raphael Abecassis, its Jewish symbols calling through exuberantly colored, startling supernatural images. On the other wall, behind the familiar dining room table, covered in white table cloth embroidered in gold, is the needlepoint by my successful sister Dodie. By the couch, there is a large book of prints by Russian painter and stained glass artist Marc Chagall, and the silver plant-holder on the side table that used to hold the fly-catching plant that intrigued me when I was three.



There are photos in frames on tables everywhere and on the refrigerator of the observant children and grand-children. I can't find a photo of myself anywhere. There are none of my daughter Carmel either. The air is thick. It is time to go.

As Mom hands me a care package of fried chicken, chopped up cucumber salad, and a bag with some clothes she is giving away with some white towels, we discuss an open-ended plan for Mother's Day. She tells me to send her love to Carmel, and I head to my car, bags in each hand, ready for the therapy session I will have to wait for until Saturday.

If some believe, like my husband did, that holidays like Mother's Day were made to benefit Hallmark, then I must add that parenthood was created by the American Psychological Association, to ensure that kids go to therapy because of their parents, parents go to therapy because of their kids, and, as parents inevitably make a mistake (by opening their mouths), the young adults go back to therapy and so on. Offspring feel empathy about a week after they start raising a child, with a huge boost in empathy when their children are teenagers and blurt out every flaw that they've spent years trying to hide, and more!

So I admit that before becoming a parent I believed, at least subconsciously, that our parents are, if not solely, somewhat to largely responsible for our "challenges" in life. In other words, I blamed my parents for my faults (what faults?!) — particularly my mother, the blame part of my brain winning over the pleasure part. I might have remembered her soothing washing of my hair with warm water, then rinsing with cold water as I craned my neck over the kitchen counter once a week for my first eight years.

My studies in psychology and child development at Columbia University as part of training to become a social worker reinforced this convenient opinion of parental programming. So did various therapies I'd been involved with, including the Fischer-Hoffman group therapy session (at

the church in Berkeley) where we beat pillows with all our might with baseball bats, as if we were hitting mom and dad, screaming, “I hate you, you (fill in the blanks).” (And there were a lot of blanks).

Although that therapy was completed (if such things can be said to be completed) occasionally, over time, in a bad year, in a bad time of month, on a bad day, on a bad phone call or visit this primal anger gradually would build, (genes screeching), up until the point of no return, and then erupt at my mother — always justifiably — and it would take a long time for the fallout to clear, amidst ambivalent apologies.

I became a parent 19 years ago and my perspective on parental responsibility shifted. When Carmel Rose, whom my husband John and I adopted, was a baby and woke us four times a night I began to see life through lids barely open. Fitting in a focus on another person was like learning a new tap dance that I danced clumsily between and throughout each other activity of the day. That wasn't me, was it, on my eighth errand to the supermarket to get a vegetable for dinner, holding an armload of way-too-expensive tomatoes and bananas awkwardly with Carmel in the sling on my chest — asking the grocer if he could please put broccoli on top of the other produce and, after he peered at me, bursting out crying?

I'd thought for years previous that I would be a good mother. Yet each day presented a different scenario of what I didn't know and felt unsure about as I ad-libbed. What would you do if while driving on the freeway your baby was screaming angrily at the top of her lungs, and she pitched her last pacifier into the crack on the other side of her car seat where you couldn't reach it? How much Tylenol would you replace when baby has a fever, and has just spit some unquantifiable amount of Tylenol out?

I found myself inadvertently feeling appreciation for my mother for providing day-to-day care for me as a baby, and wondering how she did it, when it was so HARD, when it tests the limits of one's psychological make-up...frequently. I realized the incredible sacrifices my mother made, and how little energy was left at the end of the day for reflection, self-improvement, or change.

My Mom helped my three sisters and me survive and make it in one piece from babyhood to adulthood; she kept us all from drowning all those summers on the beaches of Margate in Atlantic City when we were small and wore cartoon floaties round our waists; she cleverly mushed all those St. Joseph's orange baby aspirin into applesauce all those years, gave sponge baths and braided our hair when we were in bed with measles, mumps, and chicken pox.

My acknowledgment here of mom is confronted with a backlog of vague fears that I will be controlled, or not heard, or hurt; fears which, at times, peek up and out to see if the coast is clear when I am about to speak to her or see her. Complicating matters is that she is orthodox Jewish and I'm a Baha'i. Though we both believe that “the Lord is One”, and I explain to her that religion is one, and I believe in Judaism just as much as Baha'i, I never know quite what to answer when she asks me broken-heartedly, if I went to a Seder.



But there are and have been many good days with moments of sharing and caring – thank our one God, each a miracle. On one such good day, in a good time of my cycle, in a good but frazzling first year of Carmel's life, I found myself on a walk with my mom, “Bubby.” As we walked I saw the side of her short brunette hair framing her eternally young looking face, her purple skirt and linen cream, long jacket, and, at her feet, her practical, purple suede Birkenstocks. We walked in step together, and I grew aware of her familial knees that slightly bulge out on the insides like mine do.

“Mom,” I found myself saying inadvertently as she handed Carmel some ruggelach she had made, “I really appreciate all you did for me. I never realized how much work it was, or how hard it is!”

She smiled, tipped her head to the side like a schoolgirl after winning an award. Her voice, with surprise and elation, teased me saying, “You really don’t know until you become a mother, do you...? I always knew someday you’d appreciate me.”

“Yeah, it only took 42 years...and being a mom,” I mumbled.

Carmel is 19 now, and I’ve been waiting for a call back from her about Mother’s Day...for two weeks. Of course I am told by parents who have gone through this that it is better not to receive the call, and when I do get a call, I may have to pop some ruggelach (money) into her checking account. On the other end, my mother phoned me last week asking if I remembered writing her the letter thanking her for braiding my hair when I was sick, mashing up the St. Joseph aspirin in apple sauce, and driving me places.

“I don’t remember. But I do appreciate those things,” I told her.

“Claudia,” she said, “sometimes I think you feel negatively towards me.” I didn’t know what to say.

“I take your letter out,” she continued, “and read it often.”

Images: Top, Marc Chagall (1887-1985), Mother and child on the brown donkey (1978); below, collage of daughter Carmel, husband John (now deceased) and the author, made in 2000.

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