

∞ The Shadows of Motherhood ∞

By Lori E. Opal, MFT

It seems we live in a culture that promotes a fairytale story of life. We are all desperately attempting to attain the extolled, *happily ever after*. This forces us to find ways to repress and deny any feelings and aspects of ourselves, which are collectively deemed “negative.” On this track we risk ending up as a caricature in life stuck pretending that everything is only good. This is especially true of motherhood.

We have been given a whitewashed version of mothering, one that only openly acknowledges the wonderful parts. But we do not need assistance in dealing with the good stuff! It is the delicious joys within this experience, which gives us the fortitude to persevere through the most outrageous challenges. The danger is in the disowned shadow aspects, which when denied can fester under just the surface, only to bubble-up, causing in the process an astonishing pain within. And if we haven’t yet begun to remember the truth of our wholeness, we are left holding the self-story of: *There must be something wrong with me, if I am feeling this*. We have all heard great tales of the wonders of mother love, yet one must search hard to find the brave souls who have broken the social taboo and spoken of its dark side.

Jung has a well-known quote; “I’d rather be whole than good.” He understood the sacred shared roots of the words: wholeness, holy, and healing. His goal was the integration of all aspects of being. He reminds us, “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.” This quote points towards a very important spiritual reality. True enlightenment involves developing the capacity to hold the fullness of our lived experience, both the light and the dark coexisting spaciouly within consciousness.

My intention here is to illuminate some of the darkly shadowed aspects of motherhood in our American culture. In the process, I hope to point out ways of helping clients as they navigate the challenges especially inherent for new mothers. As a therapist, I have seen great healing value in creating a safe place where one may speak the *whole* of life’s truth. The Sufi poet Rumi reminds us, “God turns you from one feeling to another and teaches by means of opposites, so that you will have two wings to fly, not one.” So, in order to live a life where we are flying with both of our wings, one must learn to relish the bittersweet essence of existence. For a life fully lived is always rich with paradox, ambiguity, and all shades of ambivalence. Why would we expect motherhood to be different in this regard?

Many writers have chosen to use the phrase *conspiracy of silence* to describe the lack of truth telling around our collective experiences as mothers. I have seen, professionally and personally, how denial and silence can lead directly to isolation and shame. Why is this still happening? When motherhood is the most universal experience within life, why are so many women left feeling overwhelmed, alone and ashamed? Why is it so challenging to hold the fullness of this truth? I am reminded of Muriel Rukeyser’s quote, “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.” For me, this represents the deep terror, which perpetuates this silence. We imagine that somehow our honesty will be tremendously destructive.

We as a society have done mothers a great disservice by overly idealizing the experience of motherhood. Therefore, we mothers are holding very unrealistic expectations for

ourselves. These ideals leave no room for the shadow. In order to become a whole individual we must have room for *all* that we are. Simply living one’s life will bring out aspects of our being that may have never existed before; but motherhood turns up the alchemical heat. We will discover our very best selves: loving, generous, nurturing, patient, creative and kind, as well as our very worst selves: frustrated, stingy, angry, impatient, and punishing. In moments we may teeter on the edge of insanity. The thoughts and feelings that can most easily evoke shame in us are a natural and normal part of this remarkable package.

Louise Kaplan gives us a taste of this dark truth, “A mother survives. Most of all, she survives her hatred for her baby. . . She is the victor because she does not convert her angry thoughts and emotions into actions that would abuse or hurt her baby. . . It is easiest for a mother to retain a sense of her own goodness when her baby is thriving and content. Her baby’s misery arouses despair and anger. She conceives of her anger as a distortion, a blemish on the picture of ideal motherhood. She is certain she is the only mother who ever had murderous, dreadful thoughts about her baby.”

The reality of being a mother was so vastly different from the lovely naïve fantasy I had maintained. Up front, I would like to acknowledge I was absolutely shocked and completely traumatized by my own initiation into motherhood. While I had prepared for birthing in so many ways, I had not opened myself to the depths of surrender required to fully bear the archetype of *Mother*, creatrix of life. The intense pain and duration of

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labor, the prolonged lack of sleep, the internal hormonal maelstrom, and the awesome responsibility of protecting another life . . . words pale in the face of this overwhelming experience. Survival required attaining new levels of humility.

It was as if I had awoken from a dream to discover myself within Kali. She is the goddess of creation and destruction, which are indivisible, so why was I surprised by the devastation and the darkness? I can still remember the great comfort and relief I felt when I read how Ariel Gore had fantasized of putting her newborn daughter into the fireplace. So by the time a client shared her own shame filled thought, “If I just drop him over this (ten story) balcony, and then I could go back to my own life,” I was no longer locked in the perfect mother persona and could easily normalize her thoughts, and focus on the fact that these kinds of thoughts will come for each of us. Our only responsibility in those moments is to be strong enough not act on them.

One of the deepest held *illusions of control* is the idea that we should be able to restrain our thoughts. Thoughts arise but it is possible to simply witness them, slow down and then *respond* instead of *reacting*. Key here is to understand the functioning of the brain and autonomic nervous system. Anger, rage, and despair can overwhelm our bodies turning on the sympathetic nervous system or putting our bodies into the *fight or flight* mode. The physiological symptoms include a racing heartbeat and rapid shallow breathing. Ideally, here one could intervene by using intentional relaxation, and deep belly breathing as a way of activating the peaceful parasympathetic nervous system. If that is not

possible, then quickly take what I call a “Mommy time-out.” This basically means safely leaving before you do or say something you will regret.

I use psychological and spiritual education with clients. Some of the essential points I wish to impart here are:

- Create realistic expectations
- Do not collude with internalized perfectionism
- Find ways to gracefully surrender to what is
- Validate and normalize the full breadth of this experience
- Build gentle and nurturing internal voices
- Encourage a sense of humor
- Learn to forgive the inevitable mistakes
- Establish a supportive community
- Prioritize self-care

To emphasize this final point, I would like to focus on how just how essential self-care is for mothers. It is distressing to notice that the things that we most need for our own rejuvenation often are the first things to get dropped out of our priorities. Please remember self-care is not a luxury; it is what fosters your ability to provide for your child. If you are empty, then soon resentment, frustration and anger will be bubbling beneath the surface. Your baby’s welfare directly depends on your health and wellbeing, so nurturing yourself is at the very core of good mothering.

Back by popular demand, this article was first published in The Bridge Journal, Fall 2008 (Volume 3, Issue 3).

Recommended Resources:

I Was A Really Good Mom Before I Had Kids: Reinventing Modern Motherhood. Trisha Ashworth and Amy Nobile. (2007). Chronicle Books.

The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It. Susan Maushart. (2000). Penguin Books.

Memories, Dreams, Reflections. CG. Jung. (1961). Random House Inc.

MotherMysteries. Maren Tonder Hansen. (1997). Shambala Publications.

Oneness and Separateness: From Infant to Individual. Lousie Kaplan. (1998). Simon and Schuster.

For a more extensive bibliography please visit:
<http://www.loriopal.com/resources.html>

Lori E. Opal, MFT provides consultation, supervision, and psychotherapy in her San Francisco and Emeryville office and over the phone or on Face Time. As a mother of two, Lori is passionate about helping women prepare psychologically and spiritually for pregnancy, labor and birthing, the transition into motherhood, and the ongoing joys and challenges of parenting.

Lori currently has space for a qualified MFT Intern in her Private Practice, who brings their own client load. Please read her article that gives a good overview of important considerations at <http://loriopal.com/internships.html> to see if you might be a good fit. (Please note there are some regulatory changes that have been implemented since this article was originally written.)

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