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Opportunities for Spiritual Awakening and Growth in Mothering

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Opportunities for Spiritual Awakening
and Growth in Mothering

by

Melissa J. Albee

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
Department of Women's Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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DEDICATION



This work is dedicated to my children,
for they held the keys to my destiny.

They showed me the path
and I hit the ground running.

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I would like to take the time to acknowledge the tremendous amount of support and commitment that I received from my major professor, Marilyn Myerson, her patience and encouragement throughout this process was instrumental. I would also like to thank Gurleen Grewal, who had the courage to teach the class that changed my life and who has helped me in so many other ways. To some these women might just be professors, but they will always remain near and dear to me in my heart because they taught me more than just information, the way they live their lives sets a great example of how to be authentic in the world. I appreciated the suggestions from Naomi Yavneh, I wish we could have gotten to know each other better.

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How can I write this without thanking the man who helped me to create these wonderful children? It is very necessary to thank my husband, Jacob, for doing his best and putting up with and loving all of me.

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPIRITUAL AWAKENING
AND GROWTH IN MOTHERING

Melissa J. Albee

ABSTRACT

My experiences as a mother have been enhanced by spirituality and my spirituality has been transformed through the practice of mothering. I will argue that part of the transformation available in mothering is that one can go from thinking of oneself as an individual with free will, self autonomy, and independence to believing maybe we are all more connected and dependent upon each other than we thought. I intend to explore my personal spiritual journey from an academic perspective in order to gain and share knowledge. Intense emotional experiences such as childbirth, learning how to take care of a person who can not clearly communicate her or his desires, and learning to put the needs of someone else before your own, have the potential for both extreme pain and joy and the mother is forced to decide how to move forward. If mothers start to feel connected to their children, it can become easier to feel connected to other mothers, children, and humanity in general. This change which can occur within a mother can be a part of the spiritual awakening. American society, in general, would benefit from the recognition of the spiritual side of mothering and the awareness of the potential for a transformation in consciousness.

My thesis topic is the spirituality of motherhood. More specifically, I explore how the practice of caring for children can transform the caregiver's sense of spirituality

which is the relationship between your self and the world. This thesis is based on a feminist literary review of texts about spirituality and motherhood and also uses my personal experiences as a mother to illustrate how mothering can be a spiritual awakening and opportunity for spiritual growth. It is feminist in nature because I am attempting to illuminate and privilege the knowledges and experiences of mothers. I want to celebrate female parenting and also recognize the difficulties imposed by our sexist society. Motherhood does not always have to be exploitive or repressive and spirituality is one way to transcend these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

One night, not long ago, I was awoken by my daughter at two in the morning, Maya was crying. She crawled into my bed with her blanket in one hand and her pillow in the other. I knew that this was going to be a long night. My son was already in the bed with me and my husband because we were carefully listening to Jonathan's wheezing lungs. It took him over an hour to fall asleep that night because his cold had moved down to his chest and the prescription cough medicine no longer seemed to help. It was so very difficult to listen to the child we love cough, choke, and wail especially when we were extremely sleep deprived.

Maya would not stop crying so I stood up and asked her if she needed to go potty. There was no response aside from more tears so I asked again. Finally, she nodded her head yes and we went off to the bathroom. My daughter was still half-asleep so she just stood there in front of the toilet. I decided to pull the pajamas down for her since that tactic had worked before. She yelled, she screamed, and she tried so very hard to pull her pants back up they formed a large, tangled bunch on her thighs and then she proceeded to go to the bathroom all over herself, her clothes, and the floor. She stood there and screamed but all I could do was look at her with tired and sympathetic eyes. There was a tinge of anger that briefly passed through me, but I soon realized it does no good to tell a three year old "I told you so". My husband came and cleaned her and the mess up and we soon went back to bed and slept peacefully through the rest of the night.

Spirituality, finding my soul's voice, has helped me to become a happier mother by being more aware of myself, my actions and reactions, and connecting me with others and to the world in new ways. My spiritual journey is a transformation of consciousness into a space of hope and healing. Practicing mindfulness and acceptance helps me find harmony and happiness with my family and the world.

Being a mother has the potential to awaken an awareness of the soul that can help a sense of spirituality emerge. (Athan 17) The potential to become aware is everywhere;

my opportunity came during the mundane and yet simultaneously earthshaking event of motherhood that rocked my world and changed my life. My experiences as a mother have been enhanced by spirituality and my spirituality has been transformed through the practice of mothering. Having children caused my heart to grow and then shatter many times, only to become whole, and start over with love time and again. Being a mother has enabled me tangibly to grasp the meaning of love and apply it not only to my children, but to myself, and countless others as well.

Karen Maezen Miller, a Zen Buddhist, wrote the book *Momma Zen*. One of her beliefs is that “motherhood is a spiritual practice. It is a crash course in wisdom... If you allow it, being a mother is one of the most amazing, miraculous, mysterious, dignifying, and illuminating things you will ever do.”(6) Parenting is the yin and the yang; it encompasses both the joy and the pain of life. Part of the reason it hurts is that we often have to give so much of ourselves in order to do it well. Raising children means that you set aside your ego. You might consider trying not to be selfish and impatient with your children. It is no longer about you and what you want, rather it is about what is necessary for your family. (30) You can and sometimes do lose yourself by being a mother. Who you thought you were is changed and what you become is much different. I will argue that part of the transformation available in mothering is that one can go from thinking of oneself as an individual with free will, self autonomy, and independence to believing maybe we are all more connected and dependent upon each other than we thought.

For me, spirituality is not something other worldly, hard to attain, or related to organized religion; rather, it is all about connection: with my true self, with other people, and with the entire universe. (Packer 13) I intend to explore my personal spiritual

journey from an academic perspective in order to gain and share knowledge. Through motherhood, I have learned how to love myself, accept change, become mindful, listen to my heart, become more authentic, heal, and experience genuine happiness. I do not claim to be a perfect mother or even a calm, enlightened soul on a regular basis but I do know that what I have learned about my own soul through mothering has made me a better person and I want this knowledge to be shared so that it will be recognized and possibly help other people as well.

What is a mother? The first, of many, definitions in my *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* says that a mother is “a female parent” (810). For the purposes of this paper, a mother is any woman who raises a child. This woman may or may not be biologically related to the child that she is caring for. In the United States today, it is common for biological mothers to raise their children, but also adoptive mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other women who may or may not be biologically related. Two (or more) women could raise a child or children together and they could all be considered mothers. The living situations of mothers and their children vary enormously from family to family based on historical and cultural context. For the purposes of this paper, when I use the word mother or motherhood, I wish to include any woman who is raising or who has reared a child or children. (I discuss fathering on pages 10-11.)

In the article “Spiritual Awakening through the Motherhood Journey,” the authors Athan and Miller wrote “motherhood is an opportunity for creative spiritual growth and transformation in women. The potential lies latent in the intense emotional experiences inherent in mothering which are designed to be fruitful and accelerate spiritual development.” (17) These “intense emotional experiences” such as childbirth, learning

how to take care of a person who can not clearly communicate her or his desires, and learning to put the needs of someone else before your own, have the potential for both extreme pain and joy and the mother is forced to decide how to move forward. If mothers start to feel connected to their children, it can become easier to feel connected to other mothers, children, and humanity in general. This change which can occur within a mother, can be a part of the spiritual awakening. I strongly agree with Athan and Miller that “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.”

(17) American society, in general, would benefit from the recognition of the spiritual side of mothering and the awareness of the potential for a transformation in consciousness.

My thesis topic is the spirituality of motherhood. More specifically, I explore how the practice of caring for children can transform the caregiver’s sense of spirituality which is the relationship between your self and the world. One key element of motherhood is the possibility of learning how to love unconditionally. For the first time, I knew what it was like to love someone without limits, without judgment, and without needing to be loved back. Loving my children in this way helped me to see that they deserved a mother who truly loved herself as much as she loved her children. Unconditional love has the power to awaken the soul and transform the spirit. My personal experiences as well as scholarly work about spirituality and feminist mothering have been an essential part of demonstrating why and how mothering can be recognized as a way to heal and transform identity. Defining what I mean by spirituality and

showing how my definition is inclusive rather than hierarchical is also important. My definition of spirituality is a sense of connection to your true self, who you really are, and also to the rest of the world and the universe.

Feminism has been a tool to help me understand the world, but it also left me grasping for meaning in my own life. I learned how to see and understand the systems of patriarchy but not necessarily what to do about them. I saw the problems of the world but I did not feel that I could do much to change anything. Exploring the possibilities of a spiritualized feminism and then discussing multiple aspects which were key in my own spiritual transformation, help to illustrate what I mean by “the spirituality of motherhood”.

Method

This thesis is based on a feminist literary review of texts about spirituality and motherhood and also uses my personal experiences as a mother to illustrate how mothering can be a spiritual awakening and opportunity for spiritual growth. The thesis is feminist in nature because I am attempting to illuminate and privilege the knowledges and experiences of mothers. I want to celebrate female parenting and also recognize the difficulties imposed by our sexist society. Motherhood does not always have to be exploitive or repressive and spirituality is one way to transcend these challenges.

Feminist theory acknowledges the importance of personal experience in the production of knowledge. (McCann 17) I believe my work contributes to feminist research because, following Reinharz, I situate myself as a feminist researcher. I start with my own experiences, then process them, while being careful not to essentialize. We do not need to characterize women and mothers as being universally similar. In fact, I

want to recognize our differences while speaking of my personal experiences. “I want to suggest that we think of the meaning “woman” [and “mother”]...as [words] whose meaning is not found through the elucidation of some specific characteristic but is found through the elaboration of a complex network of characteristics.” (Nicholson 74) I ground myself in my specific time and place because I do not want to pretend that the experiences of women or mothers are similar all the time and everywhere. My life is composed of the conditions which are “always simultaneously the product of personal and structural factors.” (Reinharz 204) My culture, education, and personal experiences shape the way I view the world and speak of it.

I, like bell hooks, believe that feminist theory needs to be accessible, open, and responsive. I intentionally wrote this thesis in language that I felt many could relate to and understand. “We still need feminist theory that speaks to everyone” (hooks xiv). I am hoping to create positive change in the lives of women and I want this information to be straightforward.

First, I define what I *mean* by spirituality. My definition of spirituality is different from organized religion because it is based on getting to know and accept yourself so that you can connect with others and does not require texts or leaders to find answers (although I have found reading and speaking with others to be very useful). Organized religions often seem to suggest that institutions and leaders have the keys to sacred knowledge, while my form of spirituality insists that the sacred is within us all and we have the capacity to unlock the door ourselves. We find out what others have to say about spiritual awakening, mindfulness, healing and becoming whole and relate these topics back to my personal mothering experience to show how motherhood can be

transformative. Also, I look at Leela Fernandes' book, *Transforming Feminist Practice*, in order to explore the possibilities of a spiritualized feminism that offers insight for expanding understandings of motherhood. Examining the spiritual revelations available in mothering such as the possibility that the child may become the teacher, the importance of self-love and finding happiness, and also the lessons that can be learned through play, will help to show the dailiness of the spiritual transformation. The last chapter discusses the child within the mother who can be reborn and healed through a spiritual transformation.

In some respects, this paper is a response to the important feminist book *Of Woman Born* written over thirty years ago by Adrienne Rich. She wrote about the prevalent institution of motherhood and how it oppressed women. She also used excerpts from her journal and talked about her rollercoaster ride of emotions which ranged from anger to love. I am also responding to Judith Warner's more recent book, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, in which she claims that we, in America, are anxiously trying to be perfect parents in an "hypercompetitive and excruciatingly expensive age" (216) within a political climate which forces women to choose between providing for their children and nurturing them. I believe that these feminist perspectives do an excellent job at defining and deconstructing the difficulties imposed on women as mothers in our society but I do not believe that these works provide tangible ways to find solutions to these problems or ways of transcending them.

Throughout the paper, I will integrate insights based on the work of Aurelie M. Athan and Lisa Miller entitled, "Spiritual Awakening through the Motherhood Journey" which claims "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.” (17) I find this article to be the ultimate theoretical backbone of my personal beliefs because it supports my premise that motherhood has the potential to bring about a spiritual transformation. The article asserts that the intense emotional experiences in motherhood can accelerate spiritual growth; the lessons learned by mothering can create a sense of being reborn with new eyes for mothers; and it defines basic spiritual tenets, such as compassion, patience, surrender, and love, which are important aspects of the mother’s transformation of consciousness.

Why Motherhood?

One might ask why I chose to study the spirituality of motherhood instead of parenting. I chose the topic of motherhood, rather than parenting, primarily so that I could speak of my personal experience as a woman and a mother in this society. I believe that it is possible for men also to experience a spiritual transformation when they enter fatherhood, but in U.S. society, prescribed notions of fatherhood appear to be quite different than those prescribed to mothers. According to Chodorow thirty years ago, families and other institutions in our society taught children that men should provide materialistically for their family while women were the emotional caregivers. Girls were taught that women might rely on relationships and be dependent upon others while boys were taught to be independent (179). While this is not the case for all American families today and I do not want to essentialize gender, I think Chodorow provides important insight into why fathers still have less intimate relationships with their children. Michael Kimmel, a professor of sociology, recommends that men have close relationships with

their families and friends and share in the housework and childcare. “Gender equality is good for children, it’s good for women, and, it turns out, it’s good for men as well.” He cites studies that found that when men share household and child care responsibilities that not only were children happier and healthier, but so were the parents who also reported higher marital satisfaction (256-7). A new realization of what constitutes masculinity would help to make the roles that men and women play in the lives of their children more similar. It would be intriguing to explore the spirituality which emerges during fatherhood and the literature does exist, but this work focuses on motherhood because my writing is grounded in my personal experiences as a mother.

I am not trying to speak for all women. I do not claim that all women go through a spiritual awakening when they become mothers and I am not even trying to claim that any given woman will go through the same kind of transformation that I did. It seems to me that adoptive mothers and even mothers who have had multiple children might experience a transformation depending upon where they are in their journey and the way that their experiences are understood. Dr. Ellen Fitzenrider wrote the book, *Finding Katherine: A Spiritual Journey to Vietnam and Motherhood*, which describes how this Buddhist American mom adopted her daughter from Vietnam and learned many spiritual lessons along the way. In my case, it was after the birth of both of my children, born so close together (within a year), that I attribute my own spiritual transformation. I was forced to deal with my fears and insecurities about being a mother to two children, who needed so much, when I was not sure if I could love and nurture them in a manner that I thought they deserved. I changed after Maya was born but the real transformation did not start until after Jonathan was home and I had to take care of them both. The stress and

anxiety I felt when faced with the need to care for two children were influential in my shift.

What about the mothers who abuse their children or believe that their children are a burden, rather than a gift? I can understand that some women's economical, emotional, and mental circumstances might prevent them from enjoying childrearing. For example, Tracy Thompson, who wrote about maternal depression, estimates that "4 million women (in the U.S.) get out of bed every morning to face the daunting job of parenting while suffering with an illness (depression) that is at best debilitating, and at worst life-threatening." (3) So many women and families are affected by mood disorders which can hinder one's ability to reason and cope with stress. Depression causes irritability and anger which can then lead to abusive behavior. (88) Not only does maternal depression affect mothers, but so, too, do numerous other mental and emotional problems as well as the effects of socio-economic realities. Not all mothers have the opportunity or see the need to change the way they perceive the world and enjoy the benefits of spiritual awakening, but any mother whether or not she is abused, rich or poor, depressed, or strong and centered has the potential to become more spiritual and mindful. It is my hope that more mothers will be able to open their hearts, love themselves, and love their children wholeheartedly.

Confessional/ Feminist Researcher Disclosure

I was raised, baptized, and confirmed Catholic. The first time I had sex, I bawled my eyes out because I really thought that I was condemned to go to hell since I was not married. I questioned some of the church's beliefs and teachings when I went to college, but it was not until I was in a car accident and my parents told me that God was

punishing me for living in sin, that I decided to declare myself an atheist. Actually, I was more agnostic than atheist since I always believed there was something out there rather than nothing; but the label atheist was one big way to rebel from my upbringing. I believe that there might be a God, but I have a hard time believing that a male deity created everything. I think that if there is a God, what it is is so beyond our understandings of what a man or a woman is, it is probably both or neither and not at all subject to these classification categories. I believe that there have been numerous prophets who have had important messages. I do not think that any one prophet or religion is ultimate. In the book, *Oneness: Great Principles Shared by All Religions*, the author, Jeffery Moses, made the claim that the great prophets Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius and Mohammed all advocated the Golden Rule in one way or another. I also think that there may have been prophets who have not been recognized as such.

I grapple with the image of the Virgin Mary who was ever present during my childhood and my mother's primary example of how to be a good mother to her children. Western Christianity has "projected its own fantasies into it (the image of the Virgin Mary), and produced one of the most powerful constructs known in the history of civilizations." (Kristeva 237) Even though I no longer claim to be religious, this idealization of the suffering, ever sacrificing mother has been implanted on my sub consciousness defining for me what it means to be a good mother. I believe this idealization of motherhood effects a lot of women in cultures across the world.

I use a lot of Buddhist teachings in this paper, but I do not formally practice Buddhism nor claim to be an expert on Buddha. In true American style, I am eclectic so I

select what I find to be useful and enlightening. I am attracted to Buddhism because it encourages self-awareness and seems less hierarchical than other religions.

I have had substantial privilege in my life. I am white, middle-class, and educated. I was raised in a nuclear family consisting of a mother, father and children and I am raising my children in the same manner in our single family house with no extended familial support except for the occasional visit. I often pay someone to watch my children or trade services with friends. I can usually afford daycare as well as diapers and food. I can not imagine having as much time or energy to think about or write about the spirituality of motherhood if I had to worry about where my next meal was coming from or where we would lay our heads this evening. I am blessed and yet I am also concerned about the ways in which many try to raise our children in neat little nuclear homes with little or no outside or extended familial support. I have found that I can not and do not want to raise my children by myself.

The nuclear family is an ideal that the American family does not live up to. The 2000 census showed that, “for the first time, the percentage of Americans living in nuclear families has declined to below 25 percent of the population.” (Benfer 2) According to this article, “The Nuclear Family Takes a Hit,” the increase in divorce, single parenting, and cohabitation has led to the majority of American families where a married mother and father are not raising their own biological children. (2) The average American family has diverse structures in lived reality and yet our ideals still presume a nuclear family structure. It is also important to keep in mind that throughout history, forces such as economics, slavery, personal choice, and family necessity have made the

ideal of the nuclear family even harder to maintain. Biological parents often do not live with their biological children and some one else steps in to raise these children.

The cultural narrative here in the U.S. which is perpetuated by television, children's books, and movies suggests that the nuclear family, with its strict gender roles and clearly defined boundaries, is the best way to raise a family. I think that Nancy Hartsock made an important point when she said "that women and not men rear children in a society structured by compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance is clearly a societal choice." (293) Society's gender norms dictate that women usually raise children, but individual families have the potential to determine their own practices. Biologically, women are the ones who bear children but the care of a child, after it is born, is a choice and not dictated by biology. Class, economics, racial and religious background, and the historical and cultural context in which families are formed lead to an incredible amount of difference between family units' appearance and structure. There is no one right way to raise children; and even though I write this paper from the perspective of living within a nuclear family model, I see many problems with the way it is traditionally structured. I believe that any time a child is getting the love and care that they need, the family is fulfilling its role.

I am aware of the irony of my sitting here writing about the spirituality of motherhood while someone else watches my children. I have the privilege of sending my children off to daycare so that I can have time to write and study. Right now I am not spending quality time with my kids because I am working on this thesis. Also, I am on anti-anxiety medication because sometimes I feel unable to cope with all the stresses going on in my life. So even as I advocate spirituality as a way to transform and heal, I

recognize that sometimes the best way to be good to myself and be good for my children is to take care of myself, first. Mary Oliver reminds me that the only life I can save is my own. I have to take care of myself because that is the only way I will be able to take care of everything else that needs to be done. At first, I thought that needing a medication to remedy a mood disorder was an indication that this new-found sense of spirituality had failed me. Did I trust the universe when I could not fall asleep because I could not stop worrying? And then I remembered that I am not my brain or even my body. I am a spirit and a soul inside a body. Sometimes my body does not produce enough coping chemicals and I should do what I can to remedy it. I changed my diet, added dietary supplements, started exercising regularly, and took Cymbalta in order to find a better balance in my life. I am human and I tend to take on too much. Yet, I can be proud that I took the steps necessary to make the situation better for myself and my family.

I have been working towards my master's degree for the last five years. Eight years ago, my fiancé and I packed up my little sports car and drove fifteen hundred miles to Florida, leaving all of our friends and family behind. I used the feminist theory and its emphasis on women's agency as a tool to understand my world and create what I thought was an equitable and strong partnership. I got married, waited three years, and had my first child, a baby girl. Eleven months later, my son was born. One baby was hard enough to care for but two babies seemed almost unmanageable. I cried and pleaded when my husband left for work because I did not think I would be able to handle the needs of my two children. I took a year off of school when Maya was born and then took a year off of work after Jonathan was born and went back to school. The first class I took when I went back was called "Transformations in Consciousness" taught by Dr. Gurleen

Grewal and my life was forever changed. I realized that there was a different way to see the world which transcended dichotomies and boundaries. I learned that trying to be a “good” mom was one more way I was comparing myself to others and separating a “me” from a “them”. I started living in the moment, finding ways to be present for myself and my children, and learning how to accept myself, including my perceived strengths and weaknesses. I found that the more I studied, thought about, wrote about, and talked about spirituality; the more I could see and understand the connections in my daily life.

The writings which have had the most profound effect on my life as a mother have been: *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, *Radical Acceptance*, *Peace is Every Step*, *Momma Zen*, *The Inward Arc*, and the article “Spiritual Awakening through the Motherhood Journey”. *Of Woman Born* is one of feminisms’ best known books about the institution of motherhood. It was my goal, before having children, to avoid the traps of patriarchy and create an equitable family. I was surprised and disappointed that I too faced many of the same frustrations and obstacles when I had my own children. I read Tara Brach’s *Radical Acceptance* right after finishing my first Transformations class when I was grasping for more practical ways to live in a spiritual manner. Her concept of learning how to pause has given me the space and time that I need to make clear decisions during stressful situations and helped me to value both emotion and logic. Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Peace is Every Step* is also a wonderfully practical, easy-to-read, example of how to live mindfully. He lets us know that washing dishes, listening to a telephone ring, and driving a car can be opportunities to remind us to come back to the moment and *experience* life. *Momma Zen* by Karen Maezen Miller was the first book I read that combined spirituality and motherhood in a way that made

me laugh and cry and gave me a lot of guidance and hope. One of my favorite quotes in the book is, “Practice acceptance on yourself so you can be kinder with your child. Practice nonjudgmental awareness of your life so you can save your loved ones from the cruelty of your own impossible standards and your hard-hearted disappointment.” (41) By being kinder to myself, I can let go of the standards I have set for myself and my children and not be disappointed when things do not turn out as I had hoped. *The Inward Arc* by Frances Vaughan gave me a tangible vision of what healing and wholeness could like from a psychological perspective. When I found the article, “Spiritual Awakening through the Motherhood Journey” by Athan and Miller, I had proof that there was a way to make the subject of motherhood and spirituality into an academic exploration from which I could base my thesis. In the academic setting of a published journal, others were arguing that spirituality was an important part of the mothering experience. These works changed the way I thought about mothering and spirituality so that I could see how to live according to my beliefs.

I was very hesitant to have children because I was afraid that I would continue the cycle of abuse that I had endured during my own childhood. My father physically and emotionally abused his four children while my mother watched and sometimes pleaded for him to stop. Feminist theory helped me to understand that there were systems of power built within the institution of patriarchy which allowed my father to harm *his* children and this same system made it very difficult for my mother to prevent the violence or leave him. What traditional feminist scholarship did not do for me was tell me how to heal from these experiences and how to prevent the perpetration of the cycle of violence in my own family. I needed something more than just theory, I had needed to

change the way I thought and acted so that I could defuse my anger and learn to heal. Feminist spirituality offered both the theory and the methods of practice so that I could begin to heal and understand what wholeness looked like.

The one area of my life that has surprised and scared me the most is the relationship that I have with my husband. It would be nice to say that our relationship has gotten better, but I think a more accurate description is that our relationship has changed. Our contrasting personalities- he is easy-going and laid back and I am a planner who likes to stay perpetually busy- make parenting together difficult. I take on most of the childcare responsibilities and he likes to interact with the kids when it is convenient for him. I resent that the kids expect and accept less from him. Even though my husband and I have been together for ten years, it feels as though we are riding a roller coaster of ups and downs and I can no longer be sure that we will be together forever. My connection with him has diminished in some ways since I no longer feel close to him because I have allowed the anger and resentment in my heart to grow and yet because we have children together our connection is everlasting and almost always present. Our children deserve to see their parents in a strong, supportive relationship. I am working on cultivating empathy for my husband and I also understand that I need patience with myself and space to figure out how to move forward.

I appreciate what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels have to say about men as caregivers because it speaks to my personal experience. “Many of us... have concluded that men can’t do it, so we shut them out and do it ourselves. We resent men for not helping us more, but also bask in the smugness that at least here in this one role, we can claim superiority.” (13) Why do I, as a feminist mother who strives for gender equality

in my marriage and in society, think that my husband is incapable of being a good parent? I think that there are two good reasons illustrated by Chodorow. First, I tend to think of myself as a mother above all else even though I know that I am that and much more. Mothering “stands out in its emotional intensity and meaning, and in its centrality for women’s lives and social definition.” (6) I believe that being a mother is one of the most important things I will do in my lifetime. I also know that society holds me responsible for the behavior and success of my children. The second part of the equation is that “women as mothers produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed.” (7) My husband’s mother left when he was very young and his father raised him to be self-sufficient. He tends to think that children are resilient and should be encouraged to be independent. While I do not disagree completely, infants and toddlers do need constant supervision and care.

So it seems as if I have mostly made up my mind that my husband refuses to parent in the way that I deem best and so our conflicts just seem to grow. We tend to have two very different ideologies about how to raise children and often it is difficult for each of us to compromise on these core beliefs. I realize that two different ways of parenting can be beneficial and yet when we can not agree on key issues such as safety, quality time, and discipline, it feels as though I am parenting with the enemy. In my mind, I understand that I have created the enemy and he looks and acts like my partner; but I am having a hard time letting this go. I still think that I am right most of the time and I want to use the “I am the mom” trump card but that does not usually play out well in my family. One solution that seems to work is getting some good quality time with my husband so that I can remember why I married him and why I still love him. I have a lot

of work that needs to be done within my heart in order to forgive and let go of some of the pain and resentment. Cultivating gratitude for the things that he does do for me and the kids has been beneficial. I also want to stop labeling him as the enemy because it is harmful to both of us, I know it and he feels it. We are trying to improve our communication skills and I am attempting to empathize with him more. We are a work in progress.

Maybe I am reliving my past in some ways. I thought I chose a husband who was the opposite from my own father but what I did not realize was that my mind would recreate the enemy until I actually deal with the fear that resides inside my heart. (Greenspan 53-63) Although my husband is not an angry or aggressive man, I continue to think of him as being a danger to my children's well being. I grew up always living on edge, afraid that my siblings and I would be hurt at any moment. Now I am continuously afraid that my own children will be harmed because my husband is so easy-going and does not worry about leaving doors unlocked, letting the children go unattended frequently, and allowing them to play in precarious places. I know that it is not about being right all of the time, that I have a tendency to want to control things too much but I also do not know if I can live this way. I am considering leaving my husband and in some ways, maybe I have already left the marriage, the partnership long ago. My husband is absent from much of this paper precisely because I have not found a satisfactory way to parent with him.

bell hooks has helped me to see that some of my personal problems with my husband might have more to do with our culture than I had previously thought. Although my husband is a loving father, he just does not share in the child care responsibilities and

housework like I had hoped. Before we had children, he promised to be an active father and I made many assumptions about what that would mean. I knew that he was messy; I did not know that my standards of cleanliness would necessarily change after having children. “Men will not share equally in parenting until they are taught, ideally from childhood on, that fatherhood has the same meaning and significance as motherhood” (hooks 137) What does this mean? We as mothers and fathers might want to show and tell our children that little boys and girls have the capacity and ability to care for and nurture children. Boys, as well as girls, can be encouraged that they are acting like good parents when playing with dolls and showing kindness to others. Kids who see their parents sharing in household chores and child-rearing will learn that families are healthier and happier when the joys and burdens are shared. (Kimmel 257)

We might have to create a new vision in order to make this a reality. “As long as women or society as a whole see the mother/child relationship as unique and special because the female carries the child in her body and gives birth, or makes this biological experience synonymous with women having a closer, more significant bond to children than the male parent, responsibility for childcare and child-rearing will continue to be primarily women’s work’ (hooks 137). Maybe I need to stop trying to use the “I am the mother” trump card because if I want equal parenting, I need to stop trying to be the superior or primary parent. If mothers want or need to be the superior parent, how can we ever have any kind of equality? If we want men to be more involved as parents but then are not allowed to share the power of decision-making, we have then recreated patriarchy in the form of a matriarchy within our homes. I think that it is really important to show my children that both men and women make good parents and should share in

the responsibilities of the family and I will continue to try to make this vision a reality in my home. I think men would greatly benefit from a sense of spirituality while fathering. It could connect them more deeply to their children, their partners, and the rest of the world as well. People of any sex or gender would benefit from these types of close connections.

CHAPTER 1

Defining Spirituality

For me, spirituality is not something other worldly, hard to attain, or necessarily related to organized religion; rather, it is all about connection: with my true self, with other people, and with the entire universe. Organized religion tends to have doctrine, rules, and codes of conduct that encourages members to follow some prescribed path to the sacred rather than encouraging people to trust themselves to seek the divinity from within. I have a hard time accepting hierarchy and rules that do not speak to my beliefs about how the world should operate.

I find that I am trying to balance getting to know myself with reaching out to be with others. I have found that one of the best ways to get connected to me is to learn more about myself by sitting quietly and examining my thoughts and feelings. Meditation is a wonderful way to get connected with one's body, mind, and spirit. (Hayward 49) I have learned more about who I am and why I act the way I do by sitting with myself and paying attention to my patterns and tendencies. By learning about myself and my reactions, I may have some insight as to why others act the way that they do and I can accept their behavior as well as my own. When I do this, I can learn to accept the things I can not change and find better ways to deal with the things that I can do something about. I feel more connected and compassionate with everyone and everything. By learning to examine our actions and reactions in a quiet meditation, we can learn more about ourselves and others. Listening to one's true self is a way to be

mindful, aware, and accepting. That is the main belief of my personal spirituality which incorporates some concepts from Buddhism without taking on many of the specific practices and physical postures. (McArthur 114-5)

Connections with others and things can bring both joy and pain. By becoming more aware of my body, I seem to be almost more attuned to both positive and negative stimuli. I have noticed how I get a certain type of jolting sting in my neck when I assume a bad posture at work. The bad thing is that I notice the pain more, but the good part is that I also recognize what is causing the pain and can become more aware of how to avoid the position that causes that particular ache. Sometimes, I feel so much empathy for others that I can be almost paralyzed with the immensity of suffering in the world and I can get frustrated when I do not see a solution. I have learned that the heart and mind can witness a lot of suffering and continue to function without shutting down. (Palmer 184) That does not mean that I can keep my heart open to everyone and everything all the time in all situations. I am no good to myself or my family if I am drained of energy, time, and resources. It is important for women to be able to say and know what their limitations are so that they can continue to take care of themselves and others. I am more connected to the good and the bad in the world and aware of our human interdependence, but because I choose to be positive and have hope for the future, I do not allow the bad to overwhelm the good.

How Mothering is a Spiritual Event/Process/Awakening

I remember holding my daughter, Maya, in the bathtub when she was just nine months old and I knew her brother would be here in just two more months. I cried and I cried. I felt so guilty that I had allowed myself to get pregnant right after she had been born. I thought that having two kids close together would be fine, but at that moment I doubted that I would be able to love and care for her enough with a newborn at the same time. She was still crawling and she always wanted me to carry her. I could not imagine how we could come out of this situation okay. I just knew that I loved her and somehow everything would have to turn out. What I did not know was that my son, Jonathan, would be a sweet, happy baby who rarely cried and slept through the night easily. Now, I can see that my two children were both miraculous blessings, gifts from the universe who were meant to be just as they are.

I believe that the potential to become spiritually aware is everywhere. It could happen at any point during life's journey or it might never happen at all. I believe that a spiritual awakening is more likely to occur during an especially stressful or conflicting time in one's life, when new understandings are needed to comprehend major changes such as births, deaths, and illnesses. Athan and Miller suggest that "intense emotional experiences" require of mothers or other female caregivers such as nannies, grandmothers, or other relatives that they come up with new realizations in order to cope with the conflicts that arise in mothering such as intense fatigue, balancing the needs of someone so fragile and dependent with the needs of yourself and others in your life, depression and anxiety, and the extreme changes in lifestyle, daily routines, and priorities. "The conflicts which new motherhood sets off result in contradictory feelings that are simultaneously negative and positive and equally strong." (18) It is very difficult to cope with all these intense positive and negative emotions, and I suggest that one way mothers who are primary caregivers can cope is by trying to transcend their daily

frustrations by connecting with others. Connecting to their children, their partners (if present), other mothers, and humanity in general is one way to deal with the extremely positive and negative emotions which come naturally when so much is asked from one person.

Redefining Feminism/Possibilities of a Spiritual Feminism

Leela Fernandes wrote a wonderful book about the possibilities of a spiritualized feminism. She defines spirituality as “an understanding of the self as encompassing body and mind, as well as spirit.... a transcendent sense of interconnection that moves beyond the knowable, visible material world. This sense of interconnection has been described variously as divinity, the sacred, spirit, or simply the universe. My understanding is also grounded in a form of lived spirituality, which is directly accessible to all and which does not need to be mediated by religious experts, institutions or theological texts; this is what is often referred to as the mystical side of spirituality.” (10) I like her definition because it includes the interconnection of the universe and suggests that we do not need books, leaders, or institutions in order to get in touch with the sacred. While I have learned a lot from reading books and listening to spiritual people, I think it is important that the type of spirituality that I am describing attempts to transcend the very hierarchies that I have found to be oppressive in institutions. There is no one book or guru who will tell you the way, instead it is your responsibility to realize and continue on your path of spiritual awareness in the manner that you choose.

Misconceptions about spirituality have caused some people to reject thinking about the subject seriously. There are many misunderstandings about spirituality such as that people who believe in spirituality are associated with navel-gazers, astrology, or even

witchcraft. Since I know little about astrology or witchcraft, I do not wish to discount those who do, but I will accept the label “navel-gazer”, because it is a humorous way to describe a person attempting to look at the self. Many religious institutions, such as churches, synagogues, and mosques, et cetera, seem to suggest that people need to conform and follow rules in order to experience the divine (Daly, 31) What is needed is “a movement to produce alternate understandings of spirituality that can begin to break down the artificial barriers which religious orders have created...” (Fernandes 16) Anyone interested in seeking a spiritual awakening can take advantage of redefining spirituality for themselves so that they will be able to use the term in a way that frees people from oppression rather than bind them to more hierarchies.

Spirituality can help us to question who we think we are and learn to see ourselves as being connected to others and a source of lived divinity. (Fernandes 37) When we hold sacred the knowledge that we are all one, it is impossible to create the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy. This leads to an entire shift in the way the world is viewed. Boundaries between races, classes, genders, countries, plants and animals become fluid. Why choose to fight and hate when you can choose to love instead and make the world a better place? When you can eradicate those bad feelings from your heart, your soul feels rejuvenated by the power and strength of peace and harmony. You stop wasting energy resisting and by opening up to all that is, we can move on together. It is very difficult to accept the parts of ourselves that we do not like, or that which society has deemed undesirable. I have learned that the good comes along with the bad, no one is perfect, and that what is sometimes negative, can become positive depending upon the circumstance.

For years, I have struggled with labeling myself a feminist because it seems to turn some people off and they then tend to discount what I say and do. Feminist beliefs of equality, justice and freedom for women as well as men were depicted as unattainable and unreasonable (Daly 3). bell hooks recommends that instead of saying “I am a feminist” which “usually means I am plugged into preconceived notions of identity, role, or behavior” (hooks 31), feminists might try to say, “I advocate feminism”. By saying, “I advocate”, rather than “I am”, “it does not engage us in the either/or dualistic thinking that is the central ideological component of all systems of domination in Western society.” (hooks 31) It is a shame that the term is so loaded, but the truth is that by wearing this label of feminist, a dichotomy is created between “us” and “them”. Numerous women shy away from the label of feminist even if their views are comparable because our culture has portrayed feminists as radical “man-haters”. Society has managed to isolate and marginalize feminists as a distinct group of self-interested people. Many stereotype us and choose not to accept us or our beliefs without really understanding what those beliefs are.

I see my feminist beliefs as an important part of who I am and I am not afraid to share those beliefs. Similarly, I find it difficult to not have spiritual conversations while in the classroom. Many women outside academia do not separate their lives into realms of secular and sacred, instead they live in both worlds simultaneously. It has been common for many academic feminists to devalue beliefs about the sacred as merely a cultural difference amongst women. (Fernandes 9) “The dissociation between spirituality and social justice has further alienated secular, urban middle-class feminists from the

majority of women whose understanding of their lives do not conform to easy distinctions between secular and sacred.” (Fernandes 9)

Gloria Anzaldua writes about a spiritual feminism which is inclusive, rather than exclusive, which transcends duality, and mediates instead of separates people. She says that her goal is to “recover and reshape my spiritual identity.” (187) She writes about the work of the soul that heals the split within our culture and thoughts. She believes that “all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned from similar souls.” (185) I believe that if people can learn to see that we are each special and unique in our own ways without using labels that divide and conquer, we would be better able to connect to each other.

Pema Chodron is an American Buddhist nun who writes about the political, ecological, philosophical, and spiritual “isms”(16) that make people think that they are being politically correct but can lead to being narrow-minded and prejudiced about others. She reminds us that “the problem isn’t with the beliefs themselves, but with how we use them to get ground under our feet, how we use them to feel right and make someone else wrong, how we use them to avoid feeling the uneasiness of not knowing what is going on.” (17) I believe in feminism, anti-racism, environmentalism, and even being a mother without believing those identities are all that I am. I am seeking a more flexible identity, not always so sure of whom exactly I am or whom anyone else is either.

Joan Tollifson, who was a Zen Buddhist and then decided to reject that label, claims that labels prevent us from seeing reality accurately. Labels are constructed to explain reality, but as abstractions they will always fail. Labels can be useful but we should not mistake them for who or what someone really is since the apparently truthful

labels can cause us to “lose the ability to question them and move beyond them.” (90) A word can not describe all that one is and so one should try not lock one’s self into little boxes of limiting descriptors; rather one might consider letting go of the labels and allow one’s self to be free in the immensity of what is. I believe that both positive and negative labels can be used to separate people and that is harmful to all.

We utilize these labels to describe ourselves. It is painful to see and accept that which we consider to be negative about ourselves. If we can learn to recognize ourselves for all we really are, including all the good, bad, and indifferent parts, we can be true to ourselves and we will start to hear our soul’s voice rather than let all of the insecurities do the talking. It is amazing what can happen when you listen to your heart and soul:

The soul is generous: it takes in the needs of the world. The soul is wise: it suffers without shutting down. The soul is hopeful: it engages the world in ways that keep our hearts open. The soul is creative: it finds a path between realities that might defeat us and fantasies that are mere escapes. All we need to do is to bring down the wall that separates us from our own souls and deprives the world of the soul’s regenerative powers.”
(Palmer 184)

When we do not allow our souls to speak, we are not being authentic with ourselves or others but when we speak with that voice on a regular basis, healing and transformation can occur within ourselves and in the world around us.

Listening with an open heart and allowing the pain of others to permeate can connect the individual’s soul to the universe. Leela Fernandes believes that seeing and understanding the injustices inflicted on others is the most sacred thing one could do. We should bear witness to the pain in order to truly connect with the human experience. (91) I believe learning to bear witness and see the pain in the world will open our hearts.

Once the pain that we inflict upon ourselves and the pain that we inflict on others is realized, we will be able to break the cycle. First, we must really feel the pain in our lives. Let it in, feel it, know that the body and mind are strong enough to allow it to pass through. Then we can let it go without avoiding it or fearing it. (Tollifson 95)

One way to be true to our experiences and let our soul connect with the world is to witness the suffering of others. Witnessing is different than just observing. To witness in an ethically responsible way is to acknowledge positions of power and privilege and to acknowledge your role. Rather than thinking of a witness as an objective bystander, we can remind ourselves that the knowledge received has the ability to transform. (Fernandes 83) When one truly empathizes with another who is suffering, one can change by opening their heart to another's pain. Instead of just watching suffering, a witness can realize their position of power and then act in an ethically responsible way with a compassionate heart. Those who are truly able to witness suffering can become the mediators who connect people rather than divide.

Knowing ourselves and connecting to the pain of the world could transform the way people think and behave. If we could witness suffering, we could try to prevent the needless suffering that we ourselves might cause. It is helpful to consider that it is in the dailiness of our practice that we create the world in which we live. It is important to separate our minds from the emotion and try to find a way to create peace in our own lives. "We get angry, we shout, but rarely do we rise above all this to look at a conflict the way a mother would who is watching her two children fighting. She sees only their reconciliation." (Hanh 118) We can choose to be kind and compassionate or we can be mean and rude. Fernandes reminds us that "gossip, slander, and competitiveness...mirror

the same forms of power that underpin social inequalities based on race, sexuality, or class, for they violate an understanding of the interconnectedness between all individuals that is crucial for any lasting form of social transformation.” (55) Even these seemingly minor unkind acts hurt people on a daily basis, so it would be beneficial to stop.

In order to put away our master’s tools (Lorde) for good, it would be important to learn how to be kind to ourselves. I did not know how to love myself until I had children and experienced unconditional love; then I realized that I too deserved that love and so do others. Jeremy Hayward suggests a practice where “you begin by developing loving-kindness toward yourself and then you radiate it to others.” (108) One way to do this, according to Hayward, is to learn to love yourself, all of yourself, and then start to extend that same love to others around you. Start with people you love, and then extend loving-kindness towards others you feel neutral about, and then try to broaden that love to others you assumed that you did not like. Following this, we eventually may learn to feel kindness and compassion for the entire world.

When you allow yourself to feel this loving-kindness, you may begin to see things differently. Suddenly, there is the possibility to have hope and change. “We live in a profoundly good world, which is permeated through and through by feeling, caring, awareness.” (210) I refuse to see the world as a bad place and I will always hold out hope for humanity. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk from Vietnam who was exiled from his country for advocating peace and forgiveness during a time of war, provides an excellent model for me and many others. He exemplifies inner peace and a profound love of the world and its people despite all that he has been through.

Why is a sense of spirituality so important as a mother? I believe that one might try to accept oneself completely and know oneself in order not to need their children to complete them. It seems to me a lot of parents these days are trying to be friends with their children. They want/need their kids to love them (Atkinson 1). However, it is important to recognize that there will be times in a child's life when tough love would be more useful and discipline is crucial for the well-being of young adults. Especially in the teenage years, limits and boundaries can help young adults come to understand what they can and can not do (2&3). These strong parents will be able to say no and teach their kids that they can not always get what they want when they want it. Life does not work that way. If a parent is unable to say no and stand their ground because their self-image is too wrapped up in their child's approval, the child learns that they should always get what they want from the people in their lives. (3) Instead, it would be optimal to learn how to find happiness within ourselves and not expect others to make us happy. Everyone would be better off learning that we do not always get what we want, rather we need to accept life as it is with its ups and downs. If you accept yourself as you are and teach your children to do the same, they will learn how to ride life's rollercoaster with a smile instead of fighting the twists and turns as they come.

Alternative Ways of Knowing



After the Transformations class, a group of former students gathered to do a guided meditation together. The leader of the session instructed us to sit around in a circle and close our eyes. We were to ask the universe for

something specific and my request was for peace. She told us to imagine a path that led to a house and in the house we would find a box and in the box there would be something that would help us achieve our desire. As I opened the box, I saw the most beautiful, radiating heart that glowed in the entire spectrum of colors. At first, I did not know what this image meant, but after some time and contemplation, I realized that what I was looking at was my own heart. In order to feel peace, I needed to know that I had a pure heart and this was a truth I had never acknowledged before that day. I make a lot of mistakes but most of the time my intentions are good and my heart is in the right place. This knowledge has given me a great sense of peace and comfort.

Before I read Winnie Tomms and her perspectives on spiritual creative power, I did not know how this way of knowing operated. I found it utterly amazing that I could ask the universe a question and through meditation, the universe would make an image available in my mind that I would find to be so helpful. As Tomms explained, “spiritual consciousness is developed from spiritual experiences in which images in a person’s consciousness emerge within the presence of a spiritual creative power.” (37) The image of the radiating heart came from inside me with the help of the universe. No amount of reasoning or logic could have made me understand in such a vivid manner, rather it was intuition. My subconscious showed me what I needed to see in order to know a truth that I had not been able to accept previously.

CHAPTER 2

The best gift that I have ever received came last Christmas, but it did not arrive in a box or with a card. My family and I had gone to Disney to enjoy the holiday parade when my daughter pulled her daddy into a toy store. Maya looked all around the store until she found the stuffed animals. First she picked up a little puppy dog and said, "This is for BoBo" (which means Jonathan, her baby brother) and next she picked up a kitten and said, "This is for me." We had not planned to purchase any souvenirs but when my husband saw his two-year-old daughter think of her brother first, he could not refuse her. Her eyes twinkled and shined as she ran out of the store, looking for Jonathan, so that she could give him his gift. Her kindness still warms my heart.

This chapter explores what spiritual parenting can look like. I have included what I believe to be the important aspects of this type of parenting. I believe that we might want to keep in mind that children may teach parents as much, if not more, than previously thought. I discuss the "Balancing Act" where mothers could try to find a way to balance their needs along with everyone else's. I define what quality time means to me and how it relates to being present with children but also how to teach children to become independent as well. I learned how to pause and that helped me to integrate my emotions and logic so that I could respond rather than react. My daughter taught me how to "walk away" when conflicts were escalating. I discuss consumerism and materialism and my own tendency to buy things to make up for feeling guilty. Next, I go over ideas about happiness, self love, change, realizing choices, doing it alone, manners, lessons in play, and respect for the earth because I think these are also important things to consider while raising children.

Spiritual Parenting

Many parents make the assumption that they will be the ones to teach and impart knowledge to their children, but often our children can be the ones who do a lot of the teaching. “Your child is a tireless teacher, constantly probing your self-imposed limits and boundaries, your self-centeredness, your sheer stubbornness.” (Miller 51) I believe that our children have much to show us about ourselves and the world. One thing that parents might try to do is to accept themselves so that they can accept their children as they are. It is hard to be kind and patient with others when you are not kind in your thoughts and judgments about yourself. If you have impossible standards, it is almost impossible not to be disappointed.(41) The first thing to do as a parent is to look at yourself and accept who you are and be kind to yourself so you can let go of who you think you are so that you can be more open and less judgmental.

Having children caused the greatest transformation I have ever experienced. Maya has much of the same mannerisms and ways of dealing with the world as I do. She can push my buttons like no other. And yet, my love for her knows no bounds because I can accept myself for who I am and know that the reason why we butt heads so much is because we are on the same level and we both just want what we want when we want it. I can have patience with her and my own desires, laughing at our stubbornness (not always in front of her) and admiring our determination.

Kabat-Zinn, whose teachings are derived from the Buddhist traditions, has good advice to parents which also applies to spiritual mothering. He says that parenting “is the hardest job in the world to do well, and most of the time you don’t even know whether you are doing well, or even what that means.” (250) Parenting is not always something

that makes you feel good and when that happens, it is easy to doubt your ability to parent. Sometimes it is hard to say “no” to the little ones you love, but many times it is necessary. He reminds us that parenting is not easy and says that it will feel as though you are ‘losing it’ all the time. Often you are “losing it”- it being that sense of peaceful tranquility when you thought you knew what you were doing and why. If you can be mindful while you are losing your sense of steadiness and control, then you are practicing your spirituality while parenting. (251) When parenting gets hard, it helps to remember that this is just another one of life’s lessons and even if it did not go well, you will have another chance to try again.

Children as Teachers

Our close relationships with our children can teach us about ourselves. When we parent we should try to look at ourselves to determine why we do what we do. Maybe we parent the same way that our parents parented us out of habit. Maybe we do everything different than what our parents did because we do not like the way we were raised. If we can look at ourselves and see how we are, we can learn and continue to grow while raising our own children. (Kabat-Zinn 255) Joko Beck also reiterated this idea when she said, “As long as our buttons are pushed, we have a great chance to learn and grow. So a relationship is a gift, not because it makes us happy -it often doesn’t- but because any intimate relationship, if we view it as practice, is the clearest mirror we can find.” (quoted in *Bare-Bones Mediation* 171) We can learn to see and accept ourselves through our children even in some of the most frustrating confrontations.

Being right there for them, not just physically but mentally and emotionally as well, is one of the best things you can do for your children. To be there for them, you

must clear your mind of all of its distractions and just be right there in the moment with your child. If you want to teach your children well, remember to live by your beliefs. Try not to lecture your children, instead live your life in a way that is congruent to what you believe. Since children learn to spot hypocrisy at a young age, it is a good idea for parents to try to model what they want their children to do in order to set a good example.

Balancing Act

There is an important and difficult balancing act that most mothers perform on a daily basis. It is necessary that women find a healthy way to balance the needs of their children, with their own needs, and the needs of their entire family, including their spouse if they have one. For me, this balancing act includes working outside the home for money, benefits, and independence while going to school and working on my thesis and spending as much quality time with my children and my spouse as possible. I personally find this balancing act rather stressful and yet I do not know if I would have it any other way. On one hand it would be nice to have a lot of money and not need to work outside the home, and yet I try not to waste my time wishing for material things. I like my job and enjoy spending time in the presence of other adults and not having conversations revolving around children sometimes. I also need and want to go to school. It is very important to me that I get my master's degree. It makes me happy to nurture the intellectual side of myself. I think that as long as I spend good, quality time with my children every day, they will know that I love them.

Quality Time

I use the term "quality time" a lot and I would like to define exactly what I mean by it. My children taught me that the quality of time we spend together is determined by

our ability to stay in the moment, enjoying each other's presence, and appreciating our differences while basking in our commonalities. Quality time is not bribing my kids with candy and a movie so that I can work on my paper, although I do believe this strategy is sometimes necessary so that I can have time to work while they are home.

Winnie Tomms made a convincing argument that quality time "is important... all the time. Children don't wait for designated quality time. They want, and deserve, as much of the time as they can possibly get." (55) I know that she is right, but I do not see how it is possible to spend every moment together in the mindful, plugged in manner that she sets as a standard. What I can do is respect my children's individuality and their contributions to our shared reality that we construct together as Tomms suggests. If this means my kids watch a movie for an hour while I write this paper, I can accept that.

I think there is a balance which is necessary between enjoying quality time together and teaching children to enjoy quality time by themselves. Joan Tollifson recounted a story told by Toni Packer where a little boy was playing with his blocks on an airplane and his mother mostly ignored his work except for when she would pick up the blocks he dropped. Toni said that the "mother's noninterference is a great blessing to the boy...How lucky this boy was, that he was being left alone to play." (113) I agree that our children need to be left alone to play and think, just as we adults need that time as well. When we allow our children the space they need, they are able to use their creativity to occupy their time and also they are free from our instructions, praises, and even our (sometimes inadvertent) criticisms. So while I still have a hard time justifying allowing so much media (televisions, movies, and computer games) into my children's lives, most of the stuff they watch is educational and amusing. After I get a chance to

enrich my own life by doing the things I love, I can go and be with them in a way that makes me proud.

The Pause

One of the most important things I have learned to do is pause. One could take a moment for one's self when one is feeling a wave of emotions to pause before one acts. Whether emotions are perceived as positive or negative, it is helpful to feel them and understand where they are coming from before one reacts to the feeling. I used to do and say things based on how I felt. Now I realize that a more balanced approach is to think about what you are feeling and why you are feeling like that, before acting upon an emotion. It is not that feelings are problematic; rather, it is good to understand them before acting upon them. What if a friend hurts your feelings by saying something you believe is rude? Instead of saying something rude right back, consider pausing for a moment to rethink what was said, whether it was really meant to hurt your feelings and if it is really worth reacting out of hurt or anger. I found the pause to be especially helpful when dealing with loved ones. By giving myself that moment to think before I reacted, I discovered that I could often avoid needlessly hurting others. The world and our thoughts seem to move so fast sometimes, but often the best thing we can do is just slow down for a moment and become aware of the reasons behind the sensations so that we can allow ourselves to feel our emotions and then move on with our lives. By doing this, we can learn to acknowledge our emotions without using them as fuel for cruel words or actions.

Walk Away

In daycare, one of the phrases my daughter came home with was “walk away”. The first time I heard it, I laughed. Apparently, in preschool they teach children to walk away from each other when they are having conflicts. It is some of the best advice my daughter has ever given me. Sometimes, we all need to walk away and give ourselves a little space from the circumstance. There have been times when I have needed to just step out of the stressful situation so that I can have a little time to think. Much like pausing, walking away can give us a little bit of distance so that we can get some perspective on the situation before reacting. When two angry people stand next to each other speaking and acting aggressively, anger only builds. If you can just take a step back for a moment and disengage from the situation, you will be able to diffuse the anger and come up with solutions, instead of hurting each other with words or actions. There have been times when I have needed to walk away and give myself a timeout and that is okay. It is important for the child to know that the parent will always come back so that they can try again.

A few months ago, I picked up my children from daycare and brought them to the Super Target so that I could pick up some medications and groceries. I knew I was pushing my luck, because after a day at school, my children crave nothing more than freedom. Since they had been known to run around and not listen in public places, I made them a deal and told them if they were good they could pick out a treat when we were done. The children were very well behaved while we were shopping and they walked along side the cart and even helped me put the items on the belt to be scanned. I let them pick out some candy while we waited for the cashier and then the kids started to get bored. Jonathan began to run back and forth in the aisle and I could see that Maya wanted to join him. I reminded him that if he wanted his candy he had to stop running in the store. He did not stop so I put the candy back and then Maya started to run around as well. Somehow I managed to pay and then I had to chase after them since they were heading toward the

exit. As I ran on the waxed floor in my flip-flops, my foot slid onto the doormat, just as the automatic door opened to let my children out into the very busy parking lot. I screamed, they stopped, and I fell onto the floor, smashing my knee.

Some very nice people came to help me collect the children and get me off of the floor. The tears would not stop, but I managed to let everyone know that it was my pride that was hurt much more than my knee or my bleeding hand. Two employees helped get us to our car with the groceries. When everyone had left, I started screaming obscenities at my children and pounding on the steering wheel. When we got home, I took a Xanax and they told their daddy that they had made mommy cry. After a few hours, I apologized for calling them names.

I am not a perfect mother; in fact, some days, like the day described above I feel like a total failure. I never thought a so-called spiritual mother, like myself, could totally lose her mind and scream obscenities at her children like I did. Part of the problem is that the media portrays an image “that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding, that it is *always* the best and most important thing you do, that there is only a narrowly prescribed way to do it right, and that if you don’t love each and every second of it there’s something really wrong with you.” (Douglas 3-4) I was so ashamed at that moment because I could not stop thinking that everyone in that store thought that I was a totally unfit mother, but when I remembered those kind people who helped me, I saw nothing but empathy and kindness in their eyes. These “strangers” reached out to me and picked me up more than just physically, but spiritually as well. So when I am being kind to myself, I can forgive myself for calling my children those horrible names and know that I will make some big mistakes and sometimes we all just need a little space. I needed a little time and space to get over myself, my embarrassment and frustration and my children needed a little bit of space to be kids and to run around and even be a bit mischievous.

Walking away and pausing is all about space, boundaries, and time for ourselves so that we can do and be other things outside of the family dynamics. I believe that daycare is good for my kids because it enables them to be with other children their own age. They learn how to get along, share, and play with kids without mommy there to interfere. Also, each child gets a chance to be away from the other. Maya and Jonathan already fight with each other often. Sometimes it is for mommy and daddy's attention and sometimes it is for toys and other things that they want to play with. Maya tends to tell Jonathan what to do and Jonathan seems to do things that purposefully annoy his sister and the longer they are together on any given day, the more they seem to get on each other's nerves. I think it is good to separate them during the day so that they are free to be themselves without being confined into the roles they play as siblings. Also, when they get home from school, they are more likely to play and share together in a peaceful manner.

A sense of spirituality combined and, in some sense, emerging with motherhood has taught me that I need my own time and space also, in order to be happy and feel as if I am taking care of myself. By being able to leave my children with people that I can trust, I can nurture myself and my interests which helps me be a happier person and a happier mother. Trusting someone else to take good care of my children is sometimes hard to do, but it is important for my children and me to learn to love and trust others. This is another way to open up to the world. I am going to school and finishing my degree so that I can have that accomplishment for myself. I am proud that I have an intellectual life, outside my family, which stimulates my creativity. I am an individual

who needs to nurture her own growth as well as the growth of my children. When I am a happy mother, my children are happier and feel more secure.

Consumerism/Materialism

I believe that it is sometimes difficult to determine the difference between what is necessary and what is just desired. I want my children to be happy, but not at the expense of our family's financial well-being. No matter how much money one may have or does not have, we should not necessarily buy what our children want. If I give my children all the material things they want, they may learn to get and seek pleasure from objects. They will waste a lot of time desiring the next big thing and they will never get enough to be happy. I sometimes think that many people buy their children things out of a sense of guilt or a need to compete with others. Since I work outside the home, I do not always spend as much time with my children as I would like, but to compensate I might try to buy the kids the things they want to try to make up for feeling guilty. Also, I think that there is an important life lesson about money and material objects that needs to be taught to children. Wealth may buy you many things, but the things are not what are truly important. People, family, friends and our connections to each other take priority over material objects. Striving to spend as much quality time together as possible and teaching our children that financial independence and responsible, thoughtful spending is a better goal.

Happiness

Quality family time involves being present and loving. It is my belief that the best way to love children is just to be there with them, enjoying the moment, and accepting them as they are, and being happy. I realize that if I choose to be happy, I may

be a better mother. I deserve this and so does my family. In her book *Momma Zen*, Karen Maezen Miller reminds me that “a child wants and needs and loves a happy mother above all else. Happy is the sign that all is well and all will be. It is the seed of faith, optimism, and commitment. It is such fertile ground. Everything thrives there.” (165) Although, in some situations, a child might need and want food and water as well as a happy, loving mother in order to truly thrive. I recognize that this author and others cited are working within a specific, idealized model of happiness which does not necessarily address issues of material conditions.

Many writers, such as Palmer and Brach, remind us that there is nothing you can actually *do* to make yourself happy or whole. Palmer said that it is beneficial to make the decision that you are whole and then decide to be happy, despite all the negative traits you do not always like about yourself and all the seemingly bad things in your life. (5) The privileged American dreams of graduating from college, getting married, having children, buying a nice house, having a great career are all fine, but doing them or getting them will not necessarily make you happy or whole. Now is a good time to consider discontinuing the constant striving for something better and to stop hoping for more. By cultivating our bonds with our family and others, we can realize that the potential for happiness is always present.

Self Love

It may be easy to think of your own children as being very unique and amazing, but it is also necessary to see the miracle which is in yourself and everyone else. It is so important to love yourself without putting others down. Self love has nothing to do with arrogance or being better than anyone else.

Try to love yourself completely and fully. That means loving the parts of yourself that you might not even like to admit. Sometimes it is hard for me to admit it, but I know I can be petty, selfish and rude especially with the people I love the most. In order to work on those “undesirable” traits, I have to admit that I have them, be able to acknowledge them as they surface, and accept them as a part of who I am. We all have certain things about ourselves that we do not like, and yet they are pieces of the whole. No one is perfect and we should try not to waste our lives pretending to be.

It is hard to love someone else completely until you know and accept yourself. I learned that I needed to love myself if I wanted to love my family completely. It is easier to see other people’s faults than it is to look in the mirror and see your own faults clearly.

Change

One important thing children teach us about is change. Nothing stays the same except, of course, the maxim that all things change. As soon as you think you know your child, their personality, temperaments, likes and dislikes often transform. The concept that everything changes helps me see that I must let go of my need to worry so much. I sometimes think that if I can imagine all the horrible things that might happen, that I would be able to prevent anything bad from ever happening. I realize that that simply is not true. No amount of thinking can change what will happen and I am not the center of the world and I do not have the power to change fate or destiny or whatever. “It is easy to feel that something bad will happen if we do not maintain our habitual vigilance by thinking, judging, planning. Yet this is the very habit that keeps us trapped in resisting life. Only when we realize we can’t hold on to anything can we begin to relax our efforts to control our experience.” (Brach 103) To plan and prepare is one thing, but to miss out

on the little important things that happen all the time, in my house and in the world, is a shame. When my mind is off wandering and worrying about the trivial, my children are right in front of me asking for my love and attention. There are dangers in the world but there is also love and kindness.

Realizing Choices

My parents taught me to worry and I used to think that if I worried about every possible outcome, I would be better able to handle life's surprises. It has taken me a long time to realize that I do not have control of the things that happen and the things that other people do. The only person I can have control over, to whatever extent control is at all possible, is me, and not necessarily even my thoughts and emotions, but rather I have choices about how I act and react to the world and the people around me. How we think about things will determine our reality. "Our attitude toward the world determines our experience of it." (Costello 27) According to Buddhist beliefs about mindfulness, if we could let go of our expectations and just accept things as they are, we could stop dwelling in the future and the past, and live in the present. As the saying goes, "pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional." According to Brach, "The Buddha taught that we suffer when we cling to or resist experience, when we want life different than what it is." (106) This has affirmed for me that bad things will still happen but we do not have to blame ourselves or others for the pain which is just a part of the human condition.

One big thing that parents can not control is their children experiencing pain and suffering. We love our children so much that we do not ever want to see them hurt, but the best thing we could learn to do is be there with our children while they are experiencing pain so that they can learn from it. "Accept some suffering as a natural part

of life, realizing that aversion or battling against the suffering can be more painful than the suffering itself.” (Naphali 97) Kids love to have their “boo-boos” kissed because they want their loved ones to know and acknowledge the pain that they are feeling. Instead of distracting or minimizing the pain, allow the children to be with it and let them know that you empathize with what they are going through. This practice is much more difficult if a parent is dealing with more than just a small “boo-boo”. For children with serious illnesses or injuries, a kiss will not make the pain go away, but being present and witnessing their suffering without obsessing about it, might be the best a parent can do.

There is a myth that parents should be in control and kids should be controlled. (See the website www.privilegemoney.com which advocates parents to get control of their children by using fake money) I think this idea sets up the parents to be disappointed when they can not control their kids and I also think that it is trying to establish an ugly hierarchy of dominance in the family. Children have their own will, needs, and desires. Sometimes their curiosity or mood will drive them to do things we do not like our kids to do, especially in public. Parents often get embarrassed by their children’s perceived misbehaviors and they take them personally. When a parent’s identity is linked to their children’s identity, I believe there is usually an unhealthy confusion between self and child. Our children are separate from us in the sense that they need to live their own lives for themselves. We should try to remember that children are not our property and their actions are their own. Parents might want to be humble and not try to control another living being, not try to gain recognition for being a “good” parent for raising “good” kids, and not try to be better than anyone else. Fernandes points out that the process of disidentification can lead to a spiritual transformation.

“Such a transformation requires a complete dissociation from the ego based investments in control, recognition, and superiority.” (44) By refusing to identify with our ego, we can let our children live their own lives. It is our job to teach them how to thrive in society, but they will need to be allowed to make mistakes and be given another chance. Kids are their own individual person on their own paths and one of the hardest things a parent might have to do is let their child go down their own path and make the same mistakes the parent had to make in order to learn the same, or even different, lessons. My daughter is so stubborn sometimes and I want to tell her to be more easy-going, but I know that is so much simpler said than done. I will let her fight through her frustrations when she does not get her way because there is much to be learned when you do not get what you think you want.

Doing it Alone

It is not ideal to raise children alone. Unfortunately, not all mothers have supportive people in their lives that can help them take care of the constant needs of their children. Mothers might want to ask for help whenever they can get it and we should also consider helping out other mothers as well. There are a lot of factors including personal preference, nurturing ability, and job constraints which need to be considered to decide who cares for the children and when. I stayed home with Maya for the first three months after she was born and her dad stayed home with her for the next three months. In that time they bonded, formed their own routine and schedule, and were very happy while I enjoyed going back to work outside the home. Also, it is good to have a big support network of friends, family, and neighbors who your children can learn to trust and get along with. “Children thrive best when they have many adults to relate to.”

(Costello 35) I believe that there is something very wrong with the structure of the nuclear family, with its closed walls and strict roles. Although not easy because of wage disparities, etcetera, it could be beneficial if parents negotiate who does what with the kids and work to create a routine which is more about personal preferences and abilities, rather than what societal institutions say men and women are best suited for.

It has been said many times that “it takes a village to raise a child” and I would like to know where this village is so that I can move there. Part of the problem is that we live in a society that has institutionalized gender differences so that women are considered to be the primary providers of care. Nancy Hartsock wrote that it is not enough that both parents share childcare responsibilities; rather we must institutionalize the “participation of both women and men in childrearing.” (304) If society eradicated gender differences, there would be “the possibility of a fully human community structured by a variety of connections rather than separation and opposition.” (305) I think that she is hinting at a more spiritual societal formation without naming it as such. In a community where both men and women value the importance of children and recognize the necessity of care for all who need it, we would have a much more compassionate society which tends to the needs of not only children, but the sick, disabled, and elderly as well.

Manners

From a young age, I taught my children to say please and thank you because I wanted them to show respect for the universe. My kids caught on quickly and soon were reminding us, the parents, if we ever forgot to use these pleasantries. I think manners are a subtle sign of respect and help people to be kind to one another in the smallest ways.

With just a word or two, we can ask for what we need in a nice way and we can appreciate what we have been given. I say please and thank you to my kids every day to show them that I value their help and I am grateful for their presence in my life.

Lessons in Play

There can be so much to learn by playing with your kids. Getting down to their physical level and enjoying what they love can help us see the world through their eyes. I forgot about the magic and mystery available in bubbles, crayons, paint, and paper. Some of the best moments of my life have been outside blowing bubbles with my kids. When I see the awe in their eyes as they watch the beautiful, translucent, floating miracles, I can be truly present. We have long moments where the world is a wonderful, joyful place.

Drawing can be a lesson in seeing the world. I used to think that young kids just played without purpose with their crayons and paint, until my son, Jonathan, showed me his amazing rocket ship. He had just turned two years old when I handed him some crayons and it looked like he was only scribbling but when he was done, he showed me what resembled a triangle and he said, “Look mommy, it’s a rocket ship!” And sure enough, there was a rocket ship right there on the paper, but I would have never been able to see it without my son’s help. Children have a way of seeing the world with new eyes which are less judgmental and not as rigid so they can see things adults usually miss.

Respect for the Earth

Something that I think is very important is respecting the world and all the creatures in it. I try to impart onto my children a connection to the earth and animals. We have pets and I try to teach my kids to be kind and gentle to them. I think that by

loving animals, one opens up their heart to the world and one can see the connection we have to all living creatures. Taking care of the earth and all of its inhabitants is an important duty that we all share. That is why our family recycles and volunteers at animal and homeless shelters. Why not pay attention to our world and do what we can to make it a better place?

CHAPTER 3

The Child Within

Like a caring mother
Holding and guarding the life
Of her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Hold yourself and all beings.
Buddha (as quoted in *Radical Acceptance*, 246)

There is a child within us all that deserves love and acceptance. We all have an original or true nature that we may have learned to hide in order to avoid feeling vulnerable to the world. (Palmer 6) The problem with hiding our “true selves”, according to Palmer, is that we start living a divided life in which we no longer know ourselves. (16) In this divided life, we have forgotten how to listen to our souls and many are not happy because we can not be true to ourselves.

In order to be true to ourselves and find the child within, we might consider following our own path of awakening which is “simply a process of wakeful, profound relaxing”. (Brach 317) Accepting that life is a process, a path, and a journey because it usually happens as a “gradual unfolding” (308) that takes time and patience. Patience can allow our inner child to surface and show us each our own inner truths. Palmer said that learning our inner truths lets us know who we are and lets us communicate with our soul. (33 & 66) Letting our soul speak allows the child within to show itself to the world.

Frances Vaughan wrote about another aspect of the spiritual journey in her book dealing with healing in psychotherapy and spirituality. She said that, “The spiritual path

begins when we attend to what we truly want” (92) and suggests that we ask ourselves what really makes us happy and gives us pleasure. When I reflect on my own truths, I can see that what I truly value is quality time with my family balanced with time to spend with my friends and pursue my academic interests.

Vaughan also describes the spiritual journey as “one of eternal return...to the awareness of unity in reality, despite the appearance of separation.” (51) She reminds us that we are all one and it is a self-delusion to think of ourselves as separate individuals. In order to become reborn and start to heal, one must transcend the idea of the self-as-separate. (69) This can be a very difficult concept to grasp because we have been taught since childhood that we are our bodies, actions, and identifications. Yet, according to this perspective shared by both Vaughn and Fernandes, it is unity and connection which can be felt at a basic level when we drop all the illusions and boundaries which surround us.

Rebirth

There are many ironies when one becomes a mother. One of these ironies is that after giving birth to a child, it is the mother who may feel reborn to the world. I feel like an entirely different person from the one I was before I had children. My life is not my own. I have kids and they have me. I do not really think of myself as an “I” anymore, usually I think of “we” instead of just me. This rebirth does not mean that I am no longer an individual with goals and a life of my own; rather I am an individual and also a mother so strongly bonded to my children that my self conception has changed. I expect this thinking will change as my children get older and they no longer need me to think about how they are being cared for every moment of every day.

Athan and Miller wrote about this aspect of rebirth in motherhood, they said: “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.” (19) Mothers saw the world differently because their perspectives had been altered. They were now different people with a new way of seeing and understanding the world. For this rebirth to be a spiritual transformation, two things were necessary. First, a mother can learn about the “basic spiritual tenets” which the authors name as “compassion, patience, surrender, and Divine love.” (17) Divine love is what I refer to as unconditional love, even though conventionally it means God’s love. Mothering a child has the potential to teach caregivers how to live a spiritual life. “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.” (19) Second, women can work to develop a new sense of identity.

It was very difficult for me to accept that I was no longer the same person after I had children. I found myself grieving the loss of my freedom, individuality, and privacy, while simultaneously acknowledging that the new me was in some ways better because I could see the potential in who I could become. “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.” (19) Without having children, I am not sure I would have ever gotten to know how much love, patience, and compassion I was capable of. Motherhood also taught me how to surrender to forces greater than my

own. I learned when to leave things alone and how to stop worrying about things I could not change.

Healing

Many of us have some type of injury from our past that needs to be healed or maybe there are some parts of ourselves that we just do not want to accept. The last two sections of the paper will cover healing as a process in order to become whole. In order to heal, according to Vaughan, the shadow, which is composed of the repressed, unconscious aspects of the personality, must be consciously singled out, transcended, and eventually integrated into a broader sense of self. (51) For me, this meant that I had to look at the parts of myself that I was afraid to admit to. I used to believe that the abuse in my childhood was partly my fault because there was something wrong with me and innately bad about me. Now I can see that my temper and rage, which I was so afraid would hurt my own children, were the product of my feeling hurt and unloved. I learned that my selfishness was a normal tendency that could be overcome with empathy and that my arrogance was often just a front to make myself feel better when I felt intimidated by others. Having children showed me that all kids deserve love and acceptance and so by mothering my children I could learn to mother myself in a more nurturing way.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, taught me to look at my own parents with empathic eyes and it has helped me begin to forgive. Forgiveness can be an important part of the healing process. I can see that my parents were victims in their own right, my father never felt loved by his mother and my mother was taught to obey religious doctrine above all else, even maternal instinct. “They could not transform the suffering in themselves. But if we see them with compassionate eyes, we can offer them joy, peace,

and forgiveness.” (72) I have decided that my children’s childhood would be much different than my own and forgiving my parents has allowed me to release a lot of the built up anger and resentment that I have harbored for so long.

Healing is not just about accepting the negative parts of your personality, but also seeing the truth about oneself. We can enhance our ability to see these truths in a peaceful manner by cultivating “nonjudging attention, patience, compassion, understanding, and forgiveness” (62). By treating ourselves like a deserving child, we would then allow our inner child to come out and speak the truths in our heart.

By accepting our truths, we can learn to let go of the labels, described as constricting self-concepts and attachments, or what we think we *ought* to be. Releasing these ideas such as “I should be this”, or “I wish I was more like that” allows us to become all that we are capable of being. (69) Our potential as human beings remains latent until we free ourselves of our self-imposed constrictions. We can be free to decide for ourselves how to follow our own individual path to wholeness without the comparisons and judgments that weigh us down.

This is the beauty of accepting ourselves and seeing the truth within. Vaughan says to “accept both the dark and the light side of oneself and let go of comparisons and condemnations. The process enables one to appreciate better both the shared commonalities of human experience and the unique individuality of what one can be.” (72) Not only is there the possibility to see the potential in yourself, but also there is an opportunity to connect with others and understand where they may be coming from as well.

Vaughan went on to say that if we can not accept ourselves, we cannot expect to be accepted by others, and we do not accept others as they are. If we want our relationships with others to improve we need to be open, accepting, and loving not fearful and defensive.(180) The ways in which we interact can allow for the connection between two individuals to grow.

Transformation to Wholeness

I used to believe that there was something really wrong with me. I said to myself, "If my own father can not love me, then I must not deserve love." What I did not know was that my father never felt love from his own mother and did not know how to show his children love. When I was 16, I drove to South Dakota with my then boyfriend and asked the biker tattoo artist to draw a mask over my heart. At the time, I felt that no one could ever know me and that I would always have to hide behind my mask, so I asked him to draw a tear as well. Over time, the meaning behind the tattoo started to make me sad and regretful. I am sad that I ever felt that way, but glad that I no longer feel like I have to wear a mask anymore. Today, I am looking into getting that tattoo changed into a butterfly instead of a mask. A butterfly is one of nature's wonderful transformations and I feel as if I have undergone a dramatic change as well. I regretted that tattoo so much while I was breastfeeding and realized that both of my babies spent long hours looking at a symbol of my previous pain. I no longer regret the tattoo, now I just want to transform it into a meaningful representation of my current life. After I am done with my thesis, I am planning to take a mini-vacation to California, with my best friend of over twenty years, where I will have my tattoo changed. I feel as though my life is moving toward integration. I am the same person at home that I am at school, who I am out in the world. I can be true to myself and I no longer have to hide.

What is wholeness and what does it look like, feel like? In *The Inward Arc*, Frances Vaughan defines wholeness as "an integration of physical, emotional, mental, existential, and spiritual aspects of well-being." (4) The entire spectrum of human health should be combined to create a person who is whole and nourished. It is essential for

healing that one experiences happiness and joy and freedom from fear. Also, positive relationships with others are an important part of individual wholeness.

Sages and mystics throughout time have spoken of a universal love filled with peace and joy. What they were describing is wholeness, enlightenment or a spiritual awakening. According to Vaughan, a healthy spirituality implies qualities such as humor, wisdom, generosity, and a capacity for non detachment, self-transcendence, and unconditional love. What does this spiritual well-being feel like? It is a “sense of inner peace, compassion for others, reverence for life, gratitude, and appreciation of both unity and diversity.” (20) In order for a person to be able to discover this type of true happiness, they should try to overcome their fears.

Caroline Myss authored an interesting book entitled, *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can*. In this book, she suggests that when people base their decisions from a place of fear, they allow chaos to come between them and their inner truth. In order to decrease one's susceptibility to fear, and therefore chaos as well, one should pay attention to and nurture their spiritual life (124). Nurturing one's spiritual life goes back to knowing oneself and accepting oneself as one really is.

Looking into the mirror and seeing all that one is, inside and out can be extremely painful and frightening. Accepting the fear and overcoming the pain is necessary for one to heal and become whole.

Many of us fear...becoming intimate with our inner selves. Humbling and humiliating as it is, enlightening and terrifying as it may be, such intimacy is nevertheless an experience that happens to be essential to healing. If nothing else, healing requires personal honesty, and few things are more intimate. (137)

To become intimate with ourselves is the journey; it is the path to wholeness. It would seem as if this was an individual task, to be experienced alone; but on the contrary, we need others to help us along on this journey of self-discovery.

We need the support of a trustworthy group of family, friends, and sometimes even strangers to show us the way, remind us where we are going, and teach us how to get there. That is why my children are so essential to my spiritual well-being. They have been the ones who showed me the necessity of this spiritual journey that I am on and they give me the inspiration to continue every time I doubt that all this hard work is required. Vaughan said that “only when we know and accept ourselves fully can we love wholeheartedly.”(194) My children deserve unconditional love from their mother, but in order for me to be able to give them that wholehearted love, I must first love myself in that manner so that I have that love to give.

CONCLUSION

Recently, I asked Maya what she wanted to do and she said, “Go to the park and ride my bike.” So we went. Although we were having financial difficulties and we were tired and not sure that we wanted to go, we found the most beautiful park with trails and bridges so Maya could ride her bike and Jonathan could drive his tricycle. As my children zoomed down the path with their hair blowing in the wind, I thought this is it. This is enough. This is all we need to be happy despite everything else. We are a joyful family with so much to be grateful for. Soon, we came upon a huge gnarled oak tree which had managed to survive despite the fact that its trunk was mostly parallel to the ground. We stopped to enjoy nature’s bench and when we looked up there were three great horned owls in the tree gazing back at us. I felt truly blessed.

Motherhood, according to some feminist theory including Adrienne Rich, can be an oppressive institution where patriarchy dictates that women raise children and this leads to inequality, “the second shift”, and even the bondage of women. While I agree that motherhood is still mostly the woman’s domain and even a burden sometimes, I offer the possibility that motherhood can be a site of hope and healing. Patriarchy wounds us all. It hurts our women, our men, and especially our children by limiting our choices and restricting our actions. A sense of spirituality, a relationship between our selves, others, and the world, offers freedom from the binds of sexism, racism, and oppression in general. Spirituality is one way to transcend suffering and transform pain into love.

Motherhood is latent with the potential of a spiritual awakening because I believe that a spiritual awakening is more likely to occur during an especially stressful or conflicting time in one’s life, when new understandings are needed to comprehend major changes such as births, deaths, and illnesses. When one must start over because one can

not continue in the same way, a new path must be chosen and navigated. I had to find a way to raise my children without passing on a legacy of abuse. I found that pausing, taking time to think and feel before reacting, was an important part of my transformation and healing.

Motherhood and spirituality have a lot in common. Both are relational, both deal with how we relate to our self and others, and both change our view about our selves and our world. Motherhood was my traumatic event that necessitated a new way of being in this world. I could not longer see myself as a separate individual alone; instead I was here with two small children and we needed unconditional love. I needed to love myself so that I could love all of who they are. When I started to love myself and my children without judgment and condemnation I started to connect with others much more easily. Those who are truly able to witness suffering, like many mothers are able to do, can become the mediators who connect people rather than divide. After giving birth to a child, it is the mother who may feel reborn to the world and it is the child within the mother who may be healed through a spiritual transformation.

It is my hope that by sharing my spiritual growth and awakening that others will see that there is potential in motherhood and many other painful events in life for transformation. If we can share our pain and connect with each other, there is an opportunity to heal individually and collectively. May we all find peace together.

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