



Good Mother/Daughter Hunting: A Process of Self-Healing

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Numerous life circumstances and relationships have made me the person I am today. While throughout the years I have dealt with many problems as they have come along, there is one issue that has remained unresolved in my life. This issue concerns my relationship with my mother, Sharon. Presently our relationship is distant. I live in New York and she lives in Wyoming. The distance is more than physical, though. While researching and working on this paper, I have come to realize that my relationship with Sharon is reflective of that part of myself that identifies me as her daughter. In examining our relationship on this level, I have come to an understanding, not only of Sharon and our relationship, but also of myself. It is through understanding and acceptance that I have been able to start healing this part of myself. This process of self-healing is a necessary change that must occur within myself before I can change my relationship with Sharon.

People divide their experiences into distinct categories or “islands of meaning” by classifying their life experiences (Zerubavel 10). My exploration of myself and my relationship with Sharon can be divided into an indefinite number of “islands

of meaning.” For purposes of this paper three main areas will be examined pertaining to my past, present, and future relationships with myself and with Sharon—bearing in mind each of these “islands” are intertwined and consist of many meanings. In examining myself, my focus will not be on my physical self, but rather on the social self that, in Mead’s words, must be distinguished from the body (Mead 21). This self is not a thing. It is a process, “a continuous interchange between subject and object,” between “I” and “me” (Mead 21). People interact with themselves as much as they interact with one another through inner conversations (Blumer 216). The structure of one’s self consists of many selves within, reflecting the structure of the various groups the individual person is a member of. In this regard, I will be focusing on the part of myself that reflects my relationship of being a daughter to Sharon.

We humans are “incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture” (Geertz 8). A person’s culture is learned in the early childhood experiences of being raised by one’s parents. Sharon was not close to her parents during childhood and to this day is still not close to them. Her parents were strict and controlling. She worked on her parents’ farm, was involved in few activities, and did not date a lot. She was raised to listen to her parents and obey them. Arguing a different opinion was not permitted.

Yet, it is culture that “provides the link between what men are intrinsically capable of becoming and what they actually, one by one, become” (Geertz 10) and a parent’s unresolved issues from childhood trigger further turmoil in family life (Grosskope 7). Sharon’s adulthood is reflective of her childhood. First, her marriage to my father, Jack, was a controlling relationship in which she was dominated by him, just as she had previously been dominated by her parents. Further, Jack was an abusive, pos-

sessive person. In my early childhood years Sharon was not allowed to have a job and there was constant fighting, with Jack continually telling Sharon how worthless and incompetent she was. Second, as Sharon was not close to her parents, she is also not close to her children. She has nothing to do with her two sons and contact between her and me has been periodic with superficial meaning. Third, Sharon's marriage to her second husband is dominating. They only do activities which he finds interesting, such as hunting. They moved to Wyoming a year ago because that was something he had always wanted to do to further his career. Sharon has stated that she is not happy with her job out there and advancement opportunities for her are scarce.

Cooley states (16) that "the individual not only appropriates people and material objects by claiming them as 'mine,' but he or she also appropriates images of himself or herself reflected in others' treatment of him or her." As a child I referred to Sharon as "my" mother and looked to her for guidance and acceptance. A memory sticks out in my mind that as a child my favorite color was blue. Upon being asked my favorite color and stating it was blue, Sharon would always comment that she thought my favorite color was pink. I used to feel bad and eventually agree with her that pink was my favorite color, though it was not. Another memory that sticks out is a time during a holiday dinner at her parents' house. The food was being served and Sharon made the comment that I did not like beets. I remember this incident because beets were one of my favorite vegetables. Parents react to their own histories as they raise their children (Grosskope 7). As Sharon's parents did not give much regard to her opinions as a child, Sharon as a mother herself may have subconsciously disregarded her own daughter's opinions. Also, being plagued with personal and marital problems may have contributed to Sharon's neglecting several of my opinions as a child.

In my childhood there was constant fighting within the household, usually initiated by Jack, and it only increased as I got older. The fights contributed to Sharon and I becoming closer. This closeness was not a typical mother-daughter relationship, but a friendship. We empathized with and stuck up for each other in arguments with Jack. We went shopping together, shared the same clothes, and liked the same music. We were close friends and in a sense we actually grew up together.

When I was fifteen, at the end of my sophomore year of high school, Sharon left Jack. She and I moved into town. Soon she began dating someone she met while going to the gym. She started staying at his place and dropped most of the interests she had previously held in my activities.

In my junior year of high school Sharon's treatment of me was actually hurtful, specifically during my Junior Prom. I had a track meet that day and Sharon said she would pick me up from there to get my hair done for prom. She never showed up. She later called from her boyfriend's place while I was getting ready for prom. She said she figured I would find another way to my hair appointment. Upon asking her if she was coming home, she asked me if she really needed to. I responded she only needed to if she wanted to see me for my prom. She never saw me for prom.

Looking back, Sharon was my mother, but the image of myself as reflected in her treatment of me made me sad. In my childhood years, I felt inadequate in that I could not judge for myself what my favorite color or vegetable was. In my high school years I felt hurt that the person who was once my close friend thought I was not worthy of her attention or help. In relation to Cooley's "looking-glass self" theory, my image of myself reflected what I perceived to be my mother's image of myself. My reasoning was tainted by this image and at times I seriously doubted my own self worth.

Throughout high school I had devel-

oped a positive social value or “face.” Through “face-work,” or the designated actions carried out by a person to make what one does consistent with one’s defined face (Goffman, 2001b: 116), I had developed a reputation of being a good kid—a talented athlete and a strong student. In the spring of my junior year I began drinking, smoking, and partying with the wrong crowd. While my activities were consistent in saving a “face” at the parties, my behavior was “out of face” in that my school attendance was affected and at one point I was kicked out of a school dance for being drunk.

At the end of my junior year Sharon decided to move to Maine with her boyfriend. She had gotten custody of my youngest brother and negotiated it for a quicker divorce. She asked her parents if I could stay with them for my senior year and they refused. I, however, had become good friends with my boss’s family at work and they invited me to stay with them. After Sharon moved to Maine we spoke periodically until the winter of my senior year.

Upon Sharon moving to Maine, our relationship developed what Goffman calls “symmetry” of communication (2001b: 76). According to Goffman, symmetry refers for instance to a person dropping his expression upon approaching a house to visit and replacing his expression with a sociable one before reaching the door (Goffman 2001b). Instead of changing my expression, I would change my tone of voice over the telephone when talking to Sharon. My voice would be passive and my answers to her questions neutral. For example: “School is fine,” “Work is fine,” and “My life is fine.” Likewise, I would say the fact that her and her boyfriend were doing well “was fine.”

However, this symmetry changed upon Sharon and her boyfriend’s coming back to visit during the winter of my senior year. They had agreed to drive me down to the County Office to get the paper for my driver’s permit. Her boyfriend was in a bad mood, inconvenienced by this trip, and

making rude comments. Instead of being passive, I confronted him on these comments and we argued. My challenging his comments put a check on his behavior and established asymmetry in our communication. Sharon’s boyfriend did not care for this asymmetry and at the end of the argument Sharon put her arms around him and told him she was sorry. Her boyfriend drove himself back to his parents’ house after this argument, refusing to stop and drop me off at my place on the way. When Sharon drove me home we argued and she stated that she was with her boyfriend and that was the way it was. Upon dropping me off I told her I would always be there for her but could not be treated this way. We did not speak again for two years. In my second year of college Sharon called me to talk. From this time on we have spoken periodically, sometimes once a month and other times once every few months, with the exception of the spring of 1999. In May of 1999 Sharon and her boyfriend got married in Maine. I did not attend the wedding and we did not speak for nine months.

I call my mother by her first name instead of calling her “Mom”—as can be observed in this paper as well. This started in my freshman and sophomore years of high school. At first I alternated calling her either “Mom” or “Sharon.” After she moved to Maine with her boyfriend, I started calling her “Sharon” on a permanent basis. For a while she alternated signing her holiday cards to me either as “Mom” or “Sharon.” Today she signs them “Sharon.” She has never expressed how she feels about my calling her by her first name.

In calling Sharon by her first name I was role distancing myself from her. Role distancing is a “self-conscious attempt to foster the impression of a lack of commitment or attachment to a particular role in order to deny the self implied” (Snow and Anderson 93). It was easier to acknowledge losing Sharon as a friend than to acknowledge losing a mother who never wanted a

daughter in the first place and whose life process was being inconvenienced by my presence.

I realize now that in my high school years Sharon was in the process of “uncoupling.” Uncoupling involves “how identities and selves are intertwined and subsequently disentangled... how shared realities are built and subsequently dismantled” (Vaughan 150). In divorcing Jack, Sharon wanted not only to divorce a husband, but to divorce the past as well. Her losing interest in my activities and not being around was part of this process. In a sense, I wanted to divorce the past as well. This was done through my partying days and calling Sharon by her first name.

My continued distancing from Sharon may be interpreted as my distancing from that part of myself and my own hindsight biases. Hindsight biases concern a person thinking he or she should have foreseen how something turned out, upon learning the outcome of the situation (Myers 16). It is in these biases that I blame myself for not having handled the past with Sharon better.

My biases extend to the custody agreement in which Sharon gave up custody of my youngest brother in exchange for a quicker divorce. My youngest brother and I had been very close before the divorce. I had taken care of him as a baby and at the time he was only seven years old. Out of all my family, I had loved him most. During some of the fights I had promised him I would never leave him. However, I did leave him. Though the past cannot be changed, I feel that if Sharon and I had not been so distant I might have known and intervened when she gave up custody of him. My intervention may not have made a difference, but at least my brother would have known I still cared. Instead, I got lost in partying with my friends.

The fact that I uncoupled myself from my brother in a way reflects Sharon’s uncoupling from me. For many years after these uncouplings I felt uncomfortable

around kids. Within the last couple of years many of my friends have gotten married and had babies. I realize my mother was never as happy or as comfortable with me as my friends are with their kids. When visiting one of my friends this past winter in North Carolina, I was playing with her one-year-old son when I realized that for the first time since my days with my youngest brother I was comfortable.

This comfort with my friend’s son reflects a change that has occurred within my subconscious self. I believe that the part of my self that felt inadequate as a child and guilty for uncoupling from my youngest brother is starting to die off. In the process a more individuated and nurturing self is developing.

I have spent the last couple of years working on and learning about myself. In taking time off from college and working as an office supervisor, I developed a sense of self-efficacy or a sense that I am a competent, effective person (Myers 50). In dealing with coworkers my opinions and ideas were listened to and respected. My self-nurturing included activities such as decorating my home. In my old apartment, which I consider my first real comfortable home, I painted the walls, bought pictures to hang, furniture, etc. As my tastes changed so did my apartment.

These incidents are examples of efforts at developing my self-identity. I now realize that I will not be exactly like Sharon. Self-healing typically takes place when environmental or developmental challenges create a need for individuals to reorganize their lives (Bohart & Tallman 64). Presently I am looking more towards having a future family of my own. I hope someday to get married and have kids. The more comfortable I get to be with myself, the better a mother I will be. Unlike Sharon, I look forward to being a “mom.” It is important to me that someday I become a good mother. That is why I am taking the time, time Sharon never took, to explore myself and

my past relationship as a daughter to my mother. Destructive patterns repeat from one generation to another unless something happens to break the cycle and to heal the hurt places within (Grosskope 9). My goal is to understand and to heal my daughter self in order to establish a life I am happy with before bringing another life into this world. I hope that in my future family the dysfunctionality seen throughout the generations of my relatives thus far would stop.

Self-healing refers to “the human capacity to repair dysfunctional life pathways, to recover from emotionally injurious experiences, and to change ways of being, behaving, and experiencing so that one moves toward great coherence and functionality” (Bohart & Tallman 58). As a result of our past injurious relationship and not talking for two years, the mother-daughter relationship between Sharon and I is a dysfunctional pathway. This dysfunctionality is further reflected in the part of my self that identifies me as a daughter. In order to change my future relationship with Sharon, this part of my self must first heal. This healing process starts with acceptance (Bohart & Tallman 9) and forgiveness (Nelton 1).

Acceptance can be broken into two subcategories: 1) self-acceptance and 2) acceptance of events and/or people (Bohart & Tallman 69). In talking with Sharon she has admitted that she never wanted children. Sharon did not want to be a mother and this was not my fault. It is in understanding this that the inadequacy and pain of my younger years have begun to subside. Understanding and no longer feeling the emotional pain inside, I am able to take another look at Sharon’s life and put myself in her shoes.

When parents act in harmful ways toward their children, it is a sign that something harmful once happened to them. In order to grow beyond such limitations of a painful childhood, we must try to under-

stand the parents who hurt us (Grosskope 1). Putting myself in Sharon’s shoes, I picture myself in her controlled childhood, with no outside resources, getting pregnant and having no choice but to get married. I picture myself having a miscarriage and still believing I have no better options in my life but to marry a person I know I do not want to be with, having no job and no money for college. I picture myself further being pressured into the intimacy of having kids with this person, having to raise those kids that were wanted by people other than me, while enduring an abusive marriage and an unhappy life. I am now twenty-two years old, about the same age Sharon was at this time, and I understand now that I may have chosen to “uncouple” and run away from this past just as Sharon did. It is through this that I am now able to understand and accept Sharon and her previous treatment towards me.

Forgiveness means “to give up resentment against... stop being angry with... [to] pardon;” Forgiveness is “surrendering grievances” (Nelton 41). Through acceptance and understanding I am releasing the grievances of the past from my self and in a sense forgiving that part of my self. It is in forgiving myself that I am able to forgive Sharon.

Upon reaching this acceptance and forgiveness, I am faced with the dualism of my relationship with Sharon. The dualistic approach separates a human being into distinct and opposing parts such as mind and body, and leads to debates over which part predominates (Sacks 2). One aspect of the relationship between Sharon and me is that we are biologically related as mother and daughter. We share a past and are defined, on paper and by other people, as mother and daughter. On the other hand, Sharon and I are two people having grown distant from one another due to past occurrences. We talk occasionally as friends and address each other by first name. The dualistic approach would debate whether the mother-

daughter relationship or the friend-to-friend relationship should predominate. I, however, suggest that our relationship should not be limited to one or the other. I look to correlate parts of both the mother-daughter relationship and friend-to-friend relationship into my relationship with Sharon.

Being a mother, a daughter, or a friend is a social position. Social positions are symbols for socially recognized categories of people. They are “meaningful symbols in that we expect different kinds of behavior from these different categories of people and expect to treat them differently” (Stryker 188). A mother is expected to want to be a “mom,” to want to be spoken to as “mom,” to want to be a part of her child’s life, and to help out and support her child until the child is an adult. A daughter is expected to refer to her mother as “mom,” and to look to her mother for advice and guidance. Friends are expected to know each other, to talk on a regular basis, to have common interests, and to enjoy the company of one another.

Sharon and I do refer to each other as mother and daughter when talking to other people about each other, thereby recognizing our defined biological relationship. However, Sharon has stated to me that she never wanted to have children and therefore never wanted symbolically to be a “mom.” Presently Sharon has chosen to be a part of my life and has stated that she would like to have “a relationship” with me. I am a financially independent adult and no longer offer the threat of childhood dependency. While talking to Sharon occasionally I do not look to her for advice and guidance. Instead, our conversations have been limited to talking about our jobs or events happening with people that we both know. I realize now that my conversations with Sharon are still quite passive, similar to when she originally moved to Maine with her boyfriend. This manner of speaking to Sharon has become a habit for me. It

is this habit that would have to change in order to move my relationship with Sharon forward in the future.

To recall, self-healing refers to the capacity to “repair dysfunctional life pathways, to recover from emotionally injurious experiences, and to change ways of being, behaving and experiencing” (Bohart & Tallman 58). In examining, accepting, understanding, and forgiving Sharon and myself for the past I have recovered from an injurious experience. To further repair the dysfunctional pathway of our relationship and the dysfunctional pathway within myself, I must change my ways of being, behaving, and experiencing interactions with Sharon. Presently, I have made little effort to change my behavior in reference to my relationship with Sharon. Communication between us is through occasional telephone calls, with her calling me first.

In the movie *Patch Adams*, Patch looks beyond the problem, at one point a leaking cup, to see the solution of patching it up. I must also look beyond the problem and the past and focus on the future in order to resolve my relationship with Sharon.

A good solution is one that satisfies the constraints and allows them to move forward, creating new possibilities that feed back and shift the constraints (Bohart & Tallman 66). People create solutions through a back-and-forth process of thinking about or behaviorally trying out new solutions, experiencing the consequences and again fine tuning their behavior (Bohart & Tallman 63). The solution for me is to stop being passive in this relationship and stop being passive with myself. I should acknowledge Sharon and that part of myself. When I am thinking about Sharon, I should pick up the telephone and call her or send her a card. I could send her an occasional letter. We have never written letters to each other and this could be a way to get to know one another again. Further, the memories Sharon and I share with each other are

overwhelmed by a confusing, hurtful past. We have no new, happier memories to reflect on and in getting to know each other as the people we are now, this is something else that could be worked on by visiting each other. In consciously carrying out these behaviors, I will also be acknowledging and changing that part of myself that was once subconsciously passive.

In changing my behavior it is important for me to follow my “internal compass” (Edward & Edwards 62). An internal compass is what internally guides an individual from one direction to the next. A person must find what gives him or her joy and then take a stand to do it (Edward & Edwards 63). What gives me joy is being involved with people. While I am an open and efficacious person in my relationships with friends and coworkers, this openness has not entered in my relationship with Sharon due to my subconscious imprints inherited from the painful past between the two of us. With the healing of this pain I am ready to open up more to Sharon.

This could be seen in our last telephone conversation occurring about a month ago. In this conversation I told Sharon about someone I was going to have dinner with that night. She suggested I should get a bottle of wine to go with dinner and I told her how I rarely drink alcohol. I then went further and told her I was no longer a coffee drinker either. She seemed very surprised, because I had previously been a heavy coffee drinker. I then explained to her my stomach had problems in handling the caffeine. She told me that she has had similar stomach related experiences and we had a discussion on types of decaffeinated coffee that I should try. While this conversation alone is not the solution, it is a stepping-stone (Edward & Edwards 112) towards the solution and it reflects new possibilities by shifting the passive conversational constraints of the past—allowing me to proactively move forward in my relationship with Sharon.

Past hurts are held onto because a person does not want to get hurt in a similar fashion in the future (Bohart & Tallman 69). In studying my relationship with Sharon and in studying that part of myself in which this relationship is reflected, I have been able to release the pain of the past and no longer have to fear being hurt in this manner by her in the future. People actively seek to restore balances in their life space, repair pathways and/or find new pathways (Bohart & Tallman 68). Presently, I am seeking to restore the balance of a biological mother-daughter relationship by infusing a friend-to-friend relationship into its dynamic. By redefining the relationship in such a manner new possibilities are opened up and the pressure of fitting into a symbolic mother-daughter or friend-to-friend relationship is gone. This in turn opens the door to focusing on solutions and changing my behavior patterns towards Sharon in the future. This change of being actively involved in my relationship with Sharon is reflective of a change in that part of myself. As with all change, there is an accompanying loss in that I must leave behind an aspect of who I am (Edwards & Edward 42). I must leave behind my hurtful, passive, and distant self in the process of adopting an active and open self. In this regard, I am no longer imprisoned by my past self, but instead opening to the future.

The study of my relationship with my mother, Sharon, in this paper has also been a study of that part of myself which is identified as her daughter. In examining this part of myself throughout the paper, I have detailed a personal process of self-healing. This has allowed me to release the pain of the past and to start changing a part of myself. The goal to change myself as a daughter must be achieved through active experimentation with alternative behaviors towards and relationships with my mother. This interpersonal change is a part of my own intrapersonal self-healing and will need to be a continuing process into the fu-

ture. This is important because at stake here is not only my relationship with Sharon as a friend and mother, but also my relationship with that self in me who will have to act as a loving mother to my own children. This hunt has not been only for a good mother without. It has also been for a good mother within.

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