Honor Thy Father and Mother

Nancy Chapin

_____

Parents are transmitters of attitudes that the child adopts in forming a self-image. Our personal narratives are initially largely constructed through our relationship with our parents or other significant adults. The relationship that we form with our parents is elemental to the concept of self, forming the base of our identity. Neurologist Oliver Sacks (2001:4) proffers that the world does not have a predetermined structure: our structuring of the world is our own—our brains create structures in the light of our experiences. What happens in our minds and bodies works synergistically to give meaning to our lives. Our physical and mental experiences cannot be separated from our sense of self. This social construction of human behavior can also be self-destructive.

If we are to have happy, satisfying lives, we must develop the ability to have intimate relationships with others. According to Psychologist Eric Erickson, we accomplish this by moving through a series of stages that represent crisis points that must be resolved for successful identity formation (Bee 2000:35-37). Any stage not fully dealt with remains an unresolved issue that keeps you from establishing integrity. According to Erikson, the first stage of identity development occurs approximately during the first year of life. Erikson labeled this stage Basic Trust versus Mistrust. Ideally the infant forms a trusting, loving relationship with their caregiver. If this does not occur there may be an enduring sense of mistrust that interferes with our ability to sustain intimate relationships. Our parents are our primary means of the socialization experience that provides the lens through which we perceive ourselves. If our parents show us love and caring, nurture us and give us positive regard we are likely to feel good about them, others, and ourselves. If there is neglect, physical and mental abuse, and a sense of not being cherished, we may incur a pervasive and enduring sense of mistrust toward our parents, others, and even about ourselves. While Erickson places this stage in the first year of life, I believe that it can become salient at a later age due to changes in circumstance.

Social psychologist Charles Horton Cooley's Looking-Glass Self theory proposes that we react to the perceived judgments of others regarding our behavior. By adopting the imagined perspective of someone else we form images of self that are reflected in the treatment we receive from them. Cooley says (2001:17), there is no sense of I, as in pride or shame, without its correlative sense of you. We garner self-esteem when we receive positive feedback and experience low self-esteem when judgments are negative. As a child we internalize others' imagined perception of ourselves. A child develops a sense of being worthwhile, capable, important and unique from the attention given to them by parents and other significant adults.

I was born the fourth child in a family of eight. My father was an enlisted soldier in the Air Force and my mother was a homemaker. Depending on where my father was stationed, our family frequently moved from place to place within New York State. Our grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins lived in Upstate New York where we frequently visited. I had a sense of being part of a family, under an umbrella

of care and nurturing. All seemed right with the world, as I knew it; I felt secure and safe. To the best of my understanding, I was loved and cared for, fed and sheltered, and did not feel any lack in environment or self. I didn't possess the awareness necessary to see things any other way. From the naive perspective of a child I constructed my world as a good place and I was good in it.

When I was seven there was a precipitous event that changed how I perceived my world, how I felt about my parents ability to fulfill their roles, and how I saw myself in relation to these new experiences. My mother was pregnant with her eighth child. She and my father had an intense and frightening argument, both physically and verbally violent. All of us children were crying and begging them to stop. The fighting ended when my father grabbed a bag he had packed, jumped into the car, and drove away while we all stood in the doorway pleading with him not to go. My father was the rock our family clung to. With him gone, we were frequently left home alone in the care of my oldest sister. Often there was little or nothing to eat in the house. We would wander the neighborhood and impose on the goodwill of anyone who would feed us.

Zerubavel (2001: 10) talks about "Islands of Meaning," which is defined as the process by which we create a perceived view of reality. Social convention provides guidelines for what is considered right under the circumstances. Humans create the categories, the Islands of Meaning, that make up distinctions and internalize social beliefs and values. We learn what we should expect, what is important, as determined by the culture in which we live. Child Welfare Services is commissioned by the State to ensure the proper care of children. Society imposed a certain meaning of properness on my family life. Operating in this capacity, the local Social Services department came to remove us to foster care after several months. It had been legally determined that my mother wasn't able to fulfill her parental duties in a socially acceptable way. I still remember the anguish I felt as each of my brothers and sisters were ushered into separate State vehicles that would carry them away to worlds unknown. That day still remains with me as the single most scarring event of my life. I lost my family and myself. My perception of the world as a safe place was permanently altered along with my perception of self.

A younger brother and I were sent to live in the same foster home. Because of the treatment I received there, my trust in the ability of adults to care for my welfare was further eroded. During the three years I was placed there, the foster mother both physically and emotionally abused me. In the beginning my foster mother treated my brother and I with some respect. We were taken shopping and bought new clothing. I received a cherished new doll. I didn't realize this was to be my only toy for the duration of my stay. Over time I was subjected to harsh treatment, derogatory comments, and belittling by the foster mother. I was exposed to humiliating physical punishment for my perceived transgressions. I was not only treated differently than the foster mother's natural children, I was constantly reminded that I was not a member of the family and I got more than I deserved. I was a burden and a nuisance that had to be tolerated for the check that came in every month. My self-concept was being eroded and changed by the treatment I received. I no longer felt like a competent, valuable individual. My concept of self was continually downgraded and damaged. I felt there was no escape from the abuse. This feeling was exacerbated by the fact that my mother rarely visited. There was no one there to protect me. Except for my brother, I was completely alone in a frightening world that I couldn't cope with. There was nothing I could do to please my

foster mother. Because I was bad I made her angry. Because she was angry I became the depository for that anger. I was forbidden to tell anyone, especially my Social Worker, what was happening to me in the home under the threat of dire consequences. I became withdrawn, fearful that my behavior would draw the wrath I had become accustomed to.

In "The Social Contexts of Illness," Arthur Frank states that in becoming a patient—being colonized as medical territory and becoming a spectator to your own drama—you lose yourself (2001:184-86). Frank believes that it is the ill person's responsibility to witness their own suffering and to express this experience so the rest of us can learn from it (Frank 184). The social context of the person's relationships with others will determine whether they are open to discuss their illness or whether they will withdraw based on an assessment of available support. He further states that, the withdrawn child is no less responsible, no less a witness, to his experience. Like the open child, he reflects the attitudes of those around him. He too acts according to others' cues of what they want of him, which is to disappear. His withdrawal may result in psychological damage, but again the initial damage is not the child's. The damage is caused by those who cannot value the ill (Frank 186). I reacted to and complied with the cues I received about my mental health. Because I was withdrawn and fearful I was sent to a psychiatrist to determine what my problem was. I remember sitting in a chair next to his desk answering questions and interpreting inkblots. All the while tears streamed down my face even as I assured him over and over that there was nothing wrong; there was just something in my eye. I was instructed to define reality outside of my actual experience of it.

Because I was considered maladjusted and could not function properly in the foster care environment, I was remanded to the care of my mother at the age of ten. By that time I had changed considerably from the innocent, trusting child I had once been. I had come to believe that I was a worthless, bumbling, stupid girl that would never amount to anything. I had internalized the devaluation I experienced. My self-concept mirrored the attitude of my foster mother. I had adopted her view and now saw myself with contempt and disgust. I had become ashamed of myself. Cooley's looking glass returned the image of damaged goods.

But, I felt at least I was going to live with my mother. Things would certainly be alright now. Only foster mothers were evil, real mothers were good, real mothers took care of their children and loved them. My vision of my mother as savior was soon dashed against the reality of day-to-day life. My mother was an active alcoholic and frequently left me alone to care for my two brothers, a five-year-old and the youngest, a severely asthmatic two-year-old. I became the caretaker of the family. We experienced severe neglect and often times our basic physiological needs, for food and nurture, were ignored. Again there were many days we had little or no food in the house. Because of this neglect, my youngest brother was returned to his foster parents for adoption. My brother and I remained with my mother through adolescence.

There was little love exchanged in our household. My mother, when she was home, frequently exploded in vicious temper outbursts and frequently treated me with the scorn and contempt I had come to recognize as my due. This hurtful attitude of my mother further laid the foundation for a life-long self-contempt. My internal conversations reflected the view of self I had come to adopt. I spoke to myself in the same way as the mother figures in my life had spoken to me. Throughout my life unto the present, I continued to subject myself to the painful attitudes and behaviors that caused so much distress in my childhood. I turned against myself and played a looped internal tape of disgust and contempt.

As a child, my fantasy world revolved around my father coming to rescue me. I would have a home and food and clothing. I would be somebody again. This thought sustained me through many years of neglect and abuse. By the time I began to feel that this would never happen, my father reappeared briefly. I had hoped that things would come to pass as I had always dreamt they would. In a vindictive mood, my mother turned my father in to the authorities to answer charges of abandonment. And he fled again. I would not see him again for another 20 years. All hope was gone.

After many years of searching for us, my father's brother made contact with the family and was able to put us in touch with my father, who was living in Las Vegas, Nevada. While we never became close, we did keep in contact over the years. Several members of our family made the trip to Nevada to spend the last days of my father's life with him when we learned he was dying of a stroke. In contrast to how we had come to feel about our mother, none of us faulted him for escaping even though we were hurt by his abandonment. We all felt relieved that we were able to be with him at the end and with the guilt that we had not been able to do more for him. There was a collective sense of loss, grief, and forgiveness. In "The Social Shaping of Grief," Lofland explains that grief is an emotional experience that is both searing and long-lasting (2001:55). It was certainly both for me, given the particular circumstances of separation and neglect that shaped my grieving process.

As I grew into adulthood I came to believe that I was solely responsible for myself and that anything that happened in my life would be because of choices I made. I silently vowed that no one else would ever again have the power to damage my life. Like the true-life character in *Patch Adams* I used humor to deal with the issues I faced in life. Unlike Patch, though, my humor was more like a bandage. I considered life a cruel joke. We used humor in very different ways. Mine was a self-deprecating humor. My focus was much narrower, limited to healing only myself.

I married young in order to escape my home-life and had children so that I could be the kind of parent I had wished for and never had. I moved away and established my own family far from the influence of my past. I tried to get beyond habituated behaviors to construct a more meaningful life. Outwardly I attempted to change my behavior and adopt new ways of reacting to and being effective in my life and my relationships, as I became an adult myself. This was by no means an easy endeavor. It has been a very slow, incremental process that continues to this day. Inwardly I still feel like the neglected abused child of my past.

In the film *Good Will Hunting*, the main character of Will has grown up under similar abusive circumstances. Will has trouble forming intimate relationships with others. In the tentative forging of a relationship with the film's love interest, Skyler, Will fabricates a large tight knit family for himself. He tells Skyler that he lives with three of his thirteen brothers in a state of happy camaraderie. The truth is that he lives an extremely lonely existence by himself in a run-down tenement apartment. Like the homeless people that Snow and Anderson reported on in "Salvaging the Self from Homelessness" (2001:92), both Will and myself claimed or asserted an identity and attributed meaning to self. Mostly through omission, I also constructed a happier childhood for myself. When others talked about their family experiences I listened without contributing any stories of my own. Through the second-hand knowledge I gleaned about what families are supposed to be like, I learned what direction to move in to accomplish this in my own life with my own children. Still, learned behaviors are resistant to change and it took great will on my part and many mistakes along the

way. Punitive treatment of children was not only normative but still remained largely socially acceptable in the 1970s. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" was a commonly used biblical aphorism. Even though at times it may have been too little, too late, I tried to change my patterns of behavior from the ones I had learned to kinder, more nurturing behaviors.

I included my relationship with my mother as part of my revision of the past. Alcoholism, neglect, abuse, and abandonment have made it difficult for me to see myself as a daughter. I tried to resolve my relationship with my mother in a satisfactory way by rationalizing the need for a different perspective. I vacillated between thinking that my mother did the best she could to she could have done better. Part of the difficulty of resolving this issue for me is my mother's firm belief that she did indeed raise her family and did a very good job of it. If I become a confederate to the tale that we have always been one big happy family, the resolution would be smooth as long as the truth never came poking through the veneer. The trouble with living a lie is that you have to remember what never happened.

Spencer Cahill (2001:125) quotes Erving Goffman as saying that the failure to at least acknowledge one's previous communion with another is, in effect, to express disregard for the relationship and, by implication, the other individual's small patrimony of sacredness. I convinced myself that the best way to resolve lingering negative feelings would be through forgiveness. My mother was not wholly responsible for the circumstances of her life. She was, after all, only human. We shared a biography that carries a very heavy social weight. The mother/daughter bond is normally among the strongest bonds between two individuals. To deny this bond would be tantamount to denying the sacredness of the cultural notion of Mother as nurturer. Because of the significance of the mother-daughter relationship I maintained contact with my mother and fulfilled my perceived social obligation.

The nature of our relationship has posed a dilemma for most of my life. Religion teaches us to honor our mother and father. Regardless of the kind of parenting a person had, one's parents are entitled to respect and care throughout their lives. We must forgive those who trespass against us. Social mores admonish us to forgive and forget. Filial piety is a meaningful concept in our culture at this time. And since a positive self-concept is partially determined by following social order and convention, the decision to operate outside of social norms brings the possibility of negative self-image. Fulfilling obligations, whether real or perceived, is protective of our self-concept. If we do not honor our mother and father we may not feel positive self-regard. I had a need to feel this in myself.

I felt I owed my mother a certain amount of civil respect. Although I never totally estranged myself from my mother, we had a distant relationship for most of my adult life. Live and let live was my motto. I had fashioned a different life from the one I knew growing up. There was no point in dwelling on things that could not be changed, even though they had a profound effect on me. It was an uneasy yet long-lasting truce. I maintained not only a physical distance, but an emotional distance as well. I played the role of the dutiful daughter, there in time of need, but only if need be.

About ten years ago my mother relocated to this area with her long-time partner. She reestablished herself as the matriarch of the family, the mother, grandmother and great-grandmother to an extended family. About five years ago her partner passed away and since she is aging, she needs to call on her family for support, care, and companionship. My two sisters and I who live nearby became her network of assistance. Three years ago my mother broke her leg when she slipped on her ice-

covered porch steps. Throughout her recovery we shared responsibility for making sure that she was adequately cared for. We took turns visiting, getting her mail, cleaning, shopping, and taking my mother to doctor visits. We each reacted to our role as daughter in different ways. One sister felt pity, the other sister assisted begrudgingly, and, with the help of my two daughters, I took on the bulk of responsibility as an expression of the duty I had chosen to fulfill.

In "Sympathy Biography and Relationships" (2001:162) Candace Clark relates the concept of a socioemotional economy. This concept of social exchange tells us that we act on a cost/benefit ratio. Tit for tat. If I do this, then I am entitled to that. In the case of our parents, they bank all the good things they do for us in the future hope that we will return the good when they are needful. There is an implicit notion of deserving. When I use this formula, I am giving in exchange for a good I have not received. However, I can rationalize the uneven exchange by imagining that if I provide care for my mother, I am being a good example for my children.

My present difficulties in my relationship with my mother stem from a particularly disturbing imbroglio that occurred just over a year ago. I had to have back surgery for a fractured disc during the Thanksgiving break from school. Because it seemed mutually advantageous, my mother came to stay with me and help with my care while I recovered. Since home heating fuel costs had skyrocketed it was decided that my mother would close up her house and stay until Spring even though I expected to be sufficiently healed to care for myself long before that. I discussed my plans with my siblings and was advised to consider the possibility that the situation might not turn out as well as I had optimistically projected. One of my sisters in particular recounted stories of the disruption to her household that my mother had caused during a year-long stay in her home after her

relocation to this area. Even though no one predicted the arrangement's success I gave my mother the benefit of the doubt since time and age seemed to have mellowed her.

A confrontation between us erupted over a seemingly trivial matter. My mother had been staying with me for about two months. During that time she had been using one of my vehicles for her personal use. The rear-view mirror had fallen off and she wanted to repair it. I had just woken and was sitting in the kitchen eating breakfast when she came and asked me for a scraper to remove the old glue from the windshield. I was still not able to function normally and knew that I would have to bend down to look in cupboards for the wanted item and that the type of movements required would be painful. I told my mother that I was not ready to look for it just then but would as soon as I could. She said that she would just scrape it off with a screwdriver and I told her I did not want her to do that because it might damage the glass. I told her I would soon be done with my meal and then I would find the scraper for her. I returned to my breakfast and she returned to her room. After a few minutes passed she went outside again. It occurred to me that she might have disregarded my request so I went to investigate. She was sitting in the car digging at the windshield with a screwdriver. This prompted me to go outside and ask her again to wait until I was able to look for the tool. When I asserted myself my mother took my protest as a sign of rebellion and a lack of love. It caused a spontaneous flurry of profanity, epithets, and accusations.

Using Erving Goffman's terminology (2001:121), in an effort to save face my mother initiated an aggressive interchange in which the winner not only succeeds in introducing information favorable to himself and unfavorable to the others, but also demonstrates that as interactant he can handle himself better than his adversaries. My mother does not like to be thwarted in

her plans and when I asked her to stop she flew into a bitter tirade. She abraded me with the same harsh, critical assessment of my character that she had used against me in my youth. I was relegated to the status of the bad child more than thirty years removed from present reality. I cringed just as I had as a child when I was conditioned to panic at the sound of her raised voice.

Ronald Wardhaugh, in "The Organization of Conversation" (2001:143), says that most of the moves we make in conversations would not be made if we did not assume that they would be followed by responses whose nature we can predict. There is an expectation that our feelings will be regarded when others decide what to say to us and that there is an inherent trust that appearance and reality are the same. I was totally taken by surprise by my mother's reaction. I inaccurately assumed that what I perceived as a reasonable request would be answered reasonably.

The child within that I could never seem to connect to suddenly burst forth with all of her insecurities intact. A look, an act, a gesture, a word brought my past self out of hiding. Once again I was the broken child. It was a violent, disruptive experience that left me shaken and discouraged. I was instantly catapulted into a past where I was a self that was loathed and therefore loathed myself. I did not have to search for the deadly memories; they were a part of me. Like those in the video *Multiple Personalities* we watched suffering from the disorder, a self that I thought was thoroughly quashed remained alive and well in the deep recesses of my psyche. I remained outwardly calm as I told my mother that she would have to return to her own home.

The problem of satisfactorily resolving my relationship with my mother is both complex and complicated. In the narrative "Uncoupling" (2001:150-160) by Diane Vaughn, the process used by married couples to dismantle their relationships and redefine themselves is outlined. There is no comparable framework for dismantling your relationship with a parent. When our parents age and we begin to think about their death, we naturally want to feel that we have done the right thing. Ann Landers, advice columnist, advises readers to make peace with their parents before their death in order that they will not feel guilty when it becomes too late to make amends. In her book *Another Country (1999)*, Mary Pipher describes conflicts between adult children and their aging parents as being caused by the personalities involved and by different ways of interpreting the world (232-241). She advises a son who resents a bitter father, who after a wasted life wants to cling to him in his final days. The son says of his father, "Dad robbed me of my childhood and now he is trying to rob me of a happy adulthood." Pipher advised him to set limits, deciding ahead of time how much of an emotional investment he could make. She advised him to write down what he envisions as the best-case scenario between him and his father—what they reasonably expect to give and get under optimal circumstances.

I interpret my mother's behavior as having a toxic effect on my self-esteem and emotional health. Because of this perception, my best case scenario is to do anything but be around her. I can reasonably expect to support my siblings if and when my mother's care needs become greater. However, in my own self-interest, I have to set aside my notions of what a socially acceptable relationship to a parent consists of. I have a greater need for self-preservation. Just as we have come to believe that wives have a right and perhaps a duty to dissolve abusive relationships with husbands, perhaps some day this assumption will be extended to relationships between child and parent, even adult children.

<div style="text-align: center;">REFERENCES</div>

Anderson, Leon and Snow, David, "Salvaging the Self From Homelessness," in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 90-99, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Bee, Helen L. (2000). *The Journey of Adulthood*, Fourth Edition, Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.

Cahill, Spencer E., "The Interaction Order of Public Bathrooms," °in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 54-60, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Clark, Candice, "Sympathy Biography and Relationships," °in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 161-171, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Cooley, Charles Horton, "The Self as Sentiment and Reflection," *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 2-5, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Frank, Arthur W., "The Social Contexts of Illness," in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 180-186, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Goffman, Erving, "Face Work and Interaction Rituals," °in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 114-122, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Lofland, Lyn H., "The Social Shaping of Grief," in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 54-60, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Pipher, Mary, Ph.D. (1999). *Another Country, Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders*. New York: Riverhead Books, A Member of Penguin Putnam, Inc.

Sacks, Oliver. (2001). "Neurology and the Soul,"
in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 2-5, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Vaughan, Diane, "Uncoupling," °in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 150-160, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Wardaugh, Ronald, "The Organization of Conversation," °in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 142-148, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Zerubavel, Eviatar, "Islands of Meaning," in *Inside Social Life, Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, Third Edition*, pp. 10-14, compiled by Spencer E. Cahill, University of South Florida, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Films:

"Good Will Hunting." (1997). (126 minutes).

"Multiple Personalities." (1994). [videorecording]: the search for deadly memories/ produced by Home Box Office; Michael Mierendorf, producer/writer/director. New York, N.Y.: distributed by Ambrose Video Publishing, Inc. 1 videocassette (60 min.)

"Patch Adams." (1998). Universal Studios. (120 minutes.).