

Mothering Sons

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Pour une féministe, les rapports avec un fils peuvent être confus, compliqués, difficiles. En donnant naissance à des enfants mâles, nous créons des êtres qui nous sont proches sur le plan génétique mais qui nous sont aliénés sur le plan social. Voilà le paradoxe.

For a feminist, relating to a son can be confused, confusing, difficult. In giving birth to male children, we create beings who are genetically akin to us, yet socially alienated from us.

In our daughters, we can see our selves and our experience recapitulated. Their bodies, their pains and their frustrations are reflections of our own, even though the mirror in which we see them becomes clouded by time, social change and by their having us as mothers. Both my daughters are taller now than I am; they possess strength in their arms and shoulders I have never developed. Both are learning to craft large and beautiful objects out of wood, a career I could not have seen as possible for myself. At the age of my younger daughter my body had limited my choices for the next dozen years. I contrast my daughters' capable bodies with my own at nineteen—bobby-sox and pony-tail separated by a swollen mid-section covered in maternity clothes. But they are people I might have been had birth control been reliable and 'living together' acceptable. Our destinies are different only because the possibilities facing us were different. Our understandings are similar; no tension rigidifies our contacts. When words flow between us the meanings they have for us concur.

My son is more the stranger. His body does not resemble mine; it is like that of an old enemy. He is lean, steel-strong, rigid. My daughters' muscles are pliable and coated by softer flesh. Their hands are smaller, work-worn, yet unthreatening. My son's hands hold books, as mine do. But their movements are alien. They heave objects in anger, slam doors, bring back memories of older hands that aimed at me, choked me, seemed to hold power over my life and sometimes almost to extinguish it.

Yet I love my son. After the anguish of realizing—for the third time in four years—that my body would again distend, that I would again have to labour, lose sleep, be buried further beneath daily demands that left no space for thought, I felt joy at fulfilling what I saw then as my function. I had given my husband a son. And there was real joy in watching him grow. Adrienne Rich writes of the

slenderness, wiriness, softness, grace, the beauty of little boys who have not been taught that the male body must

be rigid (*Of Woman Born*, 1976, p. 12).

My son's small, lithe body accompanied me on shared explorations of the world. With his sisters in school, he taught me to see shells, leaves, starfish, flowers and grasses through his fresh eyes. His father was rarely home; I was the only model he knew. He did not yet question my wisdom. Even today, the same smile he gave me then can disarm me, cutting through the walls we have built between us.

What happened? School came. Hockey lessons, urged by his father, hated by my son. His father stayed home more, defeated in his career, even more determined to make a man of his son. I escaped to a job and the pursuit of the degree dropped more than a decade before I became a feminist. With his adolescence came the inevitable and overdue end of the family he had known. His father returned to the periphery of our lives.

Yet my son has learned most from his father's absence. As his father walked out, leaving work to be done and decisions to be made, so does his son. Like his father, he considers his own interests to be primary; our shared love of books results in conversations only about those in his field of interest. For both, women are suppliers, not partners.

I do public speaking about family violence and violence against women. When I do, I suggest that the problem will not be overcome until boys are encouraged to nurture, to admit their feelings and frailties. Men are not born our enemies; they are born by and through us. They become alienated in the years when the flexible flesh turns to bands of steel, when the laughter we shared with them turns into locker-room jokes directed against our kind.

If I were to give birth to a son now, instead of in 1960, would the circumstances influencing our relationship make it any better? I would know more, make more deliberate efforts to eliminate from his life male models who would teach him to despise and oppress women. What I do not know is whether this could possibly be enough in a world that glorifies violence and rewards aggression—urging its males to both—and that denigrates men and women who endeavour to escape their specified roles. I admire women with the courage to attempt the rearing of male children now, and wish them well.