
Being Friends With My Mother: Necessary Lessons

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Martha and Nancy Fleming

Dans cet article, une jeune femme explore ses rapports avec sa mère.

This article can't help but be a review in some ways. It would have been different had I not read *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich and *My Mother/My Self* by Nancy Friday. Rich has written a highly important academic study which is peculiar in nature both to the women's movement and to a certain brand of American poet/philosopher. The book is as well-researched as any in the field of women's studies can be, and meanders as it must all over the map, posing questions, some of which are impossible to answer at this time. It is not a definitive text, because the ground has only just been broken—to a great extent by this book itself. It is a storehouse of accessible knowledge and intelligent theory bedded in a solid historical perspective. 'Criticism' would deny it the status of a working document—a status which I have no doubt Rich intended it to have. Though written from a courageously radical standpoint, it is quite obviously more a catalyst to change-through-discussion than a subject for literary or theoretical appraisal. It is a dialectic, not a document. High standards of research and a fertile mind have produced a crucially important book on a key subject within the movement.

On the other hand, Friday has cashed in, to a great extent, on a nameless discontent of the urban female intellectual. The book is written exclusively for and about women who are convinced that they are moving in a post-feminist milieu, unable to recognize or reconcile what is a fundamentally patriarchal world. This exploitation of anxiety and alienation saps both strength and focus from the movement. The book is full of gratuitous confession that will no doubt serve to soothe the conscience of women whose class enabled them to 'dally dangerously' with the all-round cadets at the American military college of their choice, or who

Gail Gellner

rejected a friend for class reasons in the peer pressure years of pubescence.

One doesn't have to break utterly with mother, crushing the unique nature of the relationship, in order to have friendships in which one is not as dependent on the friend as one was on mother as a child. This fact seems to be beyond Friday, whose clever use of syllogism excludes the inexplicable in human relationships. And human intercourse is by nature inexplicable, or philosophy would have died with Plato.

The more one reads of Friday's repetitive italicized distillations of thought, the more one realizes that what Friday is talking about is division, and what Rich is talking about is union.

The concept of motherhood as an experience fundamentally misunderstood by a patriarchal society anxious to keep it within the bounds of an institution appears to be lost on Friday, though her bibliography claims she has read Rich's book before writing her own. Rich's concept is so simple, so clear and fundamental, that in light of it I cannot imagine why Friday bothered to write a book as regressive as *My Mother/My Self*. Either Friday has missed the point, or *My Mother/My Self* was ghost-written by a marketing researcher.

The cry of the female child in us need not be shameful or regressive; it is the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*).

Speaking over the phone to a friend whose career and marriage are both perhaps the most 'post-feminist' I know, I mentioned in passing that I was writing this article on women and their mothers. 'The first thing you'll have to do is define what a friend is,' she said.

The implications of this are twofold. First, that motherhood has in some tacit way been defined already—or at least that there is some accepted social consensus on the nature of motherhood. Second, that—as I had no doubt projected—the emphasis of the article would therefore be on friendship. But as I began to think clearly about the subject, it became evident that the idea of friendship within a relationship that most women consider to be the burden of their adult lives could only be for the good. It would automatically break the static image society has so long held to represent motherhood, and in many ways extend the possibilities for all of her friendships as well.

It is a difficult and vitally important thing to be friends with one's mother. Facing it, we face the often insurmount-

able hurdle of these rigid interpretations of the most primal of relationships, and the most consuming question of our adult lives—how to conduct our relationships. And from day one these two obstacles are inextricably entwined. From our earliest years mother is our mentor in developing social skills, both overtly and subliminally. She is hopelessly meshed—both as the person she is and the persona she assumes in the social role of 'mother'—with all the ways in which we deal with others. She is present in all our friendships, as conscience and as tactician.

Motherhood and daughterhood is *the* unprecedented relationship. As such it is ripe with possibility. As a daughter, my connection with my mother can be good enough to blossom and signify in most all my relationships, or so restrictive as to narrow my emotional scope without my even knowing it.

Time is a very important factor in all relationships. The longer they last, the stronger they become, by the mere fact of the size of the foundation on which they are based. It is for this reason that mother is best equipped to teach us to deal with what is at the core of human interaction, and is also potentially the best friend we can have. The person on whom we have been most dependent has the awesome responsibility to teach us that mature love has nothing to do with the blind security we have found in her arms.

Love, Iris Murdoch says, is the apprehension of the reality of others. The first perception of mother as fallible, and the clear realization that she is still 'worthy' of love, is our first lesson in this apprehension. So mother, being the teacher of this vital lesson, in however indirect or awkward a way, becomes the object of the deepest (because so hard-earned) and most tried (for it has no precedents) love.

Nor is it a lesson that can be consciously taught or learned. Sometimes a child never overcomes the revulsion of this new and imperfect mother, or may hate herself for 'making her mother this way.' Mother must act full in the face of her own fear of rejection, and it is up to her, paradoxically, to train her child to cope emotionally without her and to exist exclusively of her. She must hope that the lesson proves that we love her as much *for* her failures as *in spite of* them. And she takes the risk that this 'training' might be incomplete, therefore leaving her daughter in some way emotionally crippled, or killing the possibility of a mutually supportive love between them, miring our relationship forever in the grey zone of our first dependence upon her.

The key to this lesson is perspective. The more emotional diversity a child encounters, the more variety she is able to integrate into her life. From the first, her focus is entirely on mother, and the

original breathing space in that relationship is the projection of mother's perspective onto it. Mother has loved others and made choices in her life which are as great as that of having a child, and she therefore has to some extent a built-in removal from the mother/child situation. The dependent child must conform to these 'absences.' They're the thin edge of the wedge.

Ultimately, on through adolescence and maturity, a daughter's disengagement from her mother depends to a great extent on the success of mother's disengagement from *her* mother. We cannot adopt a healthy attitude towards love and other social involvements from someone who does not innately display them. Our socialization process is connected directly to the tenuous and delicate years our mothers spent between leaving their own fold and giving birth to us.

The common element in both dependent and independent relationships is security. Faced with the risks one must take for it, there is a danger on both sides of shying away from the long-term security of independence and preferring the short-term security of another's attention—preferably another to whom one has been connected in a relationship so secure as to be without question. And yet, indulgence, especially in the adolescent, is necessary to achieve catharsis. It is rare to find enough love and security outside the home to allow for the incubation of confidence and independence.

Things become defined, as we grow older, as much by what they are not as by what they are. As the child forays out into the world, she is able to bring to the family a perspective that is entirely her own. In these years, the horizons for a relationship between mother and daughter are widening. The wider they become, the looser the bonds of dependence, the greater the scope—the closer the two become. The early dependence is no longer a necessity. In letting us go, mother lets us love her better.

The woman's body is the terrain on which the patriarchy is erected. The awe and fear of it is what has led to its domination by force. In Adrienne Rich's structuralist view of this society (put forth in *Of Woman Born*), the oppression of women is the keystone; at the vortex of possible change from the patriarchal system is, paradoxically, the ability of women to bear children. In an axiomatic swing of emphasis, Rich sees the biological characteristics of the female form—which the movement claimed in its early days were an albatross about the neck, since 'difference' seemed to cry out for a value judgement—as in fact our strongest asset.

And this is the bond which joins mothers and daughters. Alike in having similar bodies and the possibilities of experienc-

The Holy Family

Sooner or later
we must admit
that we were sons and
daughters
once.

Blurt out from behind
blaspheming hands that
we were begat in some
womb, which when it blossomed forth,
was called The Family.

And all hailed The Family,
ocular pit
thrice blessed,
into which we were thrown,
so pink and edible
like the Valley of Gehenom

where the child cries,
as her sister must have cried,

knowing certain death
for the first time in her life.

Simmie Moore

ing on an organic level each other's birth, they have a physical and psychic extension of the emotional bond that mothers have with all their children, male and female.

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*).

And so it must be that along with the wrenching process of disengagement daughters must also experience a fundamental and ultimately sexual refocussing of their attention. They must shift the emphasis of their involvement from mother to father, from women to men. An astronomical leap. It is no wonder that female adolescence is notoriously more painful and extensive than male adolescence, and so often incomplete.

The advent of fertility is so much more decisive and evident in daughters than in sons. This fact is comic in the face of how much more shadowed and confused our initiation to all other aspects of sexual activity is. But both struggles represent—to mothers and to daughters—the most tangible evidence that they are separate 'bodies,' in a biological and emotional sense. Because of this it is infinitely threatening to the original dependence, and sex is understandably the most volatile issue in the struggle for mothers and daughters to break from that dependence.

It is here that mother must make her greatest sacrifices and take her greatest risks. It is also where the possibilities for a grounding in friendship between mother and daughter are most wide open. This new ground demands more compassion than mothers and daughters have ever before asked of each other.

And yet this relationship is not to be sentimentalized. The danger and temptation to sanctify mother or to remove her from reality is a very real one—especially within a patriarchal society at the base of which is a fear of women's ability as a 'life-giver.'

There is so much mythology to overcome, literally and figuratively, in order to get to the root of the nature of this relationship. For example, the Persephone myth, to which Rich dedicates a number of pages in her book on motherhood, is a romantic extension of a highly organic consciousness of the connection between mothers and daughters.

It is not that we should be without mythology; rather that we should be sure not to let the mythology stand in the way of or suffice for a true understanding of what it represents. Mythology, though an extension of fact, can easily co-opt it.

And it is important not to confuse the delicate tribal consciousness of one's relation to mother with the fictional and sometimes frightened distortions of woman-kind invented, for the most part, by men within a patriarchal society. The damaging removal which is fantasy makes it impossible for mothers and daughters to perceive clearly and best develop their relationships. If daughters long 'for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back' . . . if mothers long 'for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self' (*Of Woman Born*) . . . then they haven't been creating these things for themselves and each other.

I have a younger brother and sister. My father is dead. The last years of his life were spent in illness, and in estrangement from us. This understandably put a strain on the structure. However—changed, reformed, consolidated—the family is now a mutually supportive and endlessly elastic one. And at the centre of this is my mother.

The guilt and rejection that mars other mother/child relationships I have observed is minimal in my relationship with my mother. Her leniency has allowed her to have much more involvement in my life than mothers of friends have in their children's lives. There were no rules, mysterious in their reasoning, which I was tempted to break. Consequently there was no fear on my part to discuss events in my life with her. This leniency, as well as keeping open a very important dynamic for change in both of us, has allowed for the possibility of disagreement. My mother and I argue as adults based on a lifetime (mine) of trust and all that we have experienced together and through each other. The fact that there have always been gaps, breathing spaces, privacies and disaffections in our relationship allows us to be individuals within it.

It would be impossible to cover all the issues at stake in the relationships between mothers and their female children. But the fact is that my friendship with my mother, and the disengagement that it signifies, co-opts a myth about static roles which is a keystone of possible change. Not only is it personally fulfilling, but this friendship can unify women *because* of their bodies, not in spite of them, and *for* each other, rather than against men. Friendship with mother has to go past the 'I would choose her for a friend even if she were not my mother' stage. She *is* your mother, and is for that reason already your friend in an infinitely complex way. It is impossible and even undesirable to 'forget' that your mother is the woman who gave birth to you. Through that and above that she is your first object of love. The possibilities of this bond, on both personal and social levels, are endless.