

Mentoring My Daughter

Contradictions and

BY SHARON ABBEY

L'auteure confronte les assumptions au sujet du tutorat maternel et met l'accent sur la suprémacie de la résistance, l'individualisation et la réciprocité de manière à ce que de nouveaux choix et d'autres possibilités soient envisagés pour consolider les liens matrilinéaires.

This article confronts assumptions about maternal mentorship and emphasizes the primacy of resistance, individualization, and reciprocity in order to consider new choices and possibilities for extending motherline bonds (Lowinsky). The impetus for this study arose when my daughter undertook her first teaching assignment several years ago. As a professor of education in Ontario, I welcomed the opportunity to closely observe my own daughter as an "insider" rather than as a supervisor. I supported the viewpoint of Field and Field that teacher educators need to study the lived experiences and realities of beginning teachers as learners and to listen to their voices. As her mother, I was even more excited about the prospect of mentoring my daughter and assumed that I would watch her benefit from my firsthand counselling. Instead, this article charts my own cloudy and complicated transformations and understandings about maternal ideals and essentialism.

Throughout this study I was able to access unique ways of seeing and knowing by merging the standpoints of public and private space, as both teacher and mother. I will begin by discussing traditional concepts of mentorship in

the workplace, comparing these with caring roles at home, and by deconstructing the hierarchical linear form of mentorship in order to suggest alternate mutually interconnected models. The next section utilizes narrative inquiry to uncover hidden assumptions and deeper understandings of the multiple locations of maternal mentorship. As Maxine Greene points out, our lives have many strands as we stand at the crossing point of several social and cultural forces. By addressing "self" as a site of permanent openness as well as a filter, Janet Miller urges us to recognize our stories as incomplete accountings influenced by many hidden ideologies and discursive

practices rather than as static, transparent, and linear chronologies. Only by problematizing our stories can we rely on them to take us somewhere we could not otherwise get to. Like Greene, I seek elements in my stories that disrupt rather than reinforce, as well as "contradictions, gaps, views from the margin, views from the center ... a field of multiplicities" (391) that require rearrangements and reconsiderations of social and cultural normalizations of the self. Finally, the article draws on this narrative to examine the complexities involved in maternal mentorship and offers new possibilities for mother/daughter empowerment.

Mentorship in public space

Although raising a daughter is an extremely political act (Debold, Wilson, and Malavé), there have been surprisingly few feminist studies on adult mother/daughter relationships. Even feminist mothers seem ill-equipped to reshape connections with their daughters and adjust to cycles of growth, transition, and resistance (Glickman). According to Brown and Gilligan, women have been given few strategies for fostering their adult daughters' potential, self-confidence, and courage to go after what they want, to voice their opinions with confidence, and to take a stand on significant issues that affect their personhood. These researchers suggest that the need for mothers to "cover up" and not examine the maternal roles that they model for their daughters stems from the fact that no alternatives seem possible. This article takes up the challenge to identify alternative models.

The concept of "mentor" traditionally refers to a wise and knowledgeable person who takes on a special commitment to instruct, counsel, or advise a younger and less experienced person. This hierarchical definition, originally associated with patriarchal business advancement, presumes that both parties are willing to enter into such a trusting relationship. Moreover, true mentors presumably undertake such responsibilities with little thought of their own personal gain. According to William Kealy (1997) teaching mentors are more than teachers because they allow others to see experience through their eyes and their subjectivity. Kealy also stresses that the immediacy of a mentor's guidance and intervention is crucial as is his/her willingness to inquire into self-practices, to honestly confront, interrogate, and articulate underlying beliefs, as well as to challenge the status quo. By viewing

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Possibilities

mentoring as reciprocal and self-critical rather than hierarchical, these descriptions allow more room for women's voices.

This article argues that many of these mentoring characteristics might equally be applied to relationships between a mother and her daughter within various socio-cultural contexts. However, when mothers serve as mentors for daughters, they bring an additional quality to the dynamics that is "constitutively created in the rich conjunction of intense intimacy, heady emotion, extreme dependency and vital responsibility" (Bowden 37). Although mentoring mothers often manifest a special kind of attentiveness informed with long-term bonding and love, "it may have the potential to slide into damaging self-sacrifice and denial" (Bowden 36).

Connection, mentoring, and caring in private space

In spite of all the current literature on mentorship, few studies examine "how" mentoring processes operate, change, or endure between individuals or attempt to theorize "what" the parties learn from their experience together (Mullen, Cox, Boertcher, and Adoue). Even less attention has been paid to familial mentorship in the home and studies seldom analyze personal and professional mentoring interactions that occur between mothers and adult daughters (Castle, Abbey, and Reynolds). If addressed at all, it is often idealized, trivialized, taken for

granted, and seldom considered seriously. Perhaps this is because maternal mentoring usually takes place within a non-competitive private domain and is usually associated with intangible moral values and caring ethics that are difficult to measure or replicate (Larrabee; Wood). Such synergistic qualities can not easily be defined and as such, are often excluded from authorized knowledge. Furthermore, when daughters acknowledge their mothers as mentors, they usually adhere to gender expectations which often require loss and disintegration of self (Brown and Gilligan). This can result in the engendering and marginalization of women's

epistemology and embodied wisdom, the self-censoring of thought and action in order to be perceived as good and/or normal, and the unintentional modelling of disconnection between mothers and daughters (Debold, Tolman, and Brown).

The lack of attention to maternal mentoring may also stem from the view of mothers as exclusive caregivers as well as from the belief in the primacy of care as archetypal and innate in mothers rather than as a skill that needs to be learned explicitly. Consequently, selfless responsiveness to the needs of others and passivity with respect to personal needs becomes the marks of admirable maternal caring in general. As a result, mothering relations become unacceptably constrained, contributing to the devaluation of mothers as mentors. Certainly the unique and complex experiences of pregnancy, labour, childbirth, and nursing dissolve boundaries between self and other and influence women's biological attachment and commitment to care for children. However, the fact that "mothering frequently carries the full weight of ideological constructions of caring" (Bowden 21) sets up unrealistic expectations of unconditional openness, connectedness, affection, and responsiveness to the needs of others that are taken for granted. Amy Rossiter points out that complex social manipulations have constructed a reality of the unique physical tie of specifically female mothering, circumscribed by the function of caretaking. Identifying mothers solely with their roles as nurturers of their children's growing sense of self also loses sight of perspectives of a whole self and neutralizes other essential components with which to mentor. Although caring ethics represent a unique repertoire of attitudes and behaviours that some mothers might pass on to daughters, it is certainly not the full spectrum. Furthermore, the devaluation of maternal mentoring results in other significant qualities being overlooked and reduces the understanding and utilization of this potentially powerful tool for validation, growth, and empowerment between mothers and daughters.

We might also look to the self-reinforcing dynamic of the invisibility of maternal care in our culture to explain a lack of interest in maternal mentoring. The separation and concealment of mothering relations within individual households cut off from conventional social sources of affirmation and recognition often erodes a mother's self-confidence and capacity to use her lived reality to generate her own care or guide her daughter. This lack of ability to attain public acknowledgment of the responsibilities,

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values, and significance of mothering actively downgrades their worth, and their possibilities for shaping the understanding and conception of deeper human interactions. As a result, maternal mentorship is largely neglected and omitted from discourse.

The view of mentoring as "a lifelong process that brings mentors and the mentored close together at times, and further away at other times" (Mullen, Cox, Boettcher, and Adoue xxi) fits with the patterns of many mother-daughter relationships. As daughters attempt to make sense of their world, their relationships with mothers continuously change and move through different expressions of dependency and attachment in reaction to socio-political forces (Pipher). As such, maternal mentoring may occur without the mutual or deliberate willingness by both parties to participate. The struggle between the need to cling and the power to let go is also characteristic of maternal mentoring. Unfortunately, the tendency to view this tension only in negative terms eliminates many rich possibilities.

As Mullen *et al.* point out, the mentoring process consists of multiple, intertwining circles involving a complex mix of variables such as trust, reciprocity, compatibility, and elements of genuine care. Consistent with this image, it would appear that interpersonal skills such as compatibility and emotional support are most highly valued in effective mentoring experiences (Odell and Ferro). According to Sara Ruddick, trust takes on a special meaning in relationships between mothers and daughters that involves reflexivity and reciprocity. For infants, trusting their mothers is essential for protection against vulnerability. However, mothers must also trust their own ability to nurture as well as their young daughter's receptiveness to their judgments.

As daughters grow older, mothers must trust change and accept differences without feeling threatened, defensive, or overwhelmed. This maternal trust involves "an

expansive process of self-questioning, learning to appreciate new perspectives and to see the power of one's prejudices" (Bowden 34). Mothers who accept the otherness of their daughters, who are sensitive to their changing patterns, and who welcome them with their own willingness to change and develop themselves with and through a daughter's separate personhood offer a deeper level of mentoring that "balances vulnerability and submission, abandonment and domination" (Bowden 28). "Although mothering relationships are constituted in and through the intense dependency of children," Bowden argues, "they are also premised on acknowledgment of children's ca-

pacities to forge their own distinctive identities and to establish their own integrity with their own values" (29).

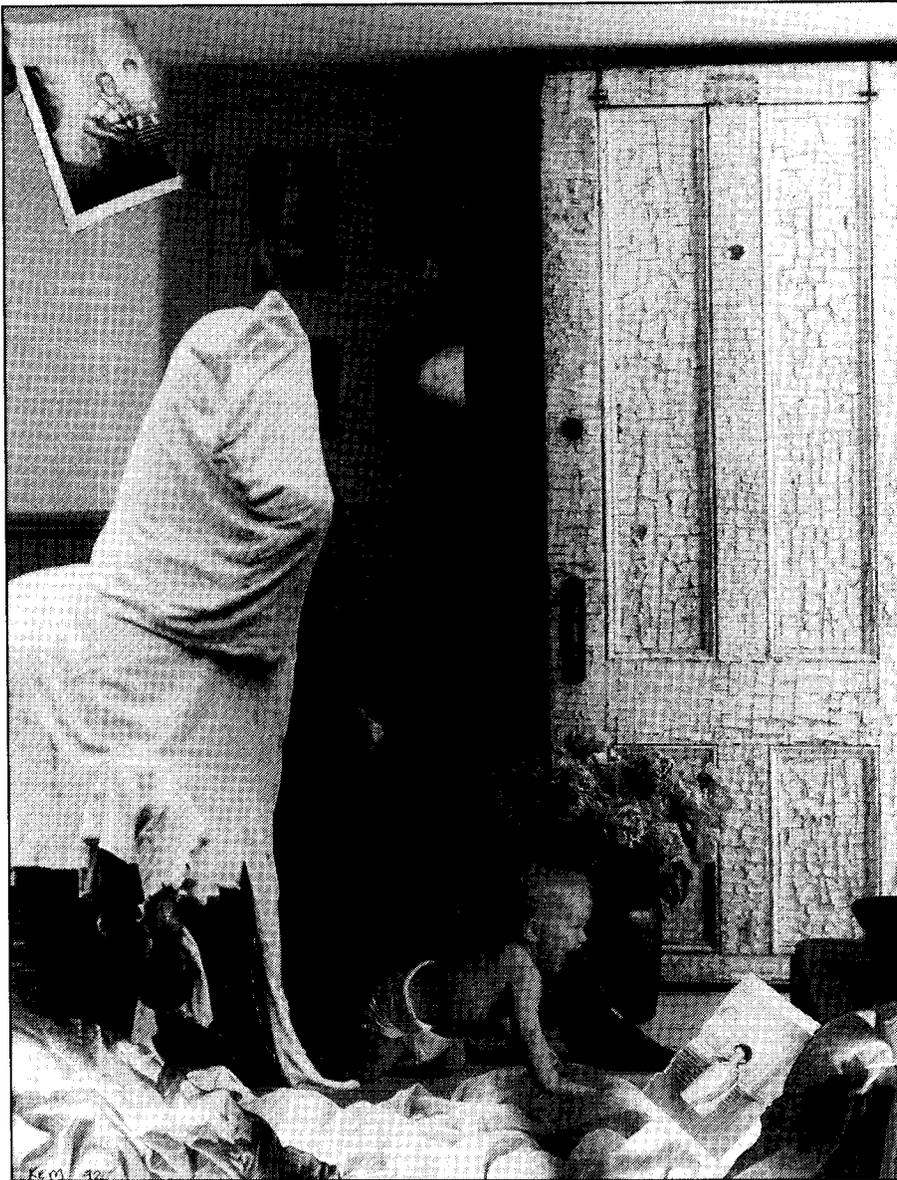
This article endorses this broader image of mentoring that emphasizes the reciprocal fostering of an inquiring stance rather than merely ensuring initial survival through the care or role-modelling of experts. Related to this self-reflective viewpoint, Field and Field contend that those who undertake the responsibility of mentoring others are usually people who are not afraid to question their own practices and who see themselves as innovative and egalitarian. According to Belenky, women who have a better sense of the power of their own minds seem more likely to think of their children as active agents who are capable of making meaningful choices and changes in their lives. Such mothers have the potential to influence their children's behaviour by engaging them in reflective dialogue and drawing out their problem-solving abilities. In other words, maternal mentors must do more than respond to the needs of others. They must also bring their own perspectives, values, and assumptions to the mentoring task, which influences the nature of the mentoring that develops (Hawkey).

Mothers can serve as powerful role-models for daughters not just with respect to the act of caring and advising but also with regard to consciously living a balanced life. Through the act of raising their daughters, mothers pass along a legacy about what the maternal role involves and how to undertake it. But, just how capable are mothers to serve as their daughters' mentors? How aware are mothers of the maternal wisdom they pass along to their daughters and how much control do they have in the process? Through the use of narrative inquiry, I will now explore these questions by examining one mother's struggles to problematize her internalized social constructions of white middle-class motherhood. This article charts a search for deeper insights about *what* mentoring involves and *how* it takes place as I moved through positions of unexamined confidence, self-doubt, skepticism, clarification, and eventually confirmation.

My story begins

In examining the chronicles of my daughter's first year of teaching, I was not surprised that the sensitive nurturing of the personal integrity and unique learning styles of each of her students was central to my daughter's humanistic mission in her classroom. She made every effort to help students feel successful and in control of their own learning. However, her own feelings of self-doubt often overshadowed words of encouragement by administrators and we were both left wondering why so little attention is paid to nurturing a new teacher's emotional sense of worth and to encouraging innovative, critically reflective teaching (Barell). My daughter confirmed for me that her emotional needs as a novice teacher were certainly as significant as the development of her pedagogy. As both her mother and an experienced teacher, I tried

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Kass Elan Morgain, "The Door is Open," collage, 16" x 13". 1993.
Photo: Cranbrook Photo

to fill her need for confirming feedback and practitioners advice with numerous pep talks and borrowed resources.

My initial conclusions focused on the merits of intergenerational family interdependency (Grumet; Lightfoot; and Roland Martin) and the need to dismantle barriers between home and school (Abbey 1996). Since many of my daughter's teaching practices mirrored my own, I was quick to judge the merits of my mentoring success on the fact that she seemed to apply many of my pedagogical beliefs. Similar to my own teaching she involved her students in active experiential learning, scientific discovery, mutual decision-making, literature-based reading, group co-operative interactions, and negotiated problem-solving. Through the mutual trust and respect we established during my classroom visits I was able to offer feedback on student interactions and initiate reflective discussions at the end of the day.

Although some of my mentoring acts were predictable, I was surprised at the amount of role-reversal operating during my visits to my daughter's classroom. Not only did her young students look to her as their authority figure, facilitator, and problem-solver, but my daughter's energy, insights, and creativity stimulated my pedagogy and challenged my expertise as well. What began as an assumed hierarchical interaction on my part gradually became an egalitarian partnership in which information and encouragement flowed in two directions simultaneously and diverse perspectives based on age and experience became complimentary and mutually rewarding.

However, as collaborative partners, my daughter and I became increasingly self-conscious and defensive about our work together and how some of her colleagues at school were perceiving me as interfering and overprotecting or judging my daughter as overdependent and incompetent. Staff and parental reactions to our unique mother-daughter collaboration included curiosity, defensiveness, and resentment. In reaction, as mother and daughter, we were conscious of our efforts to remain unobtrusive and non-judgmental, to seek approval and constantly justify our work together, and to engage in positive, open dialogue and feedback whenever possible.

My story takes an unexpected turn

Two years after the initial study was completed, my daughter confessed that she found teaching to be stifling, isolating, and unfulfilling. Although she was admired by parents, loved by her students, and respected by her supervisors, she was becoming very disillusioned with the profession. She admitted feeling vulnerable and insecure as a rookie, describing herself as an outsider stepping into well-guarded turf. She was also disappointed that some of her colleagues seemed to be complacent, closed-minded or burned-out and were not very receptive to collaborating or sharing their resources and ideas. Most of all, she resented the imposed changes to school curricula and standardized testing that reflected the needs of parents and politicians more than students. Often feeling forced to hide her own enthusiasm and resistance to traditional practices, this was definitely not the exciting place she had envisioned.

As most of my initial research conclusions were now disturbingly inappropriate or totally irrelevant, I was forced to re-examine my assumptions about maternal mentorship at a much deeper level. I was disappointed

and worried that I had not provided my daughter with safe passage after all and the blame I imposed on myself as a "bad" mother was overwhelming (Caplan; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky). After all, mothers were expected to protect their daughters from the culture even as they helped them fit into it (Pipher). I quickly interpreted her decision to take a leave of absence as an indication of my failure as a mentor and blamed my controlling and domineering nature, as well as my fostering of inappropriate and intrusive levels of co-dependency and over-protection (Beattie). I became concerned that perhaps I had sought validation of my own self-worth through my daughter above all else. Perhaps I did seek rewards from my mentorship after all and had expected to be included in her life as I include her in mine. I began to see my own need for attachment, relationship, and connection with my daughter as neurotic rather than healthy as I fell victim to the authorized myths of impositional separation. I was convinced that a mother's "success" depended, in part, on the degree to which her daughter conforms to cultural expectations (Caplan) and that daughters are mirrors of good mothering skills. I had internalized the "perfect daughter myth" in which a daughter's success is due partly to her mother. Thus, a mother's ambition need only be to raise successful daughters and then to live through their successes. In other words, a daughter's success validates her mother and her mother takes pride in her daughter's accomplishments. I began to realize that this was a powerful lesson I had learned from my mother.

Discussion

This narrative inquiry forced me to examine how my multiple social locations intersect with my changing biography. In doing so, I extended my image of maternal mentoring to include four additional concepts which I will now address. These include: caring for oneself; adapt-

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ing to ongoing transformations; honouring the power of dependency, individuation, and embodied wisdom; and dismantling systemic barriers between the home and the workplace.

To begin with, the interpretation of my data is directly influenced by my own beliefs and practices as mother and teacher in dialogue with an unconscious self that is stubbornly capable of resisting assimilation, transformation, and contradiction (Ellsworth). As a result, interpreting my daughter's decision to leave teaching oscillated between my fear of her giving up a financially secure job that is highly respected by society and my con-

cern that she did not find her work totally fulfilling. Was I willing to encourage her to keep working in an environment that deprived her of her own sense of well-being or could I risk advising her to listen to her intuition, care for herself, and follow her path of heart into the unknown? As a mentor and a mother, I needed to develop a broader holistic framework where human interdependence and close relationships are viewed as central for social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

Amy Rossiter acknowledges contradictions in her own experiences of mothering by confronting the perception that her mothering is a response not simply to the demands of her children but to a social system that devalues her understandings and constrains her needs. She advocates a structural reorganization of mothering that encourages both a mother's respect for her own need to take care of herself as well as social responsibility for childrearing. I now realize that the notion of "ideal" mothering practices which my mother set in place were produced by the structures of her own white, western patriarchal culture even though they probably often contradicted her own personal needs. Consequently, I now believe that strong mentors are in-tune with their own needs.

Secondly, mentoring a daughter involves accepting ambiguity and the willingness to let go. After investing enormous amounts of energy learning to bond with children and incorporate them into your life, learning to disengage creates renewed difficulties, tensions, and anxieties for some mothers. Mercer, Nichols, and Doyle point out that "daughters never completely individuate from their mothers and the process of individuation is a life-long endeavor" (106). They also suggest that over the course of a lifetime "transactional processes between parent and child lead to developmental change within each" (92) as they continually re-evaluate each other. In Sara Ruddick's landmark work, she advocates a style of maternal thinking that is open-ended and that accepts ambiguity, complexity, and multiple options rather than seeking rigid and static patterns of behaviour.

Thirdly, I believe that recognizing the power of embodied wisdom strengthens maternal mentorships. Social constructions of "ideal" motherhood pass along a legacy of unexamined assumptions and resistance that invalidate the power of mutual dependency between mothers and daughters. Even with the best of intentions, mothers often mentor ideals of the patriarchy which serve to disempower their daughters. As well, they face what some feminists call "the schism" which divides generations of women and which stems from one of the roles assigned to mothers in a patriarchal society, that of "the enforcers of ever more costly losses in girls" freedom to do and to be" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 39). At an unconscious level, mothers and daughters are encouraged to separate, disrupting their dialogue and encouraging ignorance of their embodied wisdom and intuitive ways of knowing (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky).

According to Debold *et al.* (1993), any attempt to

understand women's epistemology needs to engage directly with how recognized knowledge has been engendered. Mothers, identified primarily with body in western culture, are positioned outside the realm of authorized knowledge as mentors and their subjective thinking is considered to be a less evolved, mature or normal way of knowing. As a result, women are torn from their embodied wisdom as an unacceptable form of rationality by these unitary theories that bifurcate the "lower" bodily material experience from the "higher" disembodied intellectual. By discounting their own embodied wisdom, women are often split from their own power to authorize their experiences as real and as knowledge.

My daughter's struggle to resist external authorities who prescribed how she should feel, think, and act at school may have led to her discounting her own lived knowledge and to her giving up on developing alternate methods of knowing. Mothers, as mentors, would do well to apply the advice of Belenky *et al.* by encouraging their daughters to recognize and utilize a variety of ways of thinking that includes subjectivity and relational knowing, as well as constructed knowing that integrates both personal and authorized knowledge and emphasizes the relationship of the self and other.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that while I initially focused on mentoring in the public domain as an educator, my most significant mentoring at this point in time seems to involve a merging of the private and public domains. As I reflect back on both the personal and professional aspects of my mother-daughter collaborative study, it becomes increasingly evident that the kind of familial interdependency my daughter and I established in the workplace was not only rare but seldom encouraged or rewarded. From this study, it is clear that systemic barriers operate within schools that serve to devalue and deny the role of maternal support and nurturance at all levels (Abbey 1996). It was all too evident that it was my position as professor of education and not my role as

mother that legitimized and validated my involvement in my daughter's classroom.

This raises questions about why the educational system seldom affords opportunities to strengthen and encourage female relational experiences of care and support that merge home and school roles rather than diminishing, inhibiting, and denying long-lasting forms of maternal mentorship. Dismantling barriers between home and school to allow a broader range of learning partnerships, intergenerational collaborations, and insights to operate within all levels of the educational structure warrants further examination.

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Conclusion

The way we see our daughters influences the way we study them. Although we are socialized by our mothers to fit into the world they know and trust, we resist their socialization, each in our own way (Walkerline and Lucey). By resisting or subsuming ourselves in our mother's agenda, we emerge knowing more about ourselves in the end. I had confidently assumed I would pass to my daughter wiser lessons and role-model strategies more suited to her needs than my mother modelled for me. Little did I realize that, in fact, I was passing on all of the same ambiguities and contradictions. As I widen my reflective lens I am able to see how taking a leave of absence from teaching would allow my daughter to define her own successes and construct her own frameworks for making a difference in the lives of others. She has bravely stepped into the perilous terrain I could not save her from. In the end, my daughter's independent authority helped to make my significant mentorship role more visible, accessible, and realistic to me.

Rather than identifying *with* me, perhaps my daughter had initially been afraid to be anything *but* me and her need for acceptance led her to the security of my profession by default. Her decision to resist the path I travel has served as a mirror allowing me to gaze deeply at my own acts of resistance in a new way. In the end, we can never be sure what we pass along in maternal relationships. I am beginning to understand that through my own rebellious acts I have unwittingly modelled the need for self-definition and self-actualization in my own life as a single, working mother who continually questions conventions and challenges the status quo. Perhaps, more than the traditional elements of maternal care and wise counsel, I have mentored tenacity, resilience, determination, and a certain degree of impulsive courage. I now wonder if resistance, in whatever form it takes, is a common experience among women of all cultures and has the potential to profoundly influence the quality of their mentoring relations with daughters. I suggest that this concept warrants further study.

The failure to follow one's own perceptions and values may encourage self-disrespect and habits of unreflective submission in both mothers and their daughters. "Maternal abdications of authority mean imposing unreflected prescriptions that demand children's blind obedience and suppress their creative interpretations, while confirming mother's self-denial and compliance" (Bowden 33). Maternal mentoring takes on a new meaning when such dominant values are dismantled. In fact, the mentoring becomes the dismantling and both mothers and daughters serve, in turn, as the reciprocal mentors for each other in order to validate their claims and honour their destinies within their own subjective space. According to Ruddick "mothers' integrity and confidence in their own reflectively appropriate values is crucial to the caring training of children" (116). Mothers who are in tune with their own

judgments in relation to dominant values and have a sense of their own empowerment and integrity foster their children's responsiveness to those judgments through trust rather than domination. Such reciprocal mentors serve by receiving as well as giving and by being open to change themselves.

I encourage other mothers and daughters to resist separation in their personal and professional lives and instead to strengthen reciprocal mentoring relationships that enhance empowerment, agency, and transformation in both domains. In the end, perhaps all that mothers can hope to mentor for their daughters is an inquiring stance, a disposition to be critically vigilant, and the willingness to continually reflect, openly and honestly, on the deeper meanings of their life experiences. By doing so, hopefully our daughters can learn to believe in themselves and make brave choices.

Sharon M. Abbey, Ed.D. is an assistant professor as well as a founding member of the Centre on Collaborative Research, at the Faculty of Education at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario where she teaches courses in curriculum studies, holistic education, and gender issues. She is the president of the Canadian Association for Studies of Women in Education, vice-president of the Association for Research on Mothering and a member of the Board of Directors for the National Foundation of Body Image and Eating Disorders. Her research interests include the roles of mothers in education for which she received the FWTAO Ruby Kinkaid Doctoral Studies Award. Recent publications include the co-edited collection of essays Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns (Second Story Press, 1998).

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SANDRA ALLAND

The Rise of the Progressive Conservatives

They're burning witches again
(I can smell it from my
kitchen window at night.)

Barbecued women
always clog my sinuses.

Sandra Alland's poetry has been published in Fireweed, The Lazy Writer, and Black Cat 115.

SHARON SINGER

raising daughters

face it, I told myself early on
you'll never get it right
won't find the perfect balance
that spotlights each snare
sustains ordinary job and uncommon bliss
hell, who of us doesn't know
there's a land mine
on the front doorstep;
does our world really need more
fearful human beings?

trust yourself
I tell each daughter
what do you feel in the centre of you?
there's a voice
in your belly, by your spine
on your tongue
find it
count on it
nothing will guide you as well

times will be wondrous
I tell them
predict nothing less
things will get messy
I tell them
depend on it
you'll be broken, betrayed
trust yourself through it all
when confused and undone
trust yourself still
in the unknowing, honour yourself
it's a certain way through

Sharon Singer's poetry has appeared in numerous publications in Canada and the U.S., including Sunstone, Canadian Literature, and Writing For Our Lives.