



Caring-Enough Mothers

Alix Pirani

In this article I want to look at the mother-who-doesn't-care, the one who elbows her children out of her way. She is the mother who, when she gives birth to a severely disabled weakling, wishes she could, as many animals do, kill it or actively leave it to die. She is the woman who has an abortion.

This aspect of motherhood is reflected in the dark Goddess, the destructive and

highly seductive one, the fatally attractive, who may lure you to your death or incontinently devour you. She is the mother who gives you life in the body, lures your soul into incarnation, and then sooner or later kills your body. She is inseparable from the light, benign, protective life-enhancing Goddess. Usually they are two-in-one. The one-who-cares and the one-who-doesn't-care combined

Alix Pirani is on the training staff of the Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling. She is the author of The Absent Father: Crisis and Creativity and editor of the anthology The Absent Mother: Restoring the Goddess to Judaism and Christianity. This article is the second part of a talk given to the Bristol Psychotherapy Association in December 1991; the first part appeared in the S&S 'Mothers' issue in July 1993.

in ambivalence.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition the dark one is Lilith, sister to the Shekhinah. The question of Lilith's absence and presence can throw light on our ideas about mothering. Lilith actually cares passionately about the fullness of life because she is so acutely aware of death. But she doesn't care too much about protecting and taking care of babies — or men. So she has always carried our culture's disowned ruthlessness: our infanticidal feelings, sexual and oral greed, murderousness. The more they are disowned, the more she is scapegoated, darkened, turned into a devil. But the dark Goddess is the mother when she is in the place of death-in-birth, of death-in-sexual-ecstasy, a symbol of transformation, and central to our creative life therefore. She is one with what is called the red phase in the menstrual cycle — the time around blood-flow when a woman is not, this time, pregnant, but free to be sexual and creative, un-motherly. And is bedeviled by the tension and taboos inculcated by patriarchal society, which result in an undue loathing of the blood and messiness of her body — the menstrual blood that for so long has not been spoken of, a secret not to be mentioned in the family, or beyond, not mentioned in psychoanalysis or psychotherapy. Lilith is the curse. And the Shekhinah is the blessing: she of the white phase of menstruation, the time of ovulation, when motherhood may be achieved. The orthodox Jewish system of restricting sexual relations to that time in effect keeps women in their role as mothers and denies them their non-maternal sexual and creative powers.

To make Lilith absent is to court disaster, for we know that the mother who totally denies her own anger, frustration and murderousness will probably produce violent children, or violence in their father. That has been going on in our society for centuries. Today when I see the appalling cult of violence, the unending male obsession with making war, I ask 'Where are the women? Where are the mothers?' I try to ask it without hysteria, in stillness, because I trust that the caring mothers are there, if invisible. But they *are* invisible, and my hysteria and craziness — many women's — is inevitable in this insane world. Lilith is the hysteric, the Shekhinah the schizoid. The one is banished, fleeing to the desert to shriek her abuse and despair and scorn at the patriarchal regime. The other wanders in the desert, out of her mind with grief, hoping one day to find a better regime, a better father to return to and love.

In order to trace the origins of the Goddess's banishment, since this dynamic still works so powerfully in our internal and external worlds, I returned to the Bible and looked at the story of Cain and Abel. Murderous conflict between brothers is still with us, still the front-page story. And again I asked 'Where was Eve? Where was the mother? Why was she unable to prevent that disaster?' I decided to explore it as a case for family therapy (now published in *Free Associations* No.21) and found that Eve's ineffectuality is caused by her having no mother, no sense of self, no self-worth. The absent mother was Lilith, censored out of the Bible, consort of God and of Adam, scapegoated, returning to Eden

briefly as the tempting serpent, her suppressed accumulated negativity ultimately manifesting in Cain's murderousness. The psychological exploration was extraordinarily revealing, but it left me with a sense of great loss and sadness about that passionate woman who is absent from the story and from our internal and external mothers, who has been split off and seen only as sexual temptress or devil, endlessly fascinating to men but unreclaimed. However, I'm glad to say she is being reclaimed by women in workshops, in the feminist movement in America, in poetry and art. Perhaps her most heartwarming appearance in recent literature is as Shug in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

In clinical experience Lilith is often around in the form of the natural mother of a client who has been adopted, the absent uncaring one who gave away her child, the shadow behind the present caring mother. Sometimes she is the unmentionable sexual wanton, a contrast to the non-sexual adoptive mother.

Similarly Lilith is experienced by adults who have left a turbulent and treacherous motherland and come to an adoptive new motherland. There are large numbers of such immigrants and, for their offspring, coming to therapy in Britain offers them very ambivalent foster-mothering.

Now I want to say something about the features of the therapist's work over the past decade or so that have challenged my view of mother's influence.

First, the issue of incestuous abuse — mainly by fathers, mainly of daughters, though mothers and sons are sometimes involved in these practices too. This

whole area is fraught with great pain, potentially dangerous hysteria and politicizing. It is undoubtedly a powerful symbol, and shocking revelation, of patriarchal power and irresponsibility. And nowhere else does one feel so acutely that question: Where was mother? Why was she so absent that she allowed this to happen? What degree of collusion was there? The absent mother always colludes, if only at an unconscious level. Even the present mother colludes, who may watch with equanimity while her husband abuses his daughter, verbally or physically, in more or less subtle ways. Yet the sad fact is that the insensitivity which dominates here — the same insensitivity that enables people to kill and torture indiscriminately, that experiences other persons as unfeeling objects — is the result of the alienation of the body. This stems from the absence, from birth onwards, of a healthy relationship with mother's body, an alienation that originates in Western religious conditioning. Our feelings about our bodies come directly from the way they were loved and respected. No fully self-respecting, self-loving woman who is happy in her body will allow the abuse of her body or of her daughter's body, or fail to protect herself or her daughter from an intrusive or violent man.

So when the violation begins, what happens? Those who recognize stupidity and brutality for what it is will immediately, if they can, remove themselves. Those who don't or can't do this remove themselves by splitting mind from body — at the worst, traumatically. We often hear the statement 'I couldn't believe it was happening — I said, this can't be

happening, he's not like that', and the battering or the repeated rape goes on. Years later this returns in the therapeutic setting and the woman again says 'Did it really happen? Is it all my fantasy? Do you believe me? Am I accusing him unjustifiably?' And again, implicit, is the question: 'What was I, am I, doing wrong?' This situation is a paradigm of the whole global crisis: women are stunned by the enormity of what is happening and lose their power to resist.

Yes, we do have to learn, as women, what we do wrong, but without a debilitating sense of guilt. Creative guilt comes from our sense of having dishonoured ourselves, betrayed ourselves and our bodies. And whether or not these things did really happen we have to learn what meaning the scenario has, and how to go forward and change this scenario for the future. Which means learning to love and understand and honour our bodies.

We need also to look at the betrayal of the body in psychotherapy itself. The message we must draw from the many instances of sexual abuse in our own area which are coming to light is that psychoanalysis, verbal psychotherapy has too long persisted in — ostensibly — excluding the body from its practice and has in effect betrayed it. Practitioners of body therapies work with careful respect and preservation of boundaries; they can only do this if they are clear and comfortable with their own body boundaries. Whether or not they intend to work with the body, all psychotherapists should experience, for their own health and clarity, some kind of body therapy. The most powerful is neo-Reichian bioenergetic therapy which is an inclusive body-mind-

spirit therapy, but it is possible to combine other practices and techniques with verbal work. Also important is dynamic work such as psychodrama. Whatever emotional, mental or spiritual progress is made in therapy, it will not last unless the body holds it, and learns how to hold it as it did in early childhood — through movement and touch. If the therapy is static and the therapist remote, there will inevitably be regression to inertia and contempt for one's body in subsequent times of crisis.

This too relates to our wider national context, and I want to talk about the environment we have been working in over the last ten years — something I find it hard to do without passion. It is an experience which is hard to contain, because we have been at once so tightly held and so hopelessly unheld, and this has come directly from a mother-figure who was the product of the national psyche, who lodged herself firmly in that psyche, and is still there — visually absent now, but shrieking from the desert to which she was banished, seemingly unable to grasp what that desert is about, playing on people's guilt feelings at having discarded the one whom they allowed to abuse them for so long.

In these last ten years the number of people coming to therapy from social work, education, the health service, civil service, business world, has increased markedly. Their day-to-day problems of stress and frustration have presented acute challenges to us; how do we help people live within oppressive, manic, desperately underfunded institutions? How do we help them care for, mother, those they work with? These carers often un-

consciously reproduce the plight of their own clients in their behaviour in therapy, acting the hopeless client or rebellious disaffected teenager, implicitly asking us 'OK. How would you deal with this?' More and more these people have been working on their relationship with mother and with mother-figures of a threatening kind and seeing, but often wanting to deny, that Mrs Thatcher was what it was about: they tried to laugh that off. The denial is there because really to confront the power that she has had over those institutions is truly frightening. Just as it is now truly frightening to me to contemplate that half the nation and half the Tory party still wants to hold on to her regime.

We can talk endlessly about the psychology of Thatcherism and of Thatcher herself. There are two or three aspects I find interesting in terms of her woman-power. She behaves, some have said, like a nanny. I see a headmistress. Also a governess in the old tradition whereby the lower middle class woman went into a family or school to maintain her gentility and wielded great power in that role. These are all substitute mothers, note — Mother is absent. The mother of the average Tory politician who went from nanny to prep and public school is a figure of romantic idealisation and remoteness, keeping the male at the emotional age of 8 or 13, serving to harden and brutalise him for power and militarism and/or to become some woman's plaything. She promotes attitudes of contempt for teachers and learning which filter through to all sections of British society.

But we have to look behind Margaret

Thatcher: see how unmothered she is herself. Her own mother is invisible: she is the grocer's daughter, a daughter of the patriarch. And in the political line she has no mother: she is the first woman Prime Minister and has had to go it alone, unsupported by any feminine community. More to the point is that Mother Earth is tying a noose around her and around us and Thatcher embodies our defences against owning that, together with an unconscious acting out of the depriving malignant breast. The resources are running out and we have the rampant chaotic violence of people fighting one another for survival, made more desperate by the threat of global annihilation that overhangs us all. We kept Mrs Thatcher in place to hold at bay the fear of being engulfed by the rest of the world, which has threatened us ever since we lost the imperial power we once had. Her reaction to loss, separation, death, has been manic: this denied depression has been given to the rest of the population. There is still scant sign that the recession is being understood: that we have to give up, with appropriate mourning, the illusion that we can all be rich, well-fed, endlessly fuelled, armed, protected, automobile. The world economy, the breast, *is* running dry, and any government is going to have to face that squarely and stop treating the people like little children who must be kept quiet with sweets and toy cars.

However, one thing which has held the balance for us in these years has been the existence of that other mother-figure, the Queen. With the grandmother Elizabeth, sister Margaret, a number of daughter figures, and their daughters, we

have again a four-generation community of women. They too are playing a powerful role in the national psyche, and I think a largely benign feminine role, since they, and all the royals, can and do lead a symbolic life, and have a power which stays outside and alongside the executive power of government. They are our polytheistic gods, and their lives resemble the Olympic soap operas and provide a mythology for us to play with. The Queen at the head of her family has always offered a model of caring, and an intelligent and respectful handling of conflict. Her sensitivity to others' needs is a feature which was sorely lacking in Mrs Thatcher.

At this time of year, of course, the nature of mother, of birth, comes into question in acute ways, both symbolic and real. We feel the painful contrast between the simple birth in the manger, the frugal lifestyle, the spiritually devoted mother, and the lifestyle and mothers around us at Christmas. Still, we have there a model of motherhood which, though tainted as it has been by perverse interpretations of what virginity means, is an imaginal gift that brings us close to an understanding of divine and human love.

For there are times when the loving mother does seem to surround us, when we are one with the natural, rural world. It is the sort of love that can't help but love, the mother's wholehearted delight at another's being in her world. We long for that and can hardly bear its absence. But mostly we can go on if we know that such love is available to us from someone, somewhere, if only in our images of benign gods or beings who care about us. We have to cultivate those images, so

that the love we need will be present for us.

That, to me, is the business of therapy and healing: the re-creation of the capacity to love, be loved and fully alive, even in the present context of deadening hateful realities. Healing works through active imagination, the arts, the cultivation of the body's health, the shedding of guilt. Guilt does not heal: love heals. The task of maintaining that simplicity in a complicated, damaged and guilt-ridden world is not easy. As therapists we too are in danger of being paralysed by guilt. We must support one another, and cease clinging to whatever our egos are over-invested in: this theory, that performance, the size of our fees and bank balances, our professional images. It has to be beyond ego, once the ego of the profession, so to speak, has overcome tendencies towards disintegration and can stay whole.

So, if there is a good mother — Goddess? — godmother? it's perhaps she who oversees us, tolerates and helps us laugh at our imperfections, and teaches us, firmly, how we can manage and overcome them. She will do that out of a selflessness, perhaps a sacrifice of self, but not self-denial, that can only come when she has a strong sense of herself. So she becomes a medium for the healing power of love.

