Mothers — Absent and Present

Alix Pirani

When I came to look at the title I had chosen for this talk I saw that, as I had very recently compiled a book called *The Absent Mother*, I needed to make 'mother' somehow present again. As a mother of four adults, one of whom is a mother, I do still experience discomfort and unease about the possibility that I might even now for my children be too present, too controlling, or too absent, neglectful. That discomfort and unease itself reflects the ironic saying: 'A mother's place is in the wrong'. So many people tell women what they ought to do or be and make them feel guilty if they don't or aren't. It started with God and Eve and it has hardly changed since. "What have I done wrong?" or "What am I doing wrong?" is a common question of women, stated or unstated, and the reason for the high percentage of women coming to counselling or therapy. The willingly referred patients. Eve is the archetypal referred woman patient. God did it all wrong — created a grossly imperfect world full of fallible minds in fallible bodies, and Eve ended up with the guilt and the belief that it was her fault

and she'd probably go on getting it wrong for ever, so she and Adam had better work and suffer to expiate that. And we all know the clients who come to therapy and who believe, often with the therapist's collusion, that the process itself is all work and suffering — in order to achieve redemption.

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Well, my talk, I decided mischievously, is not going to be produced by work and suffering. I shall enjoy myself, and play around with some ideas on this subject. And I said to myself, "I only have to be a good-enough mother (or lecturer), and anyway Winnicott is all in favour of play..." So there I was once more asking for permission and definition by male authority ("Dear Winnicott, our good-enough father which art in heaven"). A student in training recently expressed to me her anxiety that she hadn't been a good-enough mother because her children hadn't had transitional objects like Linus blankets. Am I good-enough enough?

So I began to wander around this subject, aware that there are so many labels attached to mothering, so many books about it, theories, investigations of those early times in her womb and thereafter. And so much implied judgement, so many oughts. At one time I became convinced that many male therapists were in the business of doing mother's job better than she did. When the birth process was being explored in the 1970s, in primal therapy and in new approaches to obstetrics, I was the only woman and mother in Britain seriously involved in the therapeutic investigation: the heavyweight men appropriated the whole area; and often made us mothers feel we had been doing it wrong.

I certainly don't want to prescribe or proscribe in any categorical way. If you've come here secretly hoping to find out how you or anyone else *ought* to be as a mother, you'll be disappointed. I can lend you a very funny little book called *How to be a Jewish Mother*. The message I've taken from reading it is that the most comfortable and comforting mother is probably the one who can laugh at herself.

Wandering around the subject brought to me the image of a woman wandering alone in unknown territory, perhaps having absented herself deliberately, gone into the desert to find out who she really is, away from the claims and demands of family and society's attempts to define her. And for the desert I saw the empty barren landscape of dreams often reported to me, and ones I've had myself: desolate stretches of land, sometimes with the occasional wreck of a car or a building, such as we saw in pictures of the Gulf War.

Then came to mind the Goddesses in mythology who wander, unable to find a place to rest, to land. And in particular the Goddess of the Wandering Jew, of the diaspora, the Shekhinah, who is the focal image of *The Absent Mother*. Her status is exactly that: the divinity who is always absent, unable to return fully, either to God the Father, or to her people on earth, yet believed to be always present, immanent, though we may not be aware of it. And since her role is to find form on earth for divinity and love, it's not surprising that she finds that difficult, for she too doesn't want to be tied down or narrowly defined. Someone may temporarily define her, learn through her what love and divinity are, how to express them in art, poetry, prayer, life. But if they try to fix her too rigidly with their definitions she is off again, elusive, wandering.

Here I want to make a plea for human mothers that they be given space to wander, to be absent. So many need it. For

many the therapeutic hour is the only such space and, like Eve, they have to pay for it and justify it by working and suffering in it.

I think too of the people — especially women — who come to therapy and speak of their feeling that mother was not really there for them. That she was absent being something other than mother — at work maybe. Or that she was there but so often engrossed, with other children, or with her own feelings — depression? mourning? inappropriately in love? Or with her own creative work, art or writing perhaps. She was remote, unaware of her child's needs. Absent-minded. Many women have felt the pain and loss for them in that. But they do need to explore that space which was, is, mother's.

What, after all, is absent-mindedness? In its extreme state — pathological schizoid withdrawal — it can be that you're out of your mind. Or your mind has gone out of your body. In the more common state of abstraction, distraction, you lose your 'presence of mind'. You may alienate those around you. But absent-mindedness, the state of reverie, is well-known to be a condition vital to creativity. Marion Milner, that inspiring mother figure, has written cogently about this. Reverie is there in therapy sessions, where the client is freely associating, fantasising, on the borders of a dream world, lost, incoherent; and the therapist may be lost also. And, we hope, the therapist doesn't make the mistake of trying to push in some direction, out of a premature desire for safety, but can stay in that place of not knowing, until there is some hint of what seed wishes to grow in the desert.

Now I have a model where mother and child, or mother-therapist and client, are able to tolerate the absent-mindedness that is in the space between them: the awareness of absence which is their mutual presence. They should not rush to fill it. I see too the mother coming home from work, anxious to fill the space with talk, to apologise, compensate, and inject guilt into herself and the child. She doesn't allow for that confrontation, in which we know that the idealised all-loving mother is an illusion. Our anger about that, our deeper grief that she never will be perfect and ever-present with us, body to body, is where our motive to grow beyond her begins: in the place of the barren mother, the dried-up breast, the desert, where we wander, without material sustenance or tangible response to our yearnings.

Barrenness is a condition that causes much anxiety. Sometimes that is because a woman's whole intended lifestyle and relationship to her husband and society is dependent on her being a mother. But now, in this contraceptive age, the anxiety is different, and many women who wish to pursue careers, who are independent of marriage; experience, as they approach forty, a crisis what we might call post-midlife pre-menopause crisis. At an instinctive and body level they fear being barren, becoming dried-up: an old maid perhaps, realising that achievements in the world of work don't ultimately compensate for unmet deep physical and emotional maternal needs — to give and receive love and nurturance. And often in therapy they may find that it was their own unsatisfactory mothering that alienated them from be-

coming mothers — we would say they don't have a good internalised mother. Much feminist thinking and therapy is about what Adrienne Rich called 'The mother I never had', about that internal emptiness, the want of a strong feminine ego, a self-defining self that has self-worth. And the major work over the past decades has been to re-image mother, to reclaim models of strong womanhood, to fill that emptiness. Again we see that it has been by going into that empty space where mother was not that the growth of new images, new personhood, has been beginning. Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father* says that women have for centuries known the state of 'non-being' and that ultimately they will help men, T.S. Eliot's 'hollow men', to come through *their* spiritual barrenness. Men too will have to risk going into the desert, as Robert Bly would bear out, to find their true creative potency.

The word barren, like so many in our language, has heavy Biblical overtones. It carries a quality of guilt connected to the patriarchal valuation of woman: a barren wife is a tragic failure and liable to be discarded since she can't produce an heir. Yet what we are discovering about the pre-Biblical matriarchal priestesses, who ministered to cultures where there was still a Goddess, is that many were deliberately celibate, choosing not to have children but to devote their creativity to the divine purpose. So that the many stories in the Bible, starting with Sarah, wife of Abraham, of the barren woman who finally, miraculously, gives birth, are tales about how the priestess of the Goddess is turned into a good Jewish mother for patriarchy. You can see how these two strands became interwoven in the Virgin Mary, and how the celibate priestess reappears in women saints and present-day nuns. Childless and post-menopausal women are still considered pitiable in our day. At the same time mothers have abandoned that spiritual role they once had.

It's the absence of spiritual mothering from which we most suffer, of the mother who is not 'devoted to her children' but devoted to something beyond them and able to bring that into her love for them. That statement to which we all perforce arrive: 'I'll never get from my mother the love I wanted and need, and I have to accept that' usually refers to love expressed through touch, holding, food, interest, mental stimulation. But what was probably missing and most needed is the love, comfort, wisdom that mother can give when touch or holding or vital energy is impossible, the food has run out, and death from starvation in the barren desert may indeed be imminent. This requires in the mother spiritual strength, and strength to accept that she herself may be experienced as the persecutory devouring monster whose hunger is overwhelming.

The work of Melanie Klein and Winnicott around mothering and its recapitulation in the therapeutic interaction has been of the first importance to me in my work. But at times I have wanted to show them a photo of a starving African woman holding her dying baby at her empty breast, and ask them what they can say about that, sitting in middle-class comfort in London. I've come to see that it was their failure to deal with death that concerns me. They were,

with characteristic British insularity, ignoring the horrific devastations that were happening beyond these shores in their times: for that image of mother and baby could have come from Auschwitz or Hiroshima.

It is not so easy now to keep death out; and we have people outside our therapy rooms and hospitals who are physically and emotionally starving and have no hope of being materially mothered by us. My fantasy when I look at the African woman is that she doesn't need Klein and Winnicott: she transcends their concerns and is able to be with her child in the place of death because of her powerful spirituality, perhaps her sense that there is a great earth mother who will take them both back into her womb. The mother Goddess who is always present, even when the personal mother is absent.

For us in the West it is the mother Goddess who is absent also, and we try to cure our spiritual disease and fear of the body's death, by hyperactivity, eating, clinging to the nearest body to try to reclaim mother's safe body. But without nourishment for the heart and soul, without the vital connection with soil, we will never be satisfied.

This crisis of mothering, this sense of lost connectedness, has produced a number of books exploring the mother-daughter relationship. The title of one by the American psychoanalyst Kathie Carlson is *In Her Image: The Unhealed Daughter's Search for her Mother.* She writes of her own life: her absent mother, the grandmother who raised her and then turned against her violently in a state of schizophrenia, and her own difficulties now in relating to her daughter. She too found that it was the spiritual mother, the image of the Goddess they had all needed, and she believes women need her now to heal their wounds. For us to feel whole, healthy, holy, held, we need the transpersonal mother who reflects and mirrors what we may be and become, just as Winnicott's mother reflects and mirrors what her baby may be and become.

Even so there is, as always, the paradox: women suffer great pain in their woundedness and deprivation, in their inability to find overt power, and in their cultivation of victimhood and manipulative behaviours in order to exercise power; nevertheless there is often a continuity from generation to generation, a resilience, a native or folk wisdom or silent sympathy that gives them beneficial strength. Intuition, psychic and body connection are part of this. The Goddess and her mystery is there, though unnamed, and she shares the condition of invisibility which is the lot of so many women. The role of grandmother is often very important: she whose presence holds the mother's absence for the child. Particularly in this generation grandmothers are there for children whose parents are divorced; they carry a set of values to which the parents don't adhere but unconsciously long for: the safety of

an undivided stable family grouped around a dependable mother. Often the child raised by grandmother shares her wisdom — and folly! — and has a particularly spiritual, innocent way of being in the world, and may be very unworldly.

Another book which reveals the nature of this continuity in a world where women's lives are changing so rapidly, is Kim Chernin's autobiography *In Mother's House*. Her grandmother was an immigrant to America from Russia, a victim not only of the pogroms of the Tsarist regime but of her brutal husband also. Of her large number of children, Rose, Kim's mother, became a militant Marxist, and her consequent absences from her daughter were acutely painful, as was her imprisonment during the McCarthy era. Kim herself, poet and therapist, has a daughter who is now seemingly free of such hardships but lives in the uneasy contemporary American climate. But the awareness and communication between these two is much greater than what went before, and it prompts Kim to go back to her now ageing mother Rose and re-open a dialogue, and together they look at Rose's mother's role in all this.

I see this process happening everywhere now among thinking women: they are trying to recreate the image of mother, and the daughters help their mothers or mother-images to change and so have new models of maturity they can live by. The raised consciousness is, so to speak, retrospectively reflective. The recent exhibition of photographs at the Bristol Watershed, *A Daughter's View*, was exactly that in visual terms. The image of the Wise Older Woman, Grandmother, Crone, Wisdom Goddess, is being cultivated, partly because she is an inevitable autogenous archetype, particularly needed now that the Wise Older Man, the senex, has signally failed us; partly because of the challenge of our increased longevity. This longevity will have I think a marked impact on psychotherapy, which will look less and less to the past and more to the future as its central concern. 'It's about time' is a phrase of *double entendre* which comes to mind here. We heal past distresses by rewriting history in the present and actively imagining the future. It needs all the wisdom and imagination we can muster to transform our present world.

There's another point to be made here.

The future lies in our capacity to collaborate, to get together socially in creative ways. At the moment group work, interpersonal and organisational, moral education, the pursuit of justice, the politics of humanity, seem more urgent than further cultivation of the individual ego, leaving it in a state of analysis interminable, self-centred and unable to find meaning in a wider human context. This is where the model of mother and child as the central metaphor of psychotherapy has its limitations. We may still be hooked on the prevalent guilt about mothering, and on middle-class cosiness. Harlow's monkey experiments highlighted the damage caused by maternal deprivation, but subsequent experiments showed that deprivation of peer contact was more damaging — indeed, early developmental 'faults' are often corrected by free play in the group. As we know, children in the playground work through the distresses of home life. Provided they have the strength to take part in the play. That strength, once there is basic ego-development, may have to come by mother pushing the child away, perhaps ruthlessly denying it her presence. Father should be helping here, if he is not absent.

The fact is, there is a ruthless toughness required to survive in present-day Western society: without it there is no hope of humanity surviving. This is not the toughness of the inflated belligerent ego, but that of the person who, to preserve his or her boundaries — and sanity — must face the harsh reality of what human nature is like, and balance altruism with self-protection. For much as psychotherapists, and mothers, want to have faith in and promote humane and loving values, they should have no illusions as to the amount of inhumanity, brutality and stupidity there is in the world. Simple healthy aversion and hatred are necessary: to try and 'cure' them in individual therapy keeps us secluded at home with mother asking "What are we doing wrong?"

And there is a limit to how much one can care: when we acknowledge how much we don't care and don't want to, then we can begin to organise interdependence and independence, achieve morality, community and welfare in realistic ways. To do this again we have to be in that amoral space where mother and child share the pain of mutual disaffection and can stay in it, resigning themselves to unknown meaning. To quote T.S. Eliot: "Teach us to care and not to care: Teach us to sit still."