Mothers and Daughters: Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives

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Teaching English is about sharing stories and discovering more about ourselves in the process. During the difficult teenage years, literature offers a way to talk about life's problems and relationships in a safe format. Students can look objectively at issues they are completely subjective about when it comes to their own lives. A multigenre approach offers a rich opportunity for students of all learning styles to explore the issues they care about. ■ For young women, the mother-daughter relationship is critical and sometimes very difficult. At the end of my Women's Literature class, a semester-long elective for juniors and seniors, we complete a mother-daughter unit that includes nonfiction, fiction, poetry, oral history, and film. The culminating project is an extensive interview each student completes with her mother. Each semester that I have taught the class, I am struck by the depth of thinking, the willingness to share, and the deep desire my students have to understand a relationship that is so central to their lives.

Though we begin class with a historical perspective on why we study women's literature, I try to encourage thinking about the important contemporary women in students' lives from the very first day. Tahereh remembers our opening day activity when she writes up her interview with her mother:

> Flashback first day of Women's Lit. We were all asked the question, "Who is the most important female role model in your life?" or something along those lines. I really only had to think for a moment before I knew. It was typical; it was generic; it was what everyone else in the room was going to say, but yes, truly, my mother was the most important female in my life. That statement still holds true to this day and most likely for the rest of my life. I have learned so much from my mom about being human, about life and how to live it, and how to be strong, and interviewing her only taught me more, and reinforced my awe of her.

On that first day, many students mentioned mothers, grandmothers, or older sisters as important role models. Each student wound a length of yarn around a "story wreath" as she talked about her important female role model and then passed the wreath to the next person. When the wreath came to me, I shared a story about my grandmother, for whom I am named, and how she refused to leave the word "obey" in her wedding vows, something I thought was quite daring for 1907, and something that made a strong statement about her independence.

My own interest in studying the mother-daughter relationship began in 1989, when I discovered a collection of my great grandmother's letters to her mother and her mother's letters back to her. In 1868, when the correspondence began, my great grandmother had just started teaching in Chicago, and her letters are full of excitement over her first paying job. As I transcribed the two-way correspondence and started to study some of the subtexts, I found that many of my assumptions about the mother-daughter relationship did not hold up for this nineteenth century mother and daughter. Based on my own teenage rebellion, I couldn't imagine that daughters told their mothers everything, but my great-grandmother viewed her mother as her

sole confidante. In December 1871 she wrote "O! there's no friend like a mother; I realize it more fully, the more acquaintances I make" (Morgan 182). If any length of time went by and she didn't hear from her mother, she grew depressed and homesick. As both a mother and a daughter myself, I found it fascinating and instructive to understand the dynamics of the relationship in the nineteenth century and to try to apply some new thinking to my own relationships with my mother and my daughter.

It wasn't until last year, when I had the opportunity to teach our Women's Literature class, that I had a chance to explore this relationship in literature with my students. This course, designed by Liz Whaley twenty-four years ago, is described in the book *Weaving in the Women,* written by Liz Whaley and Liz Dodge, both former colleagues of mine. Because of my passion for the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, I chose to expand their unit to include multiple genres. I wanted students to juxtapose a historical view of motherhood with the perspective of stories, poems, their mothers' real-life experiences, and an examination of their own role in the mother-daughter relationship. Finally, I decided to go beyond American literature to try to get a multicultural perspective.

I begin the unit with a nonfiction selection from a 1912 book, *Why Women Are So,* by Mary Roberts Coolidge, which purports to be "a first-hand study of the ordinary, orthodox, middle-class women who have constituted the domestic type for more than a century" (v). In chapter three, Coolidge discusses "The Career of Motherhood," focusing on nineteenth century views of mothering and concluding with "the educated and relatively competent motherhood of the present day" (64). We pay particular attention to her list of characteristics of the nineteenth century mother "essential to family peace—industry, patience, devotion to physical comfort, sympathy with petty griefs, discomforts, and ailments, and, above all, unselfishness—to an exaggerated degree . . ." (55). We have some lively discussion about nineteenth century views of women and connect this reading with our earlier discussions of Lucy Stone's "Disappointment is the Lot of Women" and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

With the nineteenth century vision of motherhood as a backdrop, we spend at least one class period answering the following questions: What are the qualities of a good mother in the twenty-first century? What are the qualities of a good daughter? Last semester's list for qualities of a good mother included the following:

- gives you options, allows you to make mistakes (freedom)
- has respect for children and their decisions
- communicates with children and listens to them
- is always there for children
- has fun with kids—plays with them
- is open with her child about her own life
- takes time for herself
- is affectionate and verbal with "I love you"

As students identify qualities of a good mother, they usually offer examples based on their own experience. When Alicia volunteered item six on the list, I asked her to elaborate. She indicated a great deal of frustration in trying to talk to her mother about her parents' divorce. "She just won't tell me about it. My dad is open about what happened, but I feel like I only know his version." Other students, using stories from their own lives, tried to help Alicia understand why her mom might not want to share everything with her. This offered an opportunity to discuss just how much information about their own lives they want to share with their moms and how much they need to know about their moms' earlier lives. Though they recognize good communication as key to the mother-daughter relationship, they understand that how much they *want* to know, and similarly share, may be different from what they *need* to know and share. They often express surprise as we brainstorm a list for what is involved in being a good daughter that the list is similar to the one they have just made for mothers.

When we consider the changing roles of mothers and daughters, clearly the factors that have changed since the 1912 version of motherhood include women seeking to combine careers and motherhood and the prevalence of divorce leading to single parent households. Most students recognize the delicate balance for women between their role as mother and their role as breadwinner in each of these situations. Most of them also believe they can successfully pursue a career and motherhood and say that their parents expect them to do both. Even a current *Boston Globe* article, "Amid Boom, Widening Gender Wage Gap Seen," which begins, "Jill Carmichael was denied a promotion because she got pregnant" and continues to present the negative economic and career impact for women who take time

out to mother doesn't dissuade the class from believing that it is possible for women to "have it all."

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Their next assignment is to read several selections from Emily Moore's book, *Strong Stuff: Mother's Stories,* a collection of interviews with over a hundred mothers. One interview focuses on a forty-nine-year-old working mother, one presents a teen mother's point of view, and the last is a story by a mother who is currently parenting teenagers. I ask students to read these contemporary stories and ask their mothers to read them and react to them. Have their mothers shared any experiences in common with these mothers? I hope that by talking about someone else's experience, the student and her mom will begin a dialogue that will continue throughout the unit. Interesting insights come out of these readings and shared discussions with mothers, one of which is that mothers indicate that they have replicated the mothering techniques of their mothers, or they talk with their daughters about how they actively sought to be the opposite kind of mother. Students begin to contemplate generational influences in their and their mothers' lives.

We now turn to the fictional realm, using Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Bean Trees,* for a look at a young woman, Taylor, who becomes a mother by chance, not choice, and another woman, LuAnn, who has a child just after her husband moves out. Their stories intersect when Taylor Greer rents a room from LuAnn. Students identify strongly with Taylor, who spends her teen years avoiding pregnancy that would tie her to her small Kentucky town. They cheer when she decides to leave home, and they are dismayed when, in Oklahoma, a woman approaches her broken down Volkswagen Beetle and deposits a child on the front seat. Students write reaction papers at intervals throughout the reading, we discuss, and they write a final paper on a topic of their choice, as this novel lends itself to discussion of many issues. We use our list of qualities of a mother to compare and contrast Taylor's style of mothering with LuAnn's and examine the influence their mothers had on their mothering styles.

Having looked at a nontraditional view of motherhood in this novel, we next take up short stories from many different cultures. This year, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, we completed research projects and panel discussions on women in other cultures, so we were well equipped to read fictional accounts focusing on mother-daughter relationships from around the world. Our reading came primarily from two anthologies: *Close Company: Stories of Mothers and Daughters,* edited by Christine Park and Caroline Heaton; and our basic text, *By Women,* edited by Marcia McClintock Folsom and Linda Heinlein Kirschner.

We read stories set in Ghana, Egypt, China, India, England, and the United States. What emerged most clearly was the students' realization that there were many universalities about the relationship and that culture had little to do with it, though we were reading about everything from foot binding in China to a woman becoming part of her husband's family in India and therefore subject to her mother-in-law's whims. Students wrote short responses and frequently letters of advice to the mother or daughter in the story. Kate wrote to Maami, in "The Late Bud" by Ami Ata Aidoo:

> Dear Maami—
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> I can imagine how hard mothering must be. I could sense some tension between you and your daughter, and I feel that may be a result of your poor mothering. There are a couple of things that my mother does that I am aware of, and very grateful for. First of all, I believe that it is important to recognize your daughter and commend her for just being herself. You seemed to really disown Yaaba, and that doesn't make your daughter feel good about herself. You said straight to your daughter's face, '*Aa.* My Father God, who inflicted on me such a child?' (127) . . . If my mother said that to me, I would be truly scarred.

From her write-up of her interview, I can easily see why Kate is so uncomfortable with the mothering in this story. At the conclusion of her interview she writes, "Looking back, I know that my parenting will be extremely difficult to match up to my mother's. All I can hope for is that my children are fortunate

enough to have someone as special as my mother has been to me . . . I will always cherish the words, 'thank you.' Thank you Mom."

After the short stories, we turn to poetry for a quick look at mothers' perspectives on daughters. We read "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman" by Anne Sexton; "Morning Song" by Sylvia Plath; "Sleep, Darling" by Sappho; and "Thanking My Mother for Piano Lessons" by Diane Wakoski. These poems are all included in our anthology, *By Women.* I usually ask students to work in groups to plan to teach the class about their poem. They find "Little Girl, My String Bean . . ." exceedingly challenging to interpret, but rewarding. We are able to connect some of the poem's fertility images and the mother's appreciation of her daughter's coming of age with the similar recognition by the mother in the short story we have just read, "Incident in the Ghobashi Family" by Alifa Rifaat. The difference is that, in the story, the mom is realizing that her daughter is pregnant, and mother and daughter talk all around the problem and still have to solve it, while in the poem the mother is celebrating the daughter's "ripening." The students point out that the mother in the poem realizes that her daughter is growing away from her, and they connect the last stanza to their initial list of good qualities, in particular "giving options" that they view as freedom. Sexton's daughter Linda is "sure of [herself]," "exceptional," and "will strike fire." Diane Wakoski's poem plants the idea that they could thank their mothers.

While we are studying the poems, the students have started interviewing their moms. We have brainstormed some questions as a group, and there is a printed list of questions from previous years to supplement their own. Most students struggle to find time to interview their mothers, and I try to give them three nights off from homework in which to complete the task. Chelsea invited her mom to go to dinner so that they could find time to sit and chat. Emma sat in the kitchen while her mom cooked dinner. Kate interviewed her mom while her mom was ironing. When she shared her interview with the class, she connected this to the story we had read by Tillie Olsen, "I Stand Here Ironing" from *By Women.*

In order to provide a few nights in which to write up the interviews, we work on collaborative projects in class to pull together the ideas, images, and conflicts from all of our readings about mothers and daughters. The first time we did this project, students worked in groups to create one of the three following visuals: a weaving, a mobile, or a collage. They had to find quotes from the stories and poems and figure out a way to represent both mothers and daughters. The second semester we did this project, the class was small, and they created a giant collage, which they turned into a picture puzzle. Last summer, while catching up on reading the *English Journal,* I read about literacy weavings in Donna Mahar's article, "Social Justice and the Class Community: Opening the Door to Possibilities" and immediately thought of our final mother-daughter project, where I want the intertwining of mothers' and daughters' lives to be represented graphically.

Last semester, students worked in pairs to design a seven-inch wide strip of paper about five feet long to represent a particular story, poem, or nonfiction selection. They drew their assignment out of a hat, serving to create the partnerships and focus for their project. They were to find phrases and images that represented the major events, characters, and themes of their selection; they had to design their strip to incorporate those items and the vision of motherhood or the mother-daughter relationship presented; finally, they were to convey the culture of their selection. The end result was so successful that I haven't taken it down yet!

When each pair had finished, we had a sharing day, when they presented their strip for the weaving to the rest of the class and then wove it into the full class project. Alicia worked with me for a bit to create the cardboard "loom" and wrap it with yarn. It proved to be an excellent opportunity for her to share her frustration of trying to interview her mom, only to have her mom close the door to any questions about her divorce from Alicia's father, which happened when Alicia was only a toddler. She confided that writing her interview was going to be hard because she didn't think her mother had been very open with her. I encouraged her to do the best she could with the material she had and suggested that perhaps at some point when she was older her mother would feel more comfortable sharing some of those difficult details with her. I shared with her some of the difficulties my children had experienced after I divorced their father and some of my own reasons for not necessarily going into great depth with them about the reasons for the break-up. I finished the day feeling that, even if the weaving had been a total failure (which it wasn't), the opportunity for Alicia and me to share our stories was worth having the project.

Finally, the day arrived when we would share our mother interviews. I had emphasized from the beginning that students should check with their moms on any sensitive material that they might not wish to have included in the interview, and that my intent was not to pry into their mothers' lives. With that in mind, I structure the sharing portion of the interview so that each student talks about her interview process and problems and shares one aspect of her mother's life that she had learned about in the course of the interview. Though the sharing usually extends beyond these three areas, it is only because students have enjoyed the project so much and have learned so many rich details of their mothers' lives that they hadn't known before. Tahereh, whose interview I opened with, wrote a concluding paragraph that captures the essence of what many students discover:

> My mom has led an amazing life. She has traveled, she has loved, and she has lost. She has learned and seen many things, and has had to be stronger than a lot of people can be. But even though she has gone through so much, she says she has no regrets. Would you still marry the man you did, would you still be a mom, are you happy with the choices you made in life? The answer to all these questions is yes. To me, that is a true sign of a life well spent. My mom is happy, she is content, she does good everyday of her life. I hope to one day look back on my life and be able to say the same things she does about hers. My mother is my hero, a day-to-day statement of the strength that humans can possess. I thank my mom for all that she has done for me, and for all she has yet to do. The surprises aren't over yet, I can just tell. My mom is a book with many more chapters left to read and write.

In the prologue to his book, *Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres,* Tom Romano writes, "[Stories] are woven through my arguments, persuasion, and analysis. Stories teach me abstractions, help me explain what I mean, provide flesh and specificity to concepts" (ix–x). His work has influenced my writing and my teaching, but I hadn't realized the extent to which I was a multigenre teacher. Upon reflection, it seems only logical to me now that in my student-centered classroom I offer a smorgasbord of readings to students to help them find the best way to think about a particular idea. Surely the slower readers will be relieved to encounter poetry, the more sequential thinkers nonfiction, while the auditory learners may enjoy an interview project. In the process, what really matters is that we share our stories and the stories of professional writers, as we look more deeply into the passions of our lives.

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