

**Surviving the Distortions:
A Daughter/Mother Relationship
Affected by the Disease of Alcoholism**

*Revised version of Keynote Address
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I. Introduction

I want to thank the Wellesley Center for Research on Women for inviting me to come here today - for giving me the opportunity to delve into my own experiences of that complex relationship between daughter and mother. And because it is the Center for Research on Women, the invitation gives me the opportunity perhaps especially to consider how this relationship - daughter, mother - never happens in a vacuum, but always in a context of social factors that reach in to help shape the forms that are possible for love to take. Not to determine them. I am clear about this. But to shape them. To bring love its most searching challenge. This talk gives me a chance, too, to seek words for some of the painful distortions that came with having an alcoholic mother - a mother who suffered from the disease of alcoholism for many more years than those ten or so when it was obviously killing her. My hope is that as I give them words, these experiences will find their share of resolution, and that, in this, the beauty that was there all along will show itself - to me, to those of you for whom it will make a difference. I dedicate these reflections to my mother, to my greatgrandmother, to my great aunt, Frances, who died at nearly 98 just a month ago, and to my deep friend, Polly. These women have given me many gifts. Through them, in my life, love has survived the distortions, and for this I give thanks.

One of the themes I was originally asked to address was distances between daughters and mothers. I said not just "yes" but "YES", because the disease of alcoholism as it affected this daughter/mother relationship was all about distance. Or, rather, a lurching between distance and closeness. Separateness, merging, tangled images of self and other. And the excruciatingly difficult question, when someone we love is alcoholic, of how close it is safe for us to come.

II. Sethe in Toni Morrison's Beloved - A Context

In approaching this topic my mind goes, as to a touchstone, to one of the primary daughter-mother experiences in the history of this country - one that casts its shadow, and its light, over all of us, whatever our background. This is the experience of enslaved African-American women during the central two centuries of our national life. I think of Sethe, in Toni Morrison's Beloved. Sethe grew into motherhood with only the tiniest snatches of memory of her own mother.

Morrison tells us:

Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance. Not even her own mother, who was pointed out to her by the eight-year-old child who watched over the young ones -- pointed out as the one among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field. Patiently Sethe waited for this particular back to gain the row's end and stand. What she saw was a cloth hat as opposed to a straw one, singularity enough in that world of cooing women each of whom was called Ma'am.

Sethe finally speaks of her mother when the ghost-daughter, Beloved, is bold enough to ask.

"I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick."

Sethe tells Beloved of her mother,

"You know what? She'd had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn't smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile....."

In this brutal context, and within the knowledge that her own children can be sold away from her at any time, one essential challenge for Sethe is about love. Whether to risk it. She does - loves her husband - and loses him. She loves the babies they make together, and, when she is with them in freedom, loves her children enough to try to kill them rather than see them returned to slavery. A "too thick love," her new man Paul D. calls it, and leaves her.

So Sethe chooses to love her children, an act of deepest courage. Yet it strikes me that there is one kind of loving that she cannot yet do: to love herself. Mother love in the absence of self loving is a fierce, hungry love. It may be part of what scares Sethe's sons away. Binds her living daughter to her almost without breath to grow on. Leads Sethe to allow the ghost daughter nearly to kill her. This is one reason why the ending of the book is so very gripping, for me. Beloved has been scared off at last by the women of the community. The living daughter has begun her own life. Sethe's man Paul D. has come back to the house to find Sethe wasting away, perhaps dying.