

## Old Messages, New Circumstances

*This paper was presented as part of an informal panel presentation at the Center's 10th annual Daughters and Mother's Colloquium on March 10, 1990. The panel, entitled "At My Mother's Knee," focused on what daughters have learned from their mothers and the ways in which these teachings have been used by the daughters at various points in their lives.*

The brochure announcing the Wellesley Center's annual Daughter and Mothers Colloquium begins, "You may not be a mother, but you have one, you may not have a daughter, but you are one."

However, I am, as many women are, both a mother and a daughter--or is it a daughter and a mother? My reflections are around this double role--a duality which I like to think of as an easy ebb and flow, a comfortable blending, but which often is not as smooth in reality as it is in my fantasies.

Growing up as my mother's daughter I felt it important, imperative, almost required to stake my claim to independence and an independent self. Some psychologists have said that girls have a harder time separating from their mothers than do boys but that if we don't we're in trouble. Others say that girls don't have to separate in the way that boys must and that this is, or can be, a good and positive thing in our lives. But I am not a psychologist and I am not attempting to address issues in the abstract. I am simply trying to say how it is, and to the best of my ability to do so, how it was for me.

I wanted to be independent of my mother in large measure because I knew, or thought I knew, that my mother was independent of her mother. Hence initially, achieving a certain independence was not being different from my mother, it was being like her. I knew my mother was independent not because she said so in so many words, but because all the evidence pointed in that direction. I grew up in a small town where many of my friends' grandmothers lived close by, but my mother didn't live in the same town as her mother. Nor did my mother live as I imagined my grandmother had lived, a life imagined during visits to the houses and places where my mother grew up. And my mother never, ever said or did a single thing that gave me any idea that she couldn't handle whatever the world had to hand her on her own. She did not need her mother.

Undoubtedly, my view was shaped in part by the fact that my grandmother died a decade before I was born. My grandfather married again, but his second wife was known to me as Aunt Alice, not grandmother. However I do not believe that death alone made the critical difference. My mother could have longed for her mother, spoken of her in ways that suggested irreparable loss, found other mother figures, lived as her mother had. She did not. I was still very young when I knew that my mother left her home town before, not after, her mother's death. I knew, too, that she married a man of a different background before and not after her mother died and I knew that she had gone to college. She was the first in her family to do so, she told me proudly.

As a child sitting with my mother while she went through her old, and to me, wonderfully mysterious trunk, talking about going off to Boston to college at 19, a year later than most because she had to take a PG year, it all sounded very daring. A PG year seemed quite glamorous. I mused about "PG years" and wondered what they were and would I ever have one. Finally, one day I asked my father if he had a PG year. He looked totally baffled and asked what I meant. I tried to explain and he laughed, "Well, no," he said, "PG means post graduate. It's another year of high school." I was chagrined and a bit put out. It wasn't so wonderful. It had seemed so special, so adult, but it was just an ordinary thing. Maybe I didn't want one after all.

The trunk included a program from a ballet mother saw in Boston, a little booklet filled with the names of different dancing partners, photographs of mother looking very sophisticated as an executive secretary in Boston after she married but before I was born. I was wildly curious about it all. I wanted to know about my mother's past and from what I learned I fashioned a story. My story of my mother is probably not my mother's story of herself. Perhaps it is, indeed, more a story of my life than hers. For as a child my only clue to the future was the past. What my mother had done, I would do or not do. If it was not the only model at least it was the first and the strongest one I had of how to be a woman.

Walking the mile to and from the bus stop every day I planned my adventures. Riding my bike up and down country roads alone for hours on Saturdays I was in different worlds. Telling a friend about these things once while in college she asked, "But didn't your mother worry about you?" "Oh no", I said, surprised at the idea. "My mother never worried about me, she knew I could take care of myself."

And so began the dance, the dance that at times as I grew older felt more like a contest. It was a contest to gain independence, to have a life that is my own to be lived and revealed as I choose, but to do so without