



Center for Research
on Women

Stone Center

WELLESLEY CENTERS FOR WOMEN

Working Paper Series

Old Messages, New Circumstances

Susan McGee Bailey, Ph.D.

(1990) Paper No.210

Working Paper Series

The goal of the Wellesley Centers for Women Working Paper Series is to share information generated by the Centers' research and action projects, programs, and staff and to do so expeditiously, without the usual delay of journal publication. All papers in the extensive Working Paper Series have been peer-reviewed.

The Wellesley Centers for Women

The Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) conducts scholarly research and develops sound training and evaluation programs that place women's experiences at the center of its work. WCW focuses on three major areas:

- The status of women and girls and the advancement of their human rights both in the United States and around the globe;
- The education, care, and development of children and youth; and
- The emotional well-being of families and individuals.

Issues of diversity and equity are central across all the work as are the experiences and perspectives of women from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Since 1974, WCW has influenced public policy and programs by ensuring that its work reaches policy makers, practitioners, educators, and other agents of change.

The Wellesley Centers for Women is the single organization formed in 1995 by combining the Center for Research on Women (founded 1974) and the Stone Center for Developmental Studies (founded 1981) at Wellesley College. For more information, please visit: www.wcwonline.org.

Ordering Information

Working Papers and other publications of the Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) are available for purchase through the WCW Publications Office. For a complete list of current publications, visit our online catalog at: www.wcwonline.org/publications.

Publications Office - Wellesley Centers for Women
Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481
Phone: 781-283-2510 Fax: 781-283-2504

Unless otherwise noted, the authors hold the copyright to their WCW publications. Please note that reproducing a WCW publication without the explicit permission of the author(s) is a violation of copyright law.

OLD MESSAGES, NEW CIRCUMSTANCES

Working Papers added to the Center Series in the Spring of 1990 are dedicated, with gratitude and affection, to the memory of

Janet W. Shaw

Publications Assistant at the Center from 1980-89

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

losing touch with my earliest sense of who I am and want to be. It is the age-old dance to create distance without fatally disrupting intimate connections. A process in which I insisted that my life would not be like my mother's while at the same time, often quite consciously, aware that my mother had done x (or so I thought) and so, so could and would I. If my mother was the first in her family to go to college, I would go to graduate school. If mother left home for Boston, I would travel the world. I was pleased that at times my mother was "Susan's mother" rather than my always being "Florence's daughter". When that happens she is mine in the same way I am hers. When that happens we are somehow "equal".

If mother didn't quite approve of all my choices, so much the better--because I would not have a life like my mother's, living in a small town. I wanted a different life, one with mystery, glamour and adventure. But those things I first envisioned because mother had them all in her trunk.

At my mother's knee, I learned to make lists, to sew hems, to dislike cooking. It was not so much that cooking was objectionable in and of itself, we made candy and pickles and jelly and we both enjoyed it. But rather I learned to dislike it for the great nuisance it was. "It takes so much time, everybody eats it and its gone", and " it interrupts my sewing...or my gardening...or my work for the PTA". Cooking, my mother seemed to say, is a great intrusion on a woman's life.

My mother taught me to find bloodroot and wild asparagus in the spring, to dig clams and catch crabs in the summer. She taught me to earn money and to save the money I earned, but more than these specifics, what I learned from my mother is that mothering is not all that mothers do. Mothers have lives of their own before they have children and after they have children. Daughters need not live their mother's lives, but they do need to live their own. I used to think that I taught myself this, but I believe that if I did, I did so because this was how my mother's life presented itself to me.

And so, these lessons, these implicit messages, and now I too am a mother. I have been a mother for 19 years, but my daughter can not listen to reminiscences and weave a story. She can not plan a life of adventure or of domesticity--or of some elaborate, delicious combination of both. Amy is physically and mentally disabled and it is difficult for her to finish a short children's story, let alone maintain an interest in events long past of which she was not a part, or dream dreams of days to come and the ways she will be in the world.

Cooking, that bothersome disruption of more absorbing activities, is one of Amy's favorite past times. Recipes provide reading material that is simple, direct. Each phrase requires a specific step and the sum total of these steps is almost immediate satisfaction. The creation becomes its own reward in the most literal sense.

Since birth Amy has had serious medical problems. The past two and one half years have included the acute anxieties of five operations and the more mundane exhaustion of countless visits to doctor's offices and hospital laboratories. Things last longer with Amy. She still can not be left alone for any length of time so childcare remains a pressing problem. She doesn't drive so the "mother as taxi-cab" years go on and on. Learning to make her bed or do laundry are still tasks to be taught with time-consuming care. There are days when I long for a life that will not be totally structured around my daughter's needs. There are days when I feel freedom is as simple as being caught in traffic without a sickening sense of dread at the possibility of a child left alone. These feelings are known by every mother to one degree or another and surely my mother knew them. I, however, can recall no experience of my mother's confrontations with the wild anxieties, the demanding constraints of motherhood.

Amy and I must dance a different dance than the one my mother and I have made of the lifelong, often disturbing ambiguities between mothers and daughters. We, my mother and I, still move in a two-step that couples hesitation to intervene on her part with reluctance to seek assistance on mine. Amy and I are ill-suited to this rhythm.

For the past two decades the connection between Amy and me has been close and intense. She is my only child, I am her only parent. The passionate nature of our bond is better known to us than may be the case in larger families.

Amy is 19. It is time for her to make plans to leave home, but leaving home is not something to be planned by Amy. Leaving home is not something which I as her mother try to subtly influence while she as my daughter guards against this influence with silences and secrets...

Amy's leaving home is one more thing which I must arrange for her. I must make all the plans, organize all the steps that will take her away from me. I must convince others--schools, doctors, social workers--that my child is ready to leave me and I must ensure that this is true. I must help Amy to leave me with confidence and joy. For if she stays with me how can she learn those things I cannot teach her? How can she learn to live without me if I am always present? I must actively participate in a process which is acceptable only at a distance. Up close I feel anger and loathing at this necessity to thrust from me the child whose absence I can not

envision for more than the briefest moment without a terrible sense of loneliness and fear. How will she cope in a complex world, this child who finds pleasure in the simplest things and who trusts indiscriminately? I am her mother and it is not a mother's job to push a child away.

But I remember that I am a mother, but not only a mother. I remember that daughters must live their own lives. I remember that if at times I have accepted my mother's help with caution, fearing it might mean I was too much a daughter exactly when my daughter's survival depended on my being every inch a mother, that perhaps now I must return to being, or at least to remembering, how it is to be a daughter. I must do this to provide space and companionship for Amy as she finds more and more of her independent self. Amy will never have a child of her own to mother, but she must find ways to express mothering. She can do this only if I too can act from the self that is more than merely the sum of the mother/daughter parts--the self every mother longs to help her daughter find and every daughter hopes to know in her mother.