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

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(1991) Paper No.229

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

*Revised version of Keynote Address
Wellesley College Center for Research on Women
1991 Daughters and Mothers Colloquium.*

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.

"She left me," Sethe says [of Beloved]. "She was my best thing." Paul D. leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers. "Me? Me?" [she says.]

And that's the end of the book, a question that marks the cost of slavery.

I bring this novel into our conversation today because I believe we learn from it that an essential question, when one has lost much, is about daring to love again. Others. Oneself. And that it is possible, with a kind of deep spiritual courage that doesn't even name itself. As daughters, as mothers, we all have our losses - today, I pray, none so brutal nor so absolute as Sethe's, though we live in a country which is not so far from those times as many would pretend. Mine in particular was losing Mom to thirty years of addiction, a kind of living death. I want to tell my story in the context of Sethe's not to set up false parallels or to voice self-pity but because every daughter and mother in this country live out their relationship in the context of Sethe's loss and her response to it. We live in the shadow of her yearning: for a lost mother, a cloth hat, a real smile. And we live in the light of her choice to love anyway. Finally Sethe's story is a reminder that if I have made it through my own losses with a sense of emerging power, then my call is to use that power for justice and for life.

III. Mom's Illness

In seventh grade science class, in my very academic private girls' day school in New Jersey, the teacher told us one day that a certain small percentage of alcohol in your blood would kill you. This fact had no relevance to my social life: this was the fifties, and those 7th grade boys and girls who went to parties (I was not one of them)... downed soft drinks and threw popcorn at each other and fumbled around quickly in the sudden dark until someone's mother realized the lights were off. The information gripped me anyway. I rushed home from school that day and burst into the house to deliver it, like a burning potato in my hand, to my mother. I remember standing with her in the front hall, an airy, marble-floored room, with perhaps not even my coat off yet. "Mommy," I said passionately, "Miss Ellis said today that a little tiny amount of alcohol in your blood can kill you!" I don't remember what she said, only her quick anger, the chilly distance as she stepped back from me across the marble squares. It was a matter, she said, that I had no business whatsoever sticking my little nose into.

The incident passed. It was at least twenty years before I looked back and it released the information it had held for me all along: by the time I was in 7th grade, then, drinking was already a factor in her life, and therefore in mine. In ours. I knew something dangerous and destructive was happening. This was the only time I tried to do anything but keep that knowledge to myself. Mom's message was clear, "We teach you to tell the truth, but not that truth." Probably everyone remembers moments of such silencing, some more

lethal than this one. It's a lesson we don't forget. A little girl, a wisp of a thing, buries deep the knowledge that something wrong is happening, that damage is being done. The immense injustice of this warps her own fledgling sense of morality, gives rise to a fierce judgmentalness that for years she will wield primarily against herself. The fear and the helplessness, spawn rigid protective tactics which may ensure her survival but become, later, a prison she will have to find her way out of. Denial is like this, has these effects, whatever is being denied. We know this.

Approximately 33 years after that 7th grade science class, my mother died - a slow, wasting away kind of death - of cirrhosis of the liver. So she didn't drink herself into an especially early grave; she was a strong-bodied woman. But the death I am really talking about is the living death of those 33 years of continued addiction. The slow suicide. The despair. The death in life.

There are many stories to tell after that one of sudden distance across the marble floor. I won't tell many, because I do want time for the later parts of the story, the healing. But I want to try to tease out a rather delicate point about distance and closeness.

If you had asked my mother, she would have told you that we were close. Very close. It started at my birth. I was born, her first child, while Dad was overseas in World War II -- in the context, then, of an uncertainty I can only imagine, about whether he would even come home alive. Her own mother was a curiously bitter, unmothering woman, and this little girl baby - me - became Mom's solace. I was named by transatlantic telegram. I was the love of her life in those early months, and somehow she never really moved past this. One of the litanies she repeated to me frequently, much later, in my twenties and thirties, was this: The three people I love most in the world are Granny, you, and your father. Now at that point her Granny was dead. Dad was a problem. There was his alcoholism, there was abuse. A marital war that they were both deeply invested in. When she said, "And your father...." it was through gritted teeth, as what a wife should say. That left me -- the one most loved. Where it left my brother and only sibling is something he is still dealing with in his forties.

Mom adored me - this is her language - she adored me. What did this mean to her? I can only guess, but it seemed to mean I was a loving smiling mirror that was more encouraging to look into than into her own. Her daughter, her girl; her lovely, smart, loving, successful girl. The one with a loving mother, not a bitter one. The daughter whose smile would lift the pain of the long marital war, the internalized belittlement, the hunger for a simple word of affirmation. This closeness was a fantasy, long before I saw that it was. For I, too, thought we were close. It was decades before I could scan the vast barren spaces at the heart of this imagined intimacy. Barren spaces? First, the ways her fantasy and need kept her from seeing me, my own self. The girl with the urgent story from science class. The girl with all kinds of particulars that didn't fit into the mirror image. This wasn't a nourishing kind of closeness. Then there was the addiction. I adore you, she said, and turned from me to make her primary relationship with alcohol. The loss there,

for me, I only years later began to know. The ways I did not have a mother. It's ironic, the claim of intimacy, and the actuality of something so very different.

And within this configuration was not only loss but danger. Alcohol, as we all know, blurs one's sense of boundaries. With addiction, the blurring intensifies. In a mother who had precious little sense of her own living edges even before the alcohol, the pull to merge was irresistible. A therapist of mine during my long adult decades of trying to make sense of why I was depressed so much, met with Mom and said to me: Your mother does not seem to know where she stops and you begin. The danger took on a name for me at last only a few months ago. A friend quoted to me from John Bradshaw, in his book, Healing the Shame that Binds: "Whenever a parent is more interested in a child than the spouse, it is non-physical incest." Particles from all over my being swept together into a new molecule of truth; this was incest of a sort. Nothing sexual. But a distortion of a child's boundaries of self. A mother's consuming need for the very affirmation and mirroring which it is the child's turn to receive. A depression and a despair so profound - deepened daily by her consumption of alcohol - that closeness - especially, perhaps, the illusion of it - was a danger to the daughter's own energy for living.

But very quickly now we have to talk about sexism. For if my mother's life foundered in the physical disease of alcoholism, we must also take into account the social disease of sexism. Actually sexism isn't a disease, is it, except as a figure of speech that conveys something about how it can work on us from the inside. Sexism is an institution - a systematic, entrenched institution, which kills. Sexism was the context in which my mother Nina came up and lived her life, and gave what she could to me.

Sexism made it easy for my mother doubt her worth. Sexism made it easier for my father to take his life hurts, his life angers, out on her, to call her ugly things out of his own pain. Sexism made her come to believe he was right. Sexism devised a male role that he could never live up to, a pressure-cooker situation in which his frustration and shame had one easy outlet: a hand slammed down on soft skin, a terror inflicted to match in intensity the insufficiencies he felt within himself. Mom didn't succumb easily. During World War II while he was overseas and before I was born she organized Bundles for Britain, an upper class endeavor, surely - and a high energy, high performance one. She had jobs all along while I was growing up - paid, then volunteer - always part time, but always serious. At the hospital where she volunteered three mornings a week for more than 25 years, she skillfully avoided the boring tasks and made herself indispensable in the admissions office, became virtually second in command. She had close friends - bridge friends, movie friends - was known for laughing so hard with them that she would wet her pants. What she didn't tell them was what happened on the odd Saturday night after she and Dad got home. The bruises on her arms, her face. On her spirit. Why, with all the satisfactions of work well done, did she decide, finally, that she was stupid. Was ungrateful. Was worthless? That she brought these punishments on herself? Because the seed of sexism, sown deep in woman's flesh and spirit, is fertilized from every direction - the media, the church, family,

even the romantic novels into which Mom escaped. Sooner or later, if there is nothing to transform it, this seed bears its inexorable fruit: self-doubt, self-hatred, the atrophy of self-loving. The inability to say no to abuse. For Mom the false friend that held a hand out to her in this situation was the booze. And she took it.

What a loss it is, for each of us, to have a mother who cannot love herself. For in this inability she abandons us as daughters. We need her to show us how to love ourselves. Our first thought of how to be, is how she is. It was sexism, the devaluing of women at every level of our community existence, sexism internalized and believed about herself, that made it so easy for my mother to abandon herself, and thereby to abandon me. She owed it to me not to take my father's abuse -- but first of all she owed it to herself. It was an obligation she was not able to meet. So sexism, too, is about distance. It distances our mothers from themselves, from their own power. It seeks to distance us from ourselves, from our power.

Sexism can lead our mothers to love us in a hungry, needy, devouring kind of way. When I finally understood that Mom loved me instead of loving herself, I knew what made her love so passionate and so distorted. So, in a way, incestuous. Why it was not a love that was able to see me for who I was or could be becoming. And you know now why the ending of Beloved speaks to me so. Through the brutalities of external and internalized racism, Sethe has dared to love her children but not, directly, herself. Paul D's words to her -- "You your best thing, Sethe"-- are an invitation to this primary and transformative act of loving. It is what I longed to say to Mom. Mom, you are your best thing. This is one of the ways that oppression kills - oppressions that we in this room have received and that we have perpetrated - by reaching inside the person to block that primary act of self-love. Perhaps by knowing this, we can help each other do something about it.

IV. Resources for Survival

In response to the disease of alcoholism as it played itself out in my family, I have developed my own distortions of feeling, self-concept and behavior. These distortions are sometimes called codependency. They are there, whatever we call them. For me they have been a relentless perfectionism, a drive to be in control in relationships, a fearfulness in the face of change, and a rather miserable (and hurtful) history of obsessive crushes. In addition I have been depressed a lot, though much less recently, and I do a kind of perennial worrying which seems to be my version of paying my dues to the universe. These distortions can make me hard to live with and difficult to love. My son, for one, has complained about them bitterly.

I will spare you - and myself - an anatomy of my particular distortions, though we may choose to talk about all of ours later. I'm not unwilling to. But here I want, instead, to talk about resources for recovery from the many ways that loving someone alcoholic can scar us.

There is such an isolation to growing up in an alcoholic family. Nearly every one of the experiences which has been healing for me has brought me out of isolation into a sense of commonality with others. First came the women's movement, and that powerful experience of speaking out honestly in a circle of women about painful things in our lives for which we had been blaming ourselves. Sexuality, motherhood, pregnancy, abortion -- as we told each other our stories, we heard them ourselves. And we began to believe in change - personal change, social change, so inextricably alive together. The deep post partum depression for which I had felt so ashamed became not my weakness of spirit but a named phenomenon with physical, social, political causes -- and a difference that could be made for women coming along after me. I poured myself for many years into the books which sought to make that difference. In this work, from the double isolation of an alcoholic and WASP upperclass household, I was able to step onto the healing ground of what I shared with women of other backgrounds -- our bodies, ourselves. Later I would come anew, and still come today, to the pressing questions of what we don't share - the constructed differences of class, race, sexual orientation, age, and physical ability. The many ways we as women have been divided from each other by these differences. The choices each of us must make about these divisions in her own life.

For me, the women's movement has been, more specifically, a group of women with whom I have worked, written, struggled, played music, shared childcare and love affairs and parents' deaths, through the 20 major years of my life. I give thanks for them.

Another way that I eventually came out of isolation was Alanon, a support organization for families of alcoholics. It took me a while to get there. All kinds of resistance came up. Not until Mom was actually headlong into her final deterioration did I believe I really belonged in those rooms. My first Alanon meeting I was frustrated and put off by the group's emphasis on our shortcomings. I spoke up: My parents are the problem, not me, I said. Gently they told me, and gradually over the years they have continued to teach me, to let my parents be their own problem, and to keep the focus on myself. There is such a freedom that comes with turning my inner gaze away from the misery they cause me and to my own situation, my own potential for strength, clarity and love. It has been a potent antidote to Mom's choice of *victim* as a stance from which to meet the world.

There have been other paths out of isolation. I think of my precious discovery of the Religious Society of Friends, and a form of worship that made room for the particulars of my own spiritual journey - my questionings of a father god, my yearning for a sense of spirit alive in the turnings of my life. I think of three therapists over the years - two women, one man - who have sat patiently and creatively with me, held me in the belief that I could learn to love myself. And finally I have had the gift of a quite extraordinary woman, my grandmother's sister, the Frances I mentioned earlier. She died a month ago at nearly 98 years old. My Aunt Fran saw me through Mom's long alcoholic decline. We consoled and commiserated together, shook our heads, clucked our tongues, wept. We were, at 52 years apart, very close friends. Aunt Fran was a strong, vigorous, active woman. Her

greatest gift to me may make you smile. For some years at the end she prayed for the good lord to take her, to bring her up to heaven, to relieve her of the increasing pains and limitations of her earthly body. She was ready, she said, to die. She was even, I believe, a little angry with the good lord for ignoring her request. Yet whenever her body started to falter - pneumonia one summer, heart palpitations and shortness breath a few other times, she had the doctor there in a flash. She produced one amazing rally after another. I must have had my last visit with Aunt Fran at least 15 times in four years. Was it a fear of dying on her part that drew her back from the edge? Unfinished business? Was there one of us she felt she had to stick around for, despite our assurances to the contrary?? Or was she a grand old matriarch unwilling for a second to take her hand off the controls?

For me, visit after visit, it didn't really matter. What she gave me was a woman whose blood I shared, who carried within her a powerful and utterly persistent will to live. With Mom as my other primary model, I needed this like I needed air and food. And I have thrived on it. Maybe some of you have had such a steady one, and know what I mean.

V. Four Movements of Recovery

There are other resources, surely, for others of you. What I am most interested in are four movements of recovery - four choices - that I would suggest can take place whatever resources we each may come to draw on. Two of these I will illustrate with passages from the novel I am writing, two with stories or words from women who have been teachers for me.

The first choice, or movement, is towards loving detachment. It's what I alluded to just now when I spoke of Alanon - to detach the focus of our lives from what the addicted person is or isn't doing, and to know this doesn't mean the absence of love. It's hard to do! There is so much to hook us in the addicted person's life -- crisis, drama, suffering, a passivity that can suck us right in. Getting free of a daily obsession with these dramas is a step-by-step process. And the work isn't over then: next comes getting free of obsession with our own dramas - probably created because we miss the parental ones that have become so familiar. Loving detachment from my mother meant seeing her less over the last ten years, and at times agonizing over how this hurt her - for her denial meant that she couldn't see why I had to stay away. It meant telling her that I couldn't listen any more to her stories of abuse; if she was choosing not to make a change in this, I couldn't keep letting the poison drip into my ear. This meant that there was less, then, to talk about. Loving detachment meant praying for Mom, turning her over to her own higher power; it mean praying for myself. *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference*. Loving detachment is a different take on distance and closeness; slowly, haltingly achieved, it is the distance which heals, the intimacy which is about respect and freedom. Here is the character in my novel, Sandy, looking for an imagery that will help her detach with love. Her mother's name, in the novel, is Connie. Her father's name is Stan. This is a telephone call shortly after Connie finally collapses. Sandy has just asked how she is feeling.

Connie paused, taking stock. "I'm fine, considering. We made it to the club today for lunch for the first time all week, though I wasn't hungry at all once we got there."

So it's a wine-only diet for you now, Mom, Sandy thought, and asked, instead, "You didn't get to the club the other days?"

"No. It's the diarrhea. Even today I just made it home in time."

"Oh, Mom, what a shame!"

"It's the most bothersome thing in this whole business. Rushing to the john every two minutes. And the bumps on your bottom are so unpleasant. I've gotten rid of them before," Connie asserted bravely. "But I've never had them for this long." She sounded tired, puzzled, willing to be a good sport but a little overwhelmed. "It's a bore."

My mother's life is leaking out. "You've got kind of a bunch of problems, don't you?" Sandy asked, and was amazed at how invisible alcohol could make itself in a conversation of which it was absolutely the center. *The elephant in the living room,* she thought. *It gets bigger and bigger, squandering space under its big ass, lounging into the lampshades, leaning heavily across the sofa, one foot sweeping the desk clear, the other filling the fireplace. It pulls the drapes awry with its thick, insinuating trunk.* Not on purpose did this creature splay out across the center of their lives together, no one breathing a word of its ungainly presence. It was not happy being there.

"Yes, rather an odd bunch of problems, really. I know some of it is caused by stress and pressure," Connie said, then added in a darkly confiding tone, "and I know where that comes from." Sandy felt a dangerous flare of anger at her father. It was a trap, Sandy knew this. But what to call it, how to spot it, how to protect herself from falling in? Quickly she cast around for an image to help her. *The victim trap,* she thought. She remembered the crisp, sharp, crunchy sounds that boots made on a trail, on rock. This trap belonged to a different terrain. *How about a bog? A wet, oozy, muddy place, thick with decaying plants.* Blaming Stan was a slithery, sucking mud that pulled Connie down a little more each day. Wine was the overhanging branch that she kept trying to pull herself up on.

I drink to make life with your father tolerable. But the branch melted in her grasp, an illusion of rescue, swelling the mud that claimed, each time, a little more of her. But what was it, really, that sucked her down? The blaming -- seeing herself as a victim? Or the addiction? Suddenly mists rose and swirled from the bog's surface, and Sandy was watching an ancient folktale: a hapless human struggles in mud, reaches for a branch, the branch evaporates just as desperate fingers grasp it. In the story, both bog and branch are parts of the same evil genie/malevolent being. It doesn't matter which is which.

All Sandy knew was that when she came close enough to the edge of this bog, Connie tried to grab her leg. Didn't say, "*Help me out of here!*" Said, instead, "*Come on in with me.*" This bog was a generic one. Didn't just have Connie's name on it. Acting like a victim came easily when someone you loved so much showed you how. It was a tempting role to play, a slurpy slide down into a mud that didn't willingly let you go. If Connie was going to go down in this, Sandy would have to choose the nearest trail that didn't give away under foot, stand far enough back that she wouldn't slide in herself.

A second choice that has been crucial for me, is about passion. For my mother, and for so many who suffer from the disease of alcoholism, every day was edged in despair. This is the death in life that I spoke of earlier. Even the giddy laughter after drinks, or the brave, survivor laughter that helped to carry her through for so long, barely hovered over the pit. The deadendedness. The presence of hope as a word only, not as a language. It is a profound drain on one's own life-force to have a parent so given over to despair. I felt as though there were a sieve at the bottom of my being; good things would happen, good feelings would come, but they would leak out. I did not know how to close the holes.

Some time before Mom's death, I found an essay by Audre Lorde that over the years has given me a new take on despair. Do you know her work? Audre is a Black lesbian mother, poet and activist, one who over and over has broken deadly silences about race, sex, oppression, illness. Growing up, she was no stranger to despair; she was poor and Black and female in New York City, and it waited for her at every streetcorner. In response, Audre has lived a life of courage and passion. If you have read her wonderful biomythography, Zami, you know what I mean. The essay I read - a short one now printed in her book Sister Outsider, was called "The Erotic as Power." It absolutely gripped me, and now I know why.

To Audre, the erotic is not just about genitals, not even just about sex. It's about the times when we feel most alive, engaged, turned on, most connected with ourselves and others. Let me read you a few of her words. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane..... The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person....The erotic connection [also] functions [in] the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense, also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*..... In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

I guess the contrast with what I learned from Mom is pretty obvious. Audre's concept of the erotic called on me to recognize where I felt most alive, and to honor it. For me this meant ministry, it meant writing, it meant so many things that I began to make more room for. As I deepened in these, I touched my erotic energy, learned to let it lead me. I cannot say strongly enough how important this has been. How much it is, indeed, the exact antidote to despair. Or how much more I have to learn to do this.

I think of another teacher, Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hahn. In a talk in Boston two summers ago, he observed that each of us has within us the seeds of pain and the seeds of joy. Rather than trying to uproot and get rid of the seeds of pain, he said, just let them be there, and direct your attention to watering and nurturing the seeds of joy. I saw that this is what Audre had taught me to do, to tend the erotic within me and to let it flower. To touch and trust our own passion - as information, as life-source - is to nurture the seeds of joy. And it is what can bring us through.

So, two choices - towards our passion, towards detaching with love. The third, for me, has been about anger, and its connection with depression. Mom was depressed a lot, clearly. Given my mother's life, it makes sense that depression would be a mode of meeting the world that was more than available to me. Graduation, motherhood, divorce - so many of my life passages were marked by deep depression. And as Mom got sicker, there were months at a time when her living death got into my blood, flowed through my veins as though it belonged there, had a claim. A lot has been written about depression as anger turned inward against oneself. If this was true for Mom, she sure did a good job of it. Quite possibly it has been true for me, too. Rather than analyze this, however, I want to read you a scene from my novel when Sandy first frees a piece of the anger around

her mother's illness. Connie has just been diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver. Sandy and her friend Karen are in the woods up in northern Maine. Karen has left for a planned solo hike, leaving Sandy alone at the lean-to for the day - and not so sure about how it would go.

Then Sandy was alone. "Well..." she said out loud to the empty clearing, and didn't know how to finish the sentence. It was a matter, it seemed to her, of having the best day she could. Letting this rain-fresh sunlight in on everything. On the edge of the lean-to she saw the candle from last night's rummy game. It was one of those rainbow candles -- yellow, orange, red, blue, purple. The colors of almost any feeling she might have today. On an impulse, she put it on the picnic table and lit it. The flame flared up brightly at first against the water-darkened wood of the table, then the sunlight poured in, blending with it, claiming it; the pale orange transparency was like a single drop of the rolling fire on the sun's surface. A good protector for the day. With the binoculars around her neck, the cushions under her arm, her journal in one hand and the candle in another, she made her way down to the lake.

Down on the beach she found a flat, dry-topped stone in the water a few inches from the shore and placed the candle there. The flame flickered a few times and then stayed steady. Only the lightest breeze. Karen had a lovely, still day for her climb. Sandy settled herself up against the red canoe with her journal and lost herself in writing about yesterday's hike. In a while, she put down her pen and said out loud, inadvertently, "Mom." Her voice surprised her. "Mom," she said again, thoughtful. Even with not a single human being to hear her, it was hard to say it very loud. "Mom!" she managed, a little louder. Then she stood up and called as if Connie were standing over on the north side of the lake, or swimming *oh yes, swimming* out in the middle. "MOM!" The word echoed back to her. Suddenly it was as though she had Connie's attention in the listening lake. What on earth did she want to say to her? "I'm happy, Mom," she said, tentatively. "I think you'd want to know this....I love you.....I am learning to trust my body." Was that all? "And I pray for yours." She sat down again feeling on the edge of silly but very excited. The candle had burned through the yellow of sunlight, the orange of courage, and was moving into a deep, rich red. Sandy looked away from it. To her, red was the color of anger. Blue was easier, sadness. Purple, grief. But anger?

Connie was still listening.

So Sandy looked back at the invitation of red, waiting for words. They came in a whisper. *Mom, I'm angry at you. Somewhere. I have to be.* Tears came up but she held them back. Tears were about sadness. She wanted to stay with the red. *I'm mad at you,* she said, and her voice came thinly from the top of her throat. Tears slipped in anyway, as though they were the only language anger could use. She brushed off her cheeks and picked up her pen and journal again. *Mom, I'm mad at you,* she wrote, and then there was more. *You said you loved me best. But you left me anyway. Started drinking, kept drinking, loved alcohol more than me, left me.* Now the red began to flow more freely in her arteries. *The ugliness Dad dished out to you? You took it! When that was all I could see for how to be a woman. Believed his hatred. When I needed your light. Left me.* Now red surged her uterus and her hand wouldn't stop. *Mom, you are poisoning the body that gave me mine. That's my mother you're killing. YOU ARE MURDERING MY MOTHER!* She was shaking now, writing in a large, bold script that spread out across the whole page. Then it was over. The rush of red had passed through her, leaving her breathless, yet curiously exhilarated. She looked over at the flame at the water's edge, burning down through red towards a deep, cobalt blue. *Maybe blue is about forgiveness,* she thought, surprising herself. Well, she didn't know. She wasn't there yet.

Anyway, the flame was steady. The light in her. The light in Connie. Still burning.

In that scene Sandy notes that forgiveness may be next, but she is not there yet. She's right that forgiveness is not a quick or superficial thing. It is nothing if the anger has not come first. But let's talk, now, about forgiveness. It's the fourth and final choice I will speak about today. I call it the choice of forgiveness over disconnection. In the month when Mom entered her final decline, I went on a long car ride with a friend, who told me a story. Claire's mother suffered, like Mom, from the long-time disease of alcoholism. Unlike Mom, she was not buffered by wealth. She lived in a single room in a rooming house and spent her days on the streets. For years Claire had felt so pained, so offended, by her mother's state that she had stayed away. What was it that drew her back, finally, made her able to visit again? Some kind of inner transformation that for me has to do with humility, with forgiveness for oneself and for the other. In the last years of her mother's life, Claire would travel south once a year for a week, carrying her tape recorder and an open heart. She sat with her mother in her tiny room and asked her about her life, recorded it; she spent the day hanging out with her in her usual spots. Mornings in the shoe department of a large department

store, coffee breaks at the store's cafeteria where the waitresses were kind. She just hung out with her. Asked her about her life. Listened. On the winter evening when the city morgue tracked Claire down and called from two thousand miles away about a woman whose body had been found four days before, Claire knew that she had given herself the gift of knowing that woman. The grief which shook her was a whole different thing than it might have been had she continued to stay away. More profound, more fruitful. Claire told me this story at the perfect time, when I was struggling with how much I could bear to visit Mom as she got sicker. I thank Claire for helping me see that a big part of that journey was getting myself past my own barriers of distaste, disapproval, fear, shame. To me, this movement past disconnection is about forgiveness.

The kind of forgiveness that is not about a wrong done to us but about the human condition - ours, the alcoholic's. It is forgiveness about who we are who have been given to each other for love.

So those are the four movements which have so engaged me in this journey. Past immersion through loving detachment, past despair through passion, past depression through anger, past disconnection through forgiveness. Each is a choice we can make. They are seeds of joy. When I have been able to nurture them, I have been nourished and strengthened for the journey, and beauty has met me along the way.

VI. Closing

I want to end, now, with my mother's healing, having talked so much about my own. In my last six days with Mom and in the moments of her death, during which I am both awed and grateful to have been by her side, I learned some important things about healing. I learned how the soul does crucial work, life-work, in those days approaching the passage of death.

The healing for Mom in those last days before her death was not primarily physical, in that she did, in fact, die; nor was her emotional and spiritual healing particularly visible or dramatic, except that it was so dramatic in a woman whose bit of territory for experiencing life had been so utterly narrowed by addiction, and by the denial that attends it. There were no great unburdenings or detailed heart to hearts (though we were heart to heart), no large re-understandings of her life. She was too damaged for this by the years of alcohol.

But as she moved slowly towards the new territory of death, unbuffered by the drinks which she had finally given up four months before, and not even hazed over by tranquilizers, - her liver couldn't handle these - the healing revealed itself in little moments. A two line exchange on Sunday evening in which she indicated she knew she was going to die, and I let her know I had heard her. Four words, amidst others, on Saturday afternoon, "I feel such sorrow," she said, and the opening shut down again, but a lifetime of numbed feelings had been countered. The courage it took to wait for death, unnumbed by any chemical substance at all. The willingness to call us all in and face saying goodbye to us

when what she most dearly wanted to do was curl up in her bed and attend inwardly. This was about the soul healing, not in leaps and bounds but in those quiet, imperceptible turnings that can heal a life, and ready the person to move on.

I knew healing, too, in those days. Healing in our relationship, as I poured love into her and she received it, after so many years of the massive inaccessibility created by the disease of addiction. And I felt the effects of my own gradual healing, a recovery process which enabled me to be there squarely, safely with her in those last days, as a gift to myself even more than to her. I felt freed, finally, to appreciate what Mom had given me, and it was so much. Delight in the ocean on my skin, moonlight over the waves, silence. My sense of the hilarious, my generosity and warmth. In a curious way, my strength of mind and spirit. And the knowledge that, whatever the flaws in the loving, I had been deeply, deeply loved.

I believe that all of these kinds of healing are where we feel god, goddess, the love-spirit, moving in our lives and changing us.