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2016

## Breaking the Taboo: What My Mother's Recent Suicide Might Teach us in Critical Social Justice and Faith Work, and Perhaps Beyond

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It has been said throughout the ages, and I'll repeat it again, "So ham," and "In Lak'ech," and it must exist in so many other ancient wisdoms—a deep recognition of self in the other, of radical co-existence. Would you take a moment to sit with me? I am in that other person, and you in me. Can we break cycles of oppression, together, by having this time together? What could be more radical than sitting with each other and seeing one in the other? What happens next when we do this? Love? Shattering of worldviews? Creations of spaces of wisdom, separate, third spaces beyond the pale? Apertures into the in-between spaces which provide depth of understanding? Just being, without theorizing and being present? Join me, for even the smallest creation of this space of love, perhaps.

The taboo is the unspoken, often dirty, better hidden. The choice of deciding that it should be hidden is loaded with power and underwritten by those who have the power to make these determinations. I write against that power, against a host of systems of oppression, begging you to sit with me for a moment. In this reflective essay, I break the taboo. I wonder how far you will come with me. I write with a sense of urgency—to protect and restore life—hoping this journey will bring you with me in that pursuit. I hope someone, somewhere, might hear this and be moved to break the taboo toward deeper understanding, toward this healing world.

### **Finality**

At 73 years of age, my mom made a final decision. There was meticulous planning, and later evidence suggesting she had been considering this—in fact probably attempted it previously—for years. What was cold metal was taken up in her hands, hands that had bathed each of her three kids, hands that had moved thousands of bodies toward health as a

rehabilitation nurse for years. She bought a special kind of bullet that would not butterfly as it entered the target—her very body. She bought a gun that would not leave a mess. Her body was found in a clean white bath tub, a towel carefully placed to capture what spilled forth. A note in her handwriting had been placed on the closed door, warning whoever read it what would be found behind the door. A suicide note indicated the life of paranoia to which I was privy, “Hidden cameras in my house!” That was the one bathroom in my childhood home in West Virginia, the one I had been bathed in, had bathed myself in, for eighteen years. Bathed later in some amount of blood. I wonder if she succeeded in pulling the door fully closed; the carpet always got in the way.

No one lived with her. No one had lived with her after I left, the last of three kids, at age 18. My dad had died when I was seven of cancer; that was when I was actually orphaned. My mom survived my father, but she was a shell of a woman, a woman wrecked by a childhood trauma she ultimately could not survive. My brothers were six and seven years older than I, able to escape the abuse of my mom after only four and five years of having to live with her, without my dad. And then it was my turn. I spent my adolescence parenting her through her narcissism, her insecurities, her paranoia, waiting for the next abusive explosion. One afternoon we went to a roast beef sandwich place. I accidentally knocked my water across the table, its cold contents surprising her as it hit her legs. “What is *wrong* with you? We’re going right now!” she exploded. Despite the depths of how hard I worked, how hard I succeeded with the highest scores in school in the hardest classes, graduating as valedictorian, in special programs for poor West Virginia youth, I would be reminded that even though the Catholic diocese’s bishop had written me a letter of recommendation for college, she knew I “had him fooled,” because, as she

said, she knew who I *really* was. Some kind of monster spawn, rejected and at once necessary for the project of herself.

### **Intersecting/interjecting my story**

I spent years in pain—deep, profound, pain. Living with her—enduring her threats of suicide, “I should just go get a gun and shoot myself,” resonates differently now in hindsight, 25 years later. And then going to college on full scholarship as a form of escape from her prison, two states away and for years afterwards, her threats, her abuses, her second guessing every choice I made. “You got a Fulbright? Why would you want to go to the Middle East?” And, again, being asked, “What is wrong with you?” The day of my wedding she scowled and had a tantrum when the stylist who was going to do her hair did not show up, “What am *I* going to do now?” she cried, the day of my wedding. There was nothing she could celebrate for me, not even the births of my two children, the second of whom she chose never to meet. Only about two days before she died, over lunch with a friend, I had confided, “There’s nothing I ever miss about my mom, no sense of warm memories.” This realization helped steel me to the sense of feeling one strand peeling apart, what could have wrecked me completely, had I not done the work to reckon, on my own, with who this woman was. Mother.

### **Taboo questions**

This exploration of some of the details is an entry into the questions some dare to ask. Some dare to ask because I believe we are foundationally shaken when we learn someone has taken their life and succeeded. They fail to monitor the asking, unlike those who fear the impolitic or the impolite. I do not know which is worse. This unnatural terrain is uncomfortable, like being permanently disfigured from an accident that was not your own doing. Like any scar, one learns to wear it, adapt to it, eventually perhaps embrace it as part of one’s identity. Would

you rather I hid it? Would it comfort your faith? Told you she died, leaving you to guess that perhaps she had died of ill health in her sleep? Would you rather not ask about the details? If I had said, as I did on my Facebook page, that she died after a lifetime of mental health issues, would you assume it was just depression (as if there is any sense including the modifier “just”)? Her depression was not her only mental illness, just the one we best accept. If I call her a narcissist, of which I am convinced she was in some way, then several responses may occur. First, some may wrongly assume I am referring to how much she liked her own looks. This was not the problem of a narcissist; it is the problem of centering oneself to the exclusion of all others. This exclusion means never, not once, really loving another person. It is crippling, both to those who survive the narcissist and to the narcissist herself. This lonely form of living. I still cannot believe what she made me, my brothers, endure, but I cannot imagine how much more painful it must have been to actually be her.

Honor her death (and life) with this, if you will. I can only hold the shell of my mom in my arms in compassion, when I am brutally honest. My mother, not one day in her life, I am convinced, awoke, planning how to ruin my day. Here comes the perhaps bigger taboo: her life was fractured. First, by a family friend who sexually abused her as a girl. Then, by a larger set of systems of oppression which did not allow her the safety to be believed when she tried to share it, however that manifested (a detail we will never know, but which she unloaded on me). On one level I am honored I could be the one she told about the sexual abuse, for she said she never even told my father. Perhaps it wasn’t that I was the only daughter and therefore the caretaker; perhaps she sensed my depth of urgency about always exploring the truth, as far as I had the strength to do so, and she unburdened herself in this way with me, the “chosen one” in this sense.

“I never ever let it happen to any of you,” she said; I can never thank her enough for not having to share in that special kind of hell. This problem is epidemic; at least one in ten girls in the U.S. is sexually abused. Not me, not as a girl. Thank you, Mom, for that, at least. And I suppose I thank you for not killing yourself when it must have felt very real and possible when I was so tender young. Just strong enough to be less broken than you, and strong enough to seek healing.

### **Toward compassion**

As I step further down the path of compassion, a word that is not taboo but a concept that seems to hold not nearly enough appeal in an individualistic and competitive society, I invite you alongside me. Do you see the girl with red ringlets (I am crafting a picture of my mom for you), growing up away from the farm and coal camps where her parents had grown up, with just enough class positioning in her whiteness to pass as middle class in some venues, but remaining insecure about all she ever had? Do you see this full grown woman who never shared positive memories of her own girlhood? What must that impossibly profound set of voids, of absences, feel like, inside that shell of flesh? Do you see this girl-turned-woman in the flesh also engaging a prayer life? There were prayers; they were her real. Who heard them? Were there moments of grace from some higher power, perhaps as she sat in church pews, fingering rosary beads, engaging images of a Mary who maybe, perhaps knew her?

Who wants to hear this? We may be making some progress warning parents regarding the “how to” of avoiding having children sexually abused, but do we look toward the eclipsing patriarchy, a system wherein male and maleness continue to be seen as stronger and better, in any meaningful way? Do we look at the other systems of oppression which work in concert to break the taboos, that make the unutterable speakable? Postcolonial theory, a system which

acknowledges that our histories have been fractured by impositions of power through patriarchy and racism, has taught me it is possible to say all things, that not one thing must remain unspoken. Imagine that world where we do not hold back so as not to offend (oppressing) sensibilities. Naming my mom's sexual abuse, situating it in patriarchy, class, and all the intersections of oppression is perhaps a flash in the pan. Or perhaps it is my true voice in one academic journal.

### **Re-storying**

I have studied enough narrative inquiry research and theory to know I am re-storying, re-piecing the squares of a quilt of life that were always held together by tenuous threads. This is about all I have done since I learned a little over a month ago that my mom killed herself. After throwing myself on the cold white tiles of my kitchen, I beat them until my fingers bruised. The prayer beads surrounding my wrist shattered into the corners of many rooms. No one, nothing could contain the enormity of learning that the woman who was supposed to be mother was gone. Forever. My husband held me, but really nothing held me. What holds me in the middle of the night when I wake up for the next three hours as I sit with this new scar? Surely the flesh and the scar shall mend.

In the re-storying, I reckon with new symbols. I see sayings regarding mothers' unconditional love and realize I am, on the inside, merely the tundra where the wind blows colder over my barren landscape. There is no wall of resonance from which most read such a message and feel recognition, perhaps even a reverberation of love. I see a Cabela's sign from the highway and remember that my brother discovered the gun receipt from nearly a year previously—from Cabela's. Did she lie when she bought the gun, have a story regarding needing to "protect herself," or did she refuse to answer any questions which she may have been



asked? I see now that no matter how hard I work, I am not guaranteed comfort by the hard work. My excessive working as a student had saved me from her, but the strategy I see, as I re-story, is maladaptive. A brush with cancer last summer left me healed enough to know I cannot afford to work myself to the death. My relentless working—to be clear—not to feed my ego—but as a survival strategy—will do my two beautiful kids no good if I am gone.

### **Sitting with—being together**

You have come so far with me here. As a social justice/faith worker, you might be wondering what this has to do with you. I fashion myself, or self-author as our narrative researchers would call it, a social justice advocate. I situate myself in a faith of interconnectedness. Where is the social justice, the interconnectedness, right now? What have you done that makes a difference in the tangible life of the ones you love around you? What have you done that makes *you* a better person? Have you done your work? My mom did not. I begged her, for years. I lacked all the language. I lacked the compassion. Compassion enough for myself to let it flow toward her, only now do I have enough compassion for her to know how to love her.

I grew up witnessing injustice in West Virginia. Nestled among the achingly beautiful, ancient Appalachian Mountains, among the glistening streams where I played as a child, were the dilapidated structures called home by too many. The resource extraction by a few wealthy men who profited on the sweat of men who earned crumbs... lead to so much despair and exile, seeking new life in other terrains, just as I did. Maybe because I lived the daily abuses of my mother I was and am sympathetic to the ravages of daily oppressions which could completely destroy. As I re-story, I sense why I sympathize with others' struggles, be they struggles of poverty, race, heteronormativity, privilege of religion. I have struggled for a long time as a white

woman (though bilingual and transnational in some ways) to be able to articulate this sense of *lucha*, a struggle toward justice. I do not long to be called an ally. I do not want a label for my work. I want to sit with this compassion and sit with you. Do you see me sitting? I'm not writing the next tenure-seeking article. I'm not networking at a conference. I'm not choking down another abuse in academia and smiling politely. I'm not afraid.

We are busy. What is this busyness? Others have eloquently theorized this as a problem of arrogance. A new genre of work is emerging. Some of it is so new that it's centuries old. You know what I'm talking about, or maybe not—the work on mindfulness, post-oppositional politics which transcend merely being “against” something, meditation, and the word I used above, compassion. I find myself attracted to Native science and indigenous knowledge, work from the colonized that has endured because it helps people and peoples survive. This work emphasizes our interconnectedness, an interconnectedness, which, if recognized, would help us heal the wounds of the vicious histories of oppression and environmental degradation. I learn to sit. I learn to be with these feelings, and I work on finding time to sit with my children, my spouse, my students, my friends. This has been the most meaningful to me on the other side of the trauma. The *convivencia*, the being with. Sometimes it is the laughter among women friends in my department, laughter about the mundane, sometimes it is the being told how lonely it is to survive suicide, a special club that is hard to understand. At other times, it is the voice of a friend a thousand miles away, taking the time to sit with me, even across the distances. I re-story, talk through, feel anger, compassion, and sometimes just listen to news about a dog. It's the sitting with, as if there is time for me, and my time for them.

I have not offered a grand scheme solution for the structures of inequality and oppression. I tell you where I am, recognizing the connection I did/did not have with my mother in her *lack*

of connection. I have bored a hole into the structures that supported her life of pain and then pointed toward spaces of healing. I am so wounded still, and wonder that in our many colliding ways of seeing the world, some of which we do not name (the hubris and arrogance of classism, ableism, racism, etc.), we may never sit with each other. This is the challenge—this connecting in a way that recognizes histories and the personal and systemic natures of them toward deeply engaging.

It has been said throughout the ages, and I'll repeat it again, "So ham," and "In Lak'ech," and it must exist in so many other ancient wisdoms. Would you take a moment to sit with me, to practice this ancient wisdom of recognizing the self in the other, the other in the self? I am in that other person, and you in me. Can we break power structures together by having this time together? What could be more radical than sitting with each other and seeing one in the other. What happens next when we do this? Love? Shattering of worldviews? Creations of new spaces of wisdom? Apertures into the in-between spaces which provide depth of understanding? Just being, without theorizing and being present? Join me, for even the smallest creation of this space of love, perhaps.