

Existential Stories on The Myth and Reality of Motherhood

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Abstract

The paper presents a narrative of a woman's experience of childbirth and motherhood, supported from extracts from 7 other stories on becoming a mother. Childbirth is a life event which brings existential questions to the fore - what is the meaning of life?, who am I?, what is my identity?, and reaches to the heart of the human condition. The lived experience of becoming a mother is one which although etched deep in the minds of the mothers, can be told and retold a number of ways, and can become reinterpreted over time. Motherhood itself is imbued with myth - the myth of 'the good mother', 'the wicked stepmother', the myth of 'instant bonding', of 'the fulfilment of life'. Women grapple with their own fantasies and expectations about motherhood, and can feel both supported and oppressed by their own and societies motherhood myths.

The narrative presented shows how 'Emma' grappled with her own myths of motherhood, and felt silenced and unheard in her own experience. The contrast between her feelings and experience, her myths, and the expectations of those around her led to rage. She finally broke out of her oppression through connection with another, and finding voice in not being alone. In a sense her character is cast as one suffering oppression and playing the role of a survivor.

There is no one typical experience of motherhood, but these stories show how a range of experiences can be normal. Myths as templates which limit this range can become straitjackets and forces for oppression, but as fantasies can open up avenues for liberation. The aim of this research has been to give voice to different perspectives and stories on childbirth and motherhood, and challenge and reshape the myths which dominate our culture. At the very least these stories are humbling in the drama and courage displayed in the everyday life of mothers. At most they are shocking in the many and varied ways women become oppressed by those who are there to help them through the experience of becoming a mother - hospitals, doctors, family, friends and the culture surrounding their life events. Although all these stories will be useful to anyone providing services to support women in this area, the stories themselves are for those who tell them, those who went before, and those who will come after.

Introduction

The idea for this research was planted 10 years ago with the birth of my daughter. I had a huge amount of support with pregnancy and labour – I attended two different ante-natal courses, one organised by the NCT, and one by my doctor's surgery, I did ante-natal yoga, and read countless books on pregnancy and childbirth. I had investigated all the pain relief options and chosen a birth pool, bought all the accoutrements for baby care, and did everything that was possible to prepare myself for labour and childcare. What no one mentioned, and there almost seemed a conspiracy of silence about this, was what would happen to me on becoming a mother, how would I feel about myself and this new identity. This seemed such an oversight, such a yawning chasm in the mass of information with which I was bombarded. It is almost like having a funeral, in which no mention is made of the person who has died.

In the years between then and now, two books in particular influenced my thinking about 'motherhood. Ironically, the first talks of the change as being one of loss, and the transition to motherhood as 'a sense of change which is primarily experienced as a loss – loss of physical integrity, sexuality, work, status, autonomy, male company, and many other aspects of life' (Nicolson, 1998, p. 4). How can we make sense of motherhood being a state of loss, when the mythology surrounding it would suggest it is a time of enrichment and gain? As Nicolson in 'Post-natal Depression' points out loss is taboo in the expert literature on birth and motherhood, and loss and motherhood appear paradoxical, as motherhood is 'the archetypal "happy event"' (p. 88). Nicolson interviewed 24 women, 13 of whom she managed to interview in pregnancy and 3 times at different stages thereafter. Her focus is primarily on the issue of 'post-natal depression', and her argument is that post-natal depression is a normal, healthy response to a series of losses. Although this work is a major

contribution to our understanding of motherhood, particularly by challenging the pathologisation of depression, it didn't seem to reach or engage with the vast complexity of motherhood experiences, nor even my own experience. I did not suffer from post-natal depression, and most of the women I have interviewed since then also haven't. I was seeking access to a wider understanding of motherhood that goes beyond 'post-natal depression'.

Another book which enters the often highly ambivalent and paradoxical emotions women experience following childbirth is 'Life after Birth' by Kate Figes (Figes 2000). This book also highlights the taboos surrounding motherhood, and sought to dispel these through interviews with women on their experiences of childbirth, adjusting to motherhood and dealing with emotions, exhaustion and changes to relationships. From reading this book, and becoming a counsellor for women who were members of the National Childbirth Trust, I wrote a paper as part of my training as a counsellor on 'Issues in counselling women with young children: Identity meaning and loss' (Winstanley, 2000) where I highlighted many of these issues. I gave this paper at a seminar, and my words were followed by a deathly hush. The silence was then broken as one by one various women began to tell their own stories which were captivating and spell-binding, some fragments of which had never been told before. At this moving event, I realised how oppressive the 'motherhood myth' was, how taboo some aspects of becoming a mother were, to the extent that silence and self censure has seemed the only option for many. A number of women with young children that I have counselled, have told me before and since, how helpful it would have been if they had been able to speak about their experience, and if they had been able to see that somewhere someone else had felt as they did – they were not alone. Echoes of this can be seen in the one story I have chosen to present below. The research proper began a year ago, with the aim of allowing some of these everyday motherhood stories to surface.

To date 10 women have told me their stories, which have been transcribed verbatim from tape recorded interviews. Although in these sessions my purpose as an interviewer was to intervene as little as possible, to not get in the way of their story, which I suggested they told in any way they felt comfortable. The exact transcriptions were then returned to the women to amend, delete, correct and anonymise as they saw fit. From these transcriptions the story has been taken. Although in places I depart from the ordering of the original story, and delete repetitious and seemingly irrelevant material, the material chosen is taken verbatim from the transcripts. Unlike a story which changes time and again with re-telling, these stories have often been told for the first time, although may already have existed in previous forms, and in the case of the story chosen, parts of it already existed in diary and poetic form. For some, these stories have been an internal dialogue, and for others fragments have been told. The way telling and re-telling and later developments change the interpretation of the stories is one issue which is discussed below.

For reasons of length only one story has been repeated in full, and this was the first one gathered. One reason for this is length – it is intended that all the stories will be reproduced in a book form, with a book intended to challenge the 'silence' on this issue, and give permission for a more varied and diverse view of the experience of motherhood. The other reason is to avoid chopping up these tales into little chunks where we lose sight of the story-teller, although inevitably I have done this with the other stories for illustration. Most other writers (such as the two quoted above – Nicolson, 1998, Figes, 2000) use quotes from interviews to illustrate themes in their research. However keeping the whole story intact as far as is possible has greater power and integrity, and enables us to hear much more clearly the voice of the woman, in this case Emma (a pseudonym), which is after all one of the intentions of this work.

Emma's story does not represent the experience of other women, although others may find echoes of their experience in hers – and in fact this was one reason why she was willing to tell her story – it would have helped her so much if she had known someone else had shared her experience, and she hopes at some stage, that others will be able to read her story and get strength from it in the way she was later able to do on reading another's. It seems that, as with other major life events, there will be recurrent themes, and also aspects of uniqueness in these stories. As Yalom, an existential psychotherapist, suggests, there are a number of common concerns that face us in the human condition

but 'each person experiences the stress of the human condition in a highly individualised fashion' (1980, p. 12). As a therapist, I was concerned to allow for the common themes and also the uniqueness, and certainly to date there has been huge diversity in the stories I have collected, and it seems important that this diversity doesn't get lost.

After telling Emma's story, the paper will return to discuss the issue of myth and its link with 'the perceived reality' of the storyteller, and then elaborate on some of the ways in which stories such as these can be used and analysed.

Emma's Story: Two Date's on the Grave-stone

I have always said, and I say to this day, I want two dates on my gravestone, the day that I physically died, and the day that I gave birth.

When I hit 30, I felt I've got to decide now whether I'm going to have a child or not. Everybody around me, friends, and especially my mum, loved kids, so it was very much 'when are you going to have children', there was a kind of expectation. I had an image of a good mother, that of a mother who dotes on her child, and is completely in awe of this child, in wonder at this child, and just loves it to death. I started to think there must be something in this, or something wonderful will happen, okay, let's go for it.

I fell pregnant literally in the first 2 weeks after I came off the pill, and whoomph. I wept my way through pregnancy, because I knew then for certain, I didn't want children. But I still believed that when I gave birth something would change, something magical would happen. I really thought that when it is born, I'll feel different. I kept on waiting for it, but it never happened, that was almost the biggest disappointment, that at the end of this time, I had a baby, but 'so what?'

I did feel different, very different. Because all my relatives were around me saying 'isn't it wonderful', and 'isn't he gorgeous?', and he was, he was a lovely happy healthy baby, he slept through the night and was very good. But I was devastated, I was so lonely, I felt almost excluded from this club of all these people saying 'isn't it wonderful', and I was not understanding, I was an outsider, different.

And I remember in those early days thinking 'I wish I could kill this child'. I actually got to feeling like that, and then logically working out that it wouldn't work really, anyway, because if I killed him, then nobody would love me anyway. I didn't care about the idea of being in prison, I didn't care about that, but I did care about whether people wouldn't love me any more.

I felt no bonding and no love at all towards this child. I felt I was the housemaid, the housekeeper. That was my job, my job was to care for this child, I didn't have any life, or life of my own. I have got to say that no child was better cared for, because I then started to feel if something happened to him, it would be my fault. So from the moment he had a cold or anything I was terrified, because it wasn't that I didn't want him to die, it was that I would feel that it would be my fault if he did, so I really had conflicting feelings.

I then started to think about 'how about me killing me'? I started to think about the possibility of suicide, but I came to the conclusion that I didn't have that much courage. In any case, I still didn't think that anyone would believe me, and that would defeat the object. That was the thing that kept me alive, the fact that my mother especially would have found some reason to say that this was an accident. It wouldn't have been recognised. I wrote a poem about this in my diary:

They say I must live this thing called a life,

They tell me this prison is also my home.

When can I soar as free as a bird,

Without these restrictions that just weigh me down.

My heart is so heavy, my limbs very numb,

From being in one place for far, far to long.

They are slipping on past all those years, all those days,

An endless succession of hate and regret.

They say 'don't give in, go on staying alive',

But they never say why or for how long.

If I had the courage I would walk out of this world,

But I don't, so I stay to exist one more day."

That's what it felt like, a life term in prison, whereas to have been in prison, I'd have felt free – because I'd have been taken out of the situation.

In my diary I've written:

"I'm going through a very depressed time. I don't know if I shall pass through this. No one really wants to know or is interested. Mum and dad only say things like 'you don't mean it', or 'we are all fed up'. I suppose they are afraid to hear anymore so they pretend it is not serious. How I'd like to pack a bag and go off, start somewhere where no one knows me. But I can't hurt David, his future is all that is important now. Mine lost all significance when he was born. Maybe I will live again in years to come, but that is a very long time away."

"When I had David I was near suicidal, but no one loved me enough to see through it and face the truth."

Nobody was listening. Even the health visitor who came at times would always say 'how is David?', and never once asked 'how are you?' I doubt if a day went past that I didn't cry. I think that here was every outward sign that I was extremely depressed, extremely unhappy, but my mum, my dad, my husband, the close people in my life didn't do anything, I ended up thinking 'you don't love me enough to do something about this'. It felt as though they were burying their heads in the sand and not listening to me. Martin my husband would get embarrassed when I cried and he would say 'ssh', 'I don't want to bloody shh', you know, 'I want to be allowed to be this way, I don't want to be shh'd'. All I wanted was for him to be there, to be a presence. I wanted people to put their arms around me, a silent acknowledgement of how I was feeling, but they didn't. I even wrote a poem about this, about how I wanted to be allowed to grieve:

"How nice to lay here all alone.

To feel so good and free.

To let a tear roll down my cheek,

Without you to comfort me.

The tears they flow like falling rain,

Releasing all my pent-up fears,

You would say 'oh do not cry'

And that would cause me much more pain."

In my diary I wrote:

"This should be called my doomsday book, because it is all full of doom and gloom. I only hope that one day in happier times I may look back at this time and be glad I've got through it, although maybe there won't be happier times, and maybe I won't get through it."

It felt like a death, it was a death, it was a death of my old self. That is why I want two dates on my gravestone. Everything seems to be before this baby and after, afterwards I lived as a shadow. Yet I never really had my own identity, I went from being somebody's daughter, to somebody's wife, to somebody's mum, I was always an appendage. I lost so much, here is another point in my diary:

"Why can't we realise when we are well off in this life?" All those years ago, I thought I wasn't happy in work. Look at me now. I feel nothing, I do nothing, everything is too much trouble and too much effort. I realise today, too, that I think in terms of everything being before this, or after ... Even sex. Sex used to be pleasant, never terrific, but OK. But it changed when I got pregnant. From something you did for fun, into something horrible. Something only an animal does, by instinct, to carry on the species."

I was actually desperate to be a human being again, but at the time I didn't feel like a human being, I felt like a robot. I think the only way I could survive, was not to feel. I did a lot of grieving, a lot of crying though. There were times when we could be sitting having lunch, and something would go boom, and I would just run out, and literally scream like hell, just scream and scream and cry, but it was a way of coping. I refused to go to the doctors, because although I wasn't feeling a lot, I thought if I take the pills I won't feel anything. In a way I preferred to feel the hurt than to feel numb. The pain was better than numbness. I had to hang on to that bit of feeling, because at least it meant I was alive.

As well as all the losses, I felt terribly guilty. I do sometimes feel he could have had a better childhood. I feel I took something away from him in childhood. I was very hard on him, because I couldn't cope with a child that was naughty. So he knew he had to be good. He never got hit or anything like that, or physical abuse, but in some ways I mentally abused him I feel. Especially as a very, very young babe, when he was 6 months old or a year. I can remember that child sitting on that floor here, here in the middle of the carpet (pointing), and screaming obscenities at him. Because if I hadn't I might have hit him and really hurt him. I can remember shouting 'what a horrible f* baby you are' - that sort of thing, and he would burst out crying, because he didn't understand a word, but he understood the tone. And we sat there and we wailed together. We would both sit on that part of the floor and we wailed together, we just sobbed together, and of course he realised I was kind of pushing him away. My husband was always very good at getting up in the night and those kind of things, but David always wanted me, and I hated that. And the more he cried, the more I pushed him away. So as a child he was never sure that I was going to be there. And when he went to school he wailed and so on, because he was afraid that I wasn't going to be there. I can see that now. But it was a pity that he had to suffer with me, because he did.

It's funny, we were like siblings, fighting for attention. I'd never had a brother, I was an only child. But sitting on the floor, I think there was part of me that wanted to be the child, because I was never allowed to be a child. So there we were, sat on the floor, fighting for who could be the child.

So how did I get out of the prison? We all have to find our way out of that prison, probably there is nobody else that can find the way for us, so we have to find methods, individual methods, for unlocking the door.

The turning point was an article that I read in the paper, I still have it in my diary, look it's all yellow with age, and tattered from my reading and reading it. Look in my diary where I've written:

"Every word in this article is virtually as though I had written it. How nice to know I am not completely alone in my thoughts."

I'll read it to you:

'Mums Not the Word' (Liz Gilbey, The Telegraph 2/9/86)

There are times when I feel old and there are times when I feel tired. Both part of the human condition. But there are also times when I feel inherently deficient. Those are the times when I am told yet again that infertility is a tragedy. For me the tragedy is being ordinary, normal, fulfilled, fertile. No I am not homosexual nor an emotional ice box. Just a fairly ordinary wife of 14 years standing with a fairly ordinary daughter. I never did want children. ... Psychologists may claim that this is the standard defensive procedure adopted by an unwanted child, when faced with motherhood, but I wasn't an unwanted child. The state of pregnancy was as abhorrent as I had expected. To be a birth control failure rate statistic is one thing, to be laughed at by a doctor when I tentatively appealed for an abortion is a fatal blow to a timorous self confidence when one suspects oneself to be abnormal. To achieve honesty about this emotional deficiency is not easy. It reaches the point where one either has the temerity to look within oneself and admit this is not me or believe those who say confidently 'you'll feel different once the baby is born', I didn't. Trying to manufacture the maternal instinct makes one a shadow of oneself"

That is just the way I would have chosen to put it. It still makes me cry (wiping some tears away and continuing reading the article):

"... A self loathing, silent soul, watching other mothers for stances, moods attitudes to copy, to talk oneself into. But duty drives where love only leads, so I doubt a baby was better cared for than mine. ... As a teenager she is tough and affectionate, kind and unimpressionable, genuine and hard-working, self-opinionated and fun, I love her dearly. We are friends. But the measure of a woman for herself, or in the eyes of other people, should not be her fertility or the lack of it. ... Until this is understood and appreciated, until not wanting children is considered as valid a stance as desperately needing them, women will continue to denigrate and undervalue themselves in this almost taboo aspect of the female gender."

(Crying) This is just such a wonderful piece, I couldn't believe it when I read it. It was a life-line. It makes me feel so emotional, not bad emotion, it's a wonderful emotion. So reading this was more than magical moment, it was a turning point for me, I can't imagine what would have happened if I hadn't had read that. That was the beginning of acceptance, the fact that somebody else had had an experience similar to mine, and had learnt to accept herself. If she could do that, so could I.

I always say that I had to fall in love with David, I had to fall in love with him. And I did. I can't say when it started, but I guess it was from the age of about 3, it took me about 10 years to really fall in love with David. By that sort of age, I loved him desperately. But it wasn't a big bang, it was a slow, plod, it was a gradual awakening. It's funny, but when I went along for a hysterectomy and we had counselling, and my counsellor kept saying things like 'well what happens if your son dies, won't you want to replace him?' Well how the hell could you replace one human being by another human being? That was such a peculiar thing to say – 'to replace'. Oh God, you can't replace a baby, you can't replace anybody. And I do love him so much, and we are friends now, the best of friends, and he'll say 'love you mum', which chokes me (crying), and I'll say 'love you lots', so we are ever so close now.

Myths of Motherhood

The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary defines a myth as:

“Fictitious tale, usually involving supernatural persons, embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena; fictitious person or thing; fictitious idea or belief etc. especially one that has been accepted uncritically.” (Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, 1976)

A number of myths surround motherhood, sometimes they resonate with the lived experiences of women, sometimes they jar in mockery at human inadequacy, and sometimes they act as a fantasy to aspire to or a nightmare to fear.

The first myth is of ‘the good mother’ which is entangled with idyllic notions of motherhood. In this myth ‘women are supposed to be in a state of maternal bliss once a child is born’ (Jeffers, 1999 p.16). Bonding and the feelings of love towards a baby are instantaneous and natural. The giving birth of a human being is seen as the most sacred and meaningful act of life, it is an act which is imbued with meaning, and also provides meaning to the life of the mother. Nicolson (1998, pp. 104-5) is one writer who takes issue with ‘the myth of motherhood’ and shows how the picture built up of motherhood, means that many aspects of the lives of women suffering from post-natal depression are overlooked or reframed, because they don’t fit with the myth. One example is over the role of anger. She suggests that anger is so much at odds with the mythical notions of femininity and motherhood, that it is either ignored, or seen as guilt. She found torrents of anger issuing from her respondents, and yet neither the Pitt measure of atypical depression following childbirth, nor the Beck Depression Inventory, nor the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale measure anger. Emma was at times overwhelmed by anger, anger at her close relatives, her mother and husband, her child and at herself, and yet the main response she received from adults was to ignore it, to try and quieten her, or to minimise it – ‘it will soon pass’. A number of mothers in my research have experienced huge amounts of anger, and have again and again responses from professionals, friends and relatives to be more concerned to silence this anger, than to listen and witness their feelings, which many suggest would have been much more supportive. The same goes for the pain and distress.

Not only are ‘so-called’ negative emotions denied, but where these are expressed, women fear being ‘demonised’ as wicked or unnatural – the flip side of the motherhood myth.

Why does this myth abound? One role they play is of social coercion (Wolf, 1990, p. 11). Here the happy housewife and mother is the model of successful womanhood, an image that is promoted by patriarchal society and ideology. If the image can become powerful enough, it could condition and socialise women into striving to fulfil their ordained roles in society. To fall from grace, to deny this model, is to be an outsider, un-natural and despised. So strong is this image, that the template can be internalised into the psyche’s of women, to be passed from generation to generation. It can become powerful enough to silence alternative experiences. Maushart (1997) suggests that the myth has led to a conspiracy of silence:

“The mask of motherhood is what mutes our rage into murmurs, and softens our sorrow into resignation.” (Maushart, 1997, p3)

In this sense the myth is an expression of power relations and it has the power to negate and dilute the interpretation and telling of counter experiences. Jeffers (2000, p.26) suggests that it takes a ‘critical mass’ of voices to be heard to challenge the hard-held cultural beliefs and myths, and in order for a societal shift in consciousness to occur.

The social coercion model goes back a long way, and has become meshed with societies view of what makes for good child development. For example Elizabeth Badinter in ‘The Myth of Motherhood’ (Badinter, 1981) suggest the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s book ‘Emile’ which was published

in France in 1762 was very influential as a latter-day child-rearing book for the upper classes. This filtered down as women felt more and more responsible for their duties:

“When they could not assume their duties, they believed themselves guilty. In this sense Rousseau had won a very significant battle. Guilt had invaded women’s hearts.”

There are many fearful tales of what can become of a society which separate out the biological function of motherhood, from the social, and Margaret Atwood’s ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ (Atwood, 1996) is terrifying in its un-natural view of motherhood. It is interesting that in Emma’s story she refers to herself as a ‘handmaid’, (in Atwood’s story the Handmaid was there to be a surrogate mother for the sterile upper class, an expendable servant whose only function was to become pregnant on behalf of the ‘wife’, and sent onto another posting once birth had taken place and the child became that of the wife).

Social coercion works through guilt. Study upon study have over the years highlighted the necessity for the mother’s love for and bonding with the child in healthy development, including the work of Bowlby on attachment and loss (Bowlby 1979), and Liedloff’s book ‘The Continuum Concept’ (1986), not to mention the pressure placed on mothers in emotional and intellectual education provided by Dr. Spock’s theories, and the work of Maria Montessori. Each new study and childcare approach, although laudable in relation to child welfare, puts another brick in the wall of silent guilt that makes it impossible to speak, for those mother’s that cannot live up to the ‘good mother myth’. It is important to see it as a myth, because even those mother’s that I’ve interviewed that have found motherhood stimulating, enriching and full of positive meaning, find that they fall remarkably short of the ‘myth’. One important contribution of books like Figes (2000) and Jeffers (1999) is their emphasis on the ‘good enough’ mother.

Another reason for the myth is comfort. It is comforting to pretend that motherhood is so rosy. It has a role in social cohesion - it strengthens us as members of society, to think that our mother loved us in this way, and that we shall pass on that love to a child. It is part of the fabric that weaves society together. In fact unravelling the myth can be a shocking experience:

“I felt slaughtered, over and over, and I didn’t see that what had been slaughtered was nothing but an idea – a fantasy – an illusion – although it hurt like a knife in my chest. I had made a picture in my head – it existed nowhere else – and then screamed when it was ripped apart.” (Stevens, 1984, p. 127)

As well as discomfort, there are other reasons why the myth hold sway, and ‘the conspiracy of silence’ continues. Jeffers (1999 pp. 15-27) suggests that we hide the truth from ourselves, we may be ashamed to admit our feelings to others, we are confused, and also we don’t want to hurt our children. Of course there are a number of accounts and studies of women’s experiences of motherhood which do counter the motherhood myth, (see for example Kline 1997, Wagner 1998). However an interesting quality of myths is their endurance and power to seduce through the centuries. Many of these real life stories will be forgotten in years to come, but the myths will still hold sway.

There is another reason why these myths continue, and that is their aspirational and fantasy quality – their role in ‘wish fulfilment’. To dash a myth of perfect motherhood is to lose hope, and one of the contributors to the stories interviewed for this research, Molly, held on to the myth as something that could keep her going through the hard times. Her fantasy of motherhood being of a loving smiling woman with child tucked under her arm and surrounded by happy prancing children, as she brought out home baked scones from an aga, was something she held on to and brought her courage and hope. In fact it had become the driving force and *raison d’être* for her life, where she got great satisfaction in making a small step in that direction, for example the purchase of an apple tree for her yard was one step on the way to getting ‘the orchard’, in which the children would happily play and pick apples.

There are also other reasons. On the one hand, the motherhood myth is part truth part fantasy, parts of it may resonate with the experience of motherhood, although rarely as a whole, and for all time –

motherhood is much more full of ambivalence, and so although some may have felt moments of perfect bliss and maternal love, these are usually mixed with exhaustion, anger and despair. On the other hand, if rather than reflecting fragments of reality, providing glimpses of a perfect future, the myth is an anathema, then the fear may be that other myths of motherhood would prevail.

The other dominant image of motherhood handed down in myths and stories is that of the wicked and evil stepmother. This is found repeatedly in fairy tales, such as in Snow Drop in Grimm's Fairy Tales (now known as Snow White, J and W Grimm, 1911, pp. 38-45). It is interesting that when mothers are portrayed in myths or fairy-tales as wicked, evil and unloving, they are in some senses 'un-natural', and this is symbolically denoted by the absence of a biological connection – hence their being a 'stepmother', or an imposter of sorts (such as a wicked fairy in disguise).

Fairy-tales abound with mythical mothers. For example there is a wonderful book of 'mother and daughter tales' retold by Josephine Evetts-Secker, (1996). Evetts-Secker suggests that there are universal qualities of myth and folk/fairy tale, and no less so when we look at 'motherhood'. She has a more complex outline of the 'good mother', where the bond between mother and daughter is strong the daughter can experience her mother within herself as an inner strength. Here the good mother gives something of herself to her child before death – 'for mothers must 'die' and daughters must be prepared to leave the protection of home and to be alone', motherhood is full of devouring and creative energy, death is ground for life and renewal, as vividly enacted in the myth of Persephone. What is missed from these tales is what is left for the mother – generally the perspective taken is that of the child, rarely do we see through the mother's eyes. This robbing of perspective, this loss of self is intrinsic to the experience of motherhood, and these myths and stories reflect it only in their absence, not in the explicit content of the tales. Evetts-Secker suggests 'the world of the feminine in myth and fairy tale is situated in nature'. Woman embodies the essential qualities of the earth and rhythms of life' (p. 78). One core part of the mother myth is 'the earth mother'. She also suggests that 'the archetypal urge to participate in the work of nature is experienced through desire – desire for a mate, and desire for a child'. In her tales the barren woman's desire for a child is the motivating force in 'Katanya' and 'Snowflake'. True and false mothers are contrasted, natural and 'stepmothers', 'nurturing' and negative mothers.

Where myths flourish with polar opposites, real-life stories have the benefit of seeing things in not so black and white terms. Is a mother who doesn't bond instantly so unnatural? Is a mother who has her baby adopted or has an abortion wicked? The fascination I have with real life stories of motherhood is not the grey that exists between the ends of the spectrum, but the rainbow of emotions and experiences that is so missed when we focus on myths, but is also extinguished by the burden of the myth.

Storytelling

Stories are different to myths. In the OID (1976) stories are:

"Past course of life of person, institution etc; account given of incident or series of events; narrative meant to entertain hearer or reader, tale in prose or verse of actual or fictitious events ..."

Myths have a level of depth and complexity (Gabriel, 2000), which stories often cannot achieve, although as suggested above maybe real-life stories are more likely to show up the shades in between the strong contrasts. In a sense myths attempt to grapple with universal truths and beliefs about morality and the human condition, often through mythical characters, whereas stories tend to be more individualistic and particular. There are many types of stories, but the ones presented here are autobiographic, and based on the telling of how an incident, namely childbirth and becoming a mother, can impact a woman's life.

A primary aim of storytelling is recreational, to entertain. At one level, all the stories collected for this research are gripping and fascinating, but this is not the main aim for this research. Gabriel (2000, p. 9) outlines some of the functions of stories other than entertainment:

- they stimulate the imagination
- offer reassurance and consolation
- they provide moral education
- they justify and explain
- they inform, advise, and warn

Aspects of all of these can be found in this research on motherhood. The notion of reassurance is fascinating and paradoxical. Bettelheim has shown how what may appear to be frightening and threatening images in fairytales, may have an underlying role in providing reassurance to children. He discusses the role of fairy tales in wrestling with the existential predicament and existential dilemmas (Bettelheim, 1976 pp. 6 –12), and this is very much the case in these stories of motherhood. For example a parallel can be drawn between protecting children from the ‘dark side of life’ and protecting women from ‘the dark side of motherhood’, and in Emma’s case her family very much wanted to protect themselves and her from it. Bettelheim’s comments have resonance:

“The prevalent parental belief is that a child must be diverted from what troubles him most: his formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry, and even violent fantasies. Many parents believe that only conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images should be presented to the child. ... We want our children to believe that, inherently, all men are good. But children know that they are not always good. ... This contradicts what they are told by their parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his own eyes. The dominant culture wishes to pretend, particularly where children are concerned, that the dark side of man does not exist. ... Psychoanalysis was created to enable man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it, or giving in to escapism. ... This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form.” (Bettelheim, 1976, pp. 7-8)

Likewise with real-life stories such as Emma’s, although they raise the possibility that motherhood may at times be filled with scary, desperate, lonely, and many other painful emotions, this provides some kind of support or even ‘life-line’. Maybe being prepared for a variety of experiences, rather than being only open to the ‘myth’, or even just knowing that others have experienced these fearful emotions, can be healing, cathartic and strengthening.

These stories are educational and also dangerous – they voice and give expression to many of the experiences that get silenced, or deleted from the myths that are passed down. In this sense, they provide a much wider based of information than is evident in the myths, and suggest a more questioning and open-minded appraisal of motherhood.

The stories therefore can be counter-balanced to the myths. In some ways they explode some of the fictions, and provide a richer source of information. The uniqueness of each story reinforces the fictitious quality of myths. However it is interesting that some of the stories reflect on the ‘good mother’ myth as harmful and oppressive. Others see it as a fantasy to sustain and aspire to through the hardships of motherhood’s reality.

Analysing Motherhood Stories

The Puzzle

Many a good story poses us with a question, or a puzzle, where we are left thinking ‘why’? Our mind is energised to jump to reconcile this gap in our knowledge of the story. Becoming a mother can be puzzling, and many of the women in this study were busy working out the puzzles – what was their new identity? Why did they feel different from their expectations? Emma’s puzzle, was to work out

why she didn't feel like she was expected to, like the 'myth' of motherhood. This puzzle also becomes the reader or listener's as well. Certainly as I listened to her story I was led to ask why had she responded like this to motherhood. At various points Emma provides possible solutions to the puzzle – perhaps she was still a child and felt rivalry towards her son as they sat on the carpet and wept and raged together. Perhaps this was the resurfacing of unresolved issues from her own childhood. A psychologist could make much of her own childhood as an only child. A sociologist could make a number of assumptions about the influence of her lack of support structures – Emma had recently moved before giving birth and knew very few people locally. Yet from a more existential view, maybe the puzzle was that there was no puzzle – perhaps hers was one of any number of normal reactions to motherhood. It is only the building up of false expectations that lead to such crashing devastation.

As with all good stories, the power of solving the puzzle is left with the reader to solve in their own way. There were other puzzles also in this story, not least the question – how will Emma survive, does she survive, does she find a way out of the 'prison'? This is the type of puzzle that can be seen as a challenge – how does the protagonist get themselves out of a mess (see for example Gabriel, 2000, p. 12), but unlike heroic or fictitious stories, existential ones suggest courage in less flamboyant ways.

The Magic Wand and The Turning Point

One way out of a fix, is to wave a magic wand. Although we know this only happens in fairy stories, many harbour secret yearnings for the rescuer that will make everything right, or the magic moment when all will be revealed. Emma herself knew on one level that that would not be the case, but also deep down waited for the moment when something magical would happen, but the moment never came. In another of these stories, a woman called Maria kept hoping and hoping for that magic moment when she would become pregnant. She described it as 'a treadmill of hope'. But again and again it didn't happen.

Although in many of these stories, a magic moment does not happen, there is often a turning point. For Emma, the turning point occurred when she read the article and found she 'was not alone'. Although she could pinpoint the change to that point, there were other ways in which the change happened gradually, as with her bonding with her son. For another mother Cathy, her turning point was a religious experience when she felt the transcendental love of God. Both Emma and Cathy both believed they needed to find their own way through the existential crisis, but both found difficulty in doing it alone.

For most of the women in this study, including Emma, Cathy, Imogen and Maria a barrier on the journey to be overcome is 'not being believed'. Not being believed by others seems to paralyse and prevent change. It is almost as if this like amber fixes the person at this stage. Certainly for professionals or counsellors working with women in distress at this time, one of the most vital ways in which support can be provided is to believe and accept the experience and feelings of the mother.

Crystallisation, Reinterpretation and Hindsight

Gabriel (2000, p. 42) discusses the 'crystallisation of stories around particular interpretations of events'. Certainly many of the stories told by mothers to me have crystallised around a particular narrative, and Emma's story is one such, where I have heard it on more than one occasion, and key aspects of it seem to be 'fixed', for example the image of the 'two dates on the gravestone' seem to be carved in stone. Yet I also found some plasticity in views of motherhood, and elements of this reflect some aspects of existential thinking. For example Cooper (1998) suggests that in contrast to a natural science perspective which sees the past leading into the present leading into the future, an existential perspective suggests that the past is fundamentally interwoven with the present and the future, such that neither one can be considered anterior to the others. Not that the past and the present and future are the same, as Sartre (1956/1995) refers to the past as 'calcified'. This does not mean it has been 'fixed', just that unlike the present and future which are characterised by freedom and possibilities, the past is devoid of choices "that which has consumed its possibilities." (p. 116). However I would go

beyond Cooper's claim that the past becomes a tool of being for us to act on the present, and suggest that the present can become a tool for reinterpretation of our past. Our interpretation of the past is fundamentally end-orientated, and as we reflect on the past, these reflections may change as our aims and current experiences change. Imogen for example, one of the mothers in my research, had been very close to her mother prior to her own pregnancy, and had seen her mother as the wronged and innocent party when her own parents had divorced when she was young. However the birth of Imogen's own child had wrenched her relationship with her mother asunder – her mother had ranted and raved at Imogen's husband and rejected this new baby in her daughter's life, leading eventually to a dramatic parting of the ways. Imogen on reflecting back on her own mother in childhood now reinterpreted her parent's divorce, and saw her mother in a very different light, and as someone who had driven her husband away, in the way she had driven Imogen away. Storytelling can be one way in which the reinterpretation can become 'crystallised' at least for a while, and Imogen's story is one that had been told and retold as she sifted through her experiences and reflections.

Emma's story is also one that not only would appear very different if told by the various characters – for example her mother's or her husband's story may be very different from her own, but also suggests that her own view of it has changed as she has developed the tools of reflection. In fact her reflection on 'sibling rivalry' only occurred to her the second time she told me the story, and may have been prompted by a comment of mine, where she had said "David and I really grew up together" and I had involuntarily said "Like siblings". So in storytelling we may make use of the audience to take the story further. Her story has had longer to develop – as her son is now in his twenties, and the story may have sounded different if told at the time. Hindsight is an interesting notion. In Emma's story, her hindsight had allowed herself more understanding and acceptance than had been present at the time of the early years of motherhood. However for others hindsight can be a matter of great regret. For example Cathy had bitterly regretted not going for fertility treatment when there had been a 'window of opportunity' which subsequently closed after her kidney functions started to break down.

Roles and Characters

Villains and rescuers, and villains dressed up as rescuers often play a part in these stories. Maria, who was desperately seeking help to get pregnant through IVF, almost threw herself into the benevolent hands of some rescuers. For example one doctor when she was quite very ill (she had defective kidneys at the same time as seeking help with fertility through IVF) who had said when he came into the ward "well what has happened to Maria, I came in last week and she was perfectly well, what on earth is going on?" And Maria had felt enormous relief that this person would sort it out, he cared and was "rooting for me". In contrast other medical consultants, were more like 'wolves' clad as rescuers – for example one clinician who she had gone to see and had explained she was going through IVF and he had laughed and said incredulously "How old are you?", treating her with contempt and disrespect. Emma saw her family as largely powerless to help her, and if anything saw their attempts to soothe and pacify her as fuel to her rage, and forging an even greater wedge between herself and others – 'she was different'. Also the unfulfilled expectations causes great disappointment. For example Imogen's mother who she had seen as her closest friend, abandoned her in motherhood, leading to disappointment and disillusionment.

If rescuers and friends turned persecutor and stranger is one inversion in these stories, another is the over the role of the protagonist. For many fairy stories and other narratives, the child is the focus, the protagonist, it is their view of the world we are presented with. In these stories the mother is the focus, and this shift of emphasis makes these quite hard to read. Where we might forgive a child much, we are perhaps less forgiving of mothers.

Discussion

In this paper I have attempted to counterbalance the myth of motherhood with real-life stories from mothers themselves. I have suggested that on one hand the stories intermingle with the myth, where mothers may try and act it out, reinforce it, or wrestle with it and act against it. On the other, I suggest

that the myth of motherhood provides few very stark choices for mothers, limiting our view to one of polarities – the ‘good’ mother and the ‘wicked’ mother, the ‘natural’ mother and the ‘unnatural’ mother. By their nature these dichotomies miss much of the ambivalence, the paradoxical emotions, the variety and colour which exists between black and white. The myths can also become oppressive, something that becomes a weapon that is used to crush and silence women, but also is a weapon women use against themselves heaping guilt and self reproach and monstrous self loathing. It can also distort emotions, such as turn anger retroactively into guilt. Myths abound with meaning and morality, as well as attribution and blame. The stories suggest that of far greater benefit would be acceptance and non judgement.

Stories have their own power which is different to those of myths. There is a power of healing that can come from being witnessed, being believed, being heard. This is the power which the audience gives to the story-teller. There is also the power the story-teller gives to the audience – as exemplified by Emma’s reading of the newspaper cutting - if I can accept myself, then maybe you can accept yourself, and also perhaps you are not totally alone. Stories also have power through their own literary devices. For example the strength of metaphors to give expression to feelings that would be lost in more conventional forms of data gathering (questionnaires for example). Metaphors and similes have been abundant in the stories of motherhood – the prison, the handmaid, the treadmill, are just some that have been used here. The utility of devices such as plot, characters, magic wands, turning points have also been explored. Stories also have the power of life – they can change and evolve over time. Although the process of crystallisation has been mentioned, there is also a role for reinterpretation. The capacity to work with the past, present and future in a more iterative way opens up the possibility of choice and freedom. Finally stories are the weapon of the oppressed. The power to tell one’s own story is a vital basis for human dignity, and it is interesting that in the most oppressive regimes, the power of autobiography is repressed, and diaries themselves become inflammatory and dangerous. Examples here are the Diaries of Anne Frank, or the autobiography of Nelson Mandela (Mandela, 1994). The act of telling one’s own story is an act of liberation.

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