

Mother-Daughter Conflicts Affecting Religious Life

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It may appear as if the surest way to put an end to a mother-daughter conflict is to enter religious life, for the life-style of a sister offers well-established ways of reducing the amount of contact with one's mother. A woman religious can find a ministry at a great distance from home, so that visits home occur only rarely; she can put so much energy into her ministry that letters and phone calls can be respectfully brief; and she can include other community members in visiting time, "because they are now family," so that she and her mother are seldom alone.

Paradoxically, however, such maneuvers do not end mother-daughter conflicts. In fact, they may make them worse. When mother-daughter problems are given little conscious attention, they are less subjectable to corrective thinking, less noticeable, and therefore less demanding of psychic energy. Reducing the frequency of mother-daughter interactions makes them less causative of the heightened stress that serves for most people as a motivator for change.

In reality, women religious can no more claim immunity from conflictual mother-daughter relationships than other women, in spite of past rules that may have distanced them from home or present manipulations they may perform in order to ensure that they and their mothers lead "separate lives." Religious life, in fact, may well harbor more significant mother-daughter conflicts than married life. According to the research of Reva Rubin, married women who become mothers are

likely to work through their personal mother-daughter conflicts in the course of assuming their own maternal functions.

Women religious, on the other hand, are likely to avoid resolving conflicts with their mothers, and this often leads them to unhealthy attempts to work through those conflicts with other religious. Sisters may seek out relationships with women religious who resemble their mothers in some way, with the unconscious intent of restaging the mother-daughter relationship in an attempt to participate in a more satisfying drama of interpersonal love and nurturance than they knew in their family of origin.

FIVE CASE HISTORIES

It may be helpful to consider the stories of sisters with unresolved mother-daughter conflicts before examining the tasks facing these sisters if they are to resolve their conflicts.

Sister A, a warm but introverted woman, appears to form deep, meaningful relationships with other sisters and to share herself with those in her community. Over time, however, she becomes painfully disappointed in the behavior of those with whom she is intimate. She sometimes attempts to verbalize her disappointment, stating her expectations and pointing out how others have fallen short of them, but no one's efforts to satisfy her seem good enough. She discontinues these disappointing friendships and spends a significant amount of

time in isolation from both her latest intimates and the community in general.

In essence, Sister A never learned to resolve the conflict arising out of her longing for an ideal mother and her mother's imperfect mothering. The failure of others to meet her high expectations inevitably results in her withdrawal and rigid, self-imposed separation. If she cannot sustain merged attachment—bondedness to another by becoming that other and having that other become her—she feels compelled to reject separated attachment—bondedness to another while remaining herself.

Sister B, by contrast, is willing to settle for flawed relationships with other religious, as long as they provide the external approval needed to compensate for unavailable self-affirmation. Sister B makes sure she has at least one or two close relationships at all times, and uses her contacts frequently to unload her concerns, review her problem-solving attempts, and hear that she is loved and approved of, no matter how objectively successful or unsuccessful her efforts.

In essence, Sister B has never resolved the conflict she experienced with her mother as a result of her dependence on her mother for constant approval, and either her mother's indulgence of that dependence or her unwillingness/inability to satisfy Sister B's demand for that kind of caregiving. Sister B has learned neither to trust herself as her own primary source of approval and affirmation nor to process her anger over being either overprotected and indulged or slighted by her mother. She unconsciously substitutes anxiety for her anger, and feels a need to reduce that anxiety by hearing the reassuring words of her fellow sisters.

Sister C also experiences considerable anxiety, but hers results from her inability to tolerate feelings of guilt that result from simply being herself. Particularly when she is angry and expresses that anger in community life, she tends to perceive a reaction of displeasure in others, even though her expression has been appropriate. She interprets this perception of displeasure as a sign that she is guilty or wrong. As a consequence, Sister C engages in reconciliatory efforts as soon as possible, making sure she is understood and forgiven. Never having resolved her conflict with her mother over her right to be loved as well as to be free to express herself, Sister C cannot tolerate the uneasiness she experiences as guilt. Hidden deep in the recesses of her unconscious is the conviction that if she is herself, her mother will abandon her and she will be destroyed. She will thus cause herself to be destroyed by being herself. She feels guilty for being herself, she feels guilty for wanting to be free to be herself and wanting not to be abandoned. She is also anxious that at any moment she might prove her guilt.

Sister D, conversely, appears to disown personal guilt for anything she does; she blames others categorically for the interpersonal difficulties that arise routinely in her life. At times Sister D's reaction to feeling harmed by others is a rage that empowers her and fuels her characteristic self-righteousness. At other times her reaction is the constant expression of low-grade criticism of others, which casts an uneasy, depressive spell over the entire community.

Essentially, Sister D has never resolved her conflict over her mother's abusive use of parental power. At the same time, however, Sister D has never taken responsibility for her own abuse of power.

Sister E, an outwardly giving and generous woman in a position of authority, aggravates even dependent and subservient members of her community with her excessively mothering behavior. Becoming overinvested in numerous aspects of community life, she weaves her way into matters well within the capabilities of other sisters. She benevolently demands that others keep her informed in detail, rely on her for periodic approval, and give her the ultimate credit for the success of any work. Never having resolved her conflict with her mother over her need for independence and achievement outside family life and her mother's need for her to take on a maternal role early in life, Sister E continues to relate to other adults as a mother figure. This brings about in other sisters either conscious or unconscious resentment, buried under conscious guilt for not being properly dependent on authority.

A mother-daughter conflict remains alive in all these women, for none has resolved it by completing the daughter's universally required but very difficult task of individuating—that is, becoming her own person, cutting the symbiotic tie between herself and the woman who gave her birth.

INDIVIDUATION NEVER EASY

Individuation is no easier for the woman religious, in spite of her prayer life and life of vowed detachment from rights and possessions, than it is for other women. The mother image never dies in the psyche of a woman. It represents the hope for someone who will love unconditionally and nurture perfectly, meeting the profound expectation every human being holds, not only in infancy but throughout life.

One reason the task of individuation is difficult for any woman is that it requires her to form an identity separate from that of a person she has learned to emulate, a person she considers knowledgeable and at least minimally effective in her culture. She is called to devalue, get angry with, and rebel against her mother. It cannot be otherwise, as Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, for "identity is shaped only in revolt against someone."

Another reason individuation is hard for a woman is that it challenges her to call into question her very role as a nurturer—one who is tolerant, patient, noncompetitive, and responsible for others, including her mother. It requires her to put her obligation to nurture herself ahead of her responsibility to nurture others. It requires her to take care of her own needs even if she fails to meet the needs of others. It asks her to deemphasize the role that gives her cultural value and meaning.

Finally, individuation is especially difficult for a daughter whose mother counted on her for her own fulfillment—for instance, the daughter used by her mother to replace her mother's unavailable or absent spouse or to compensate for the self-fulfilling career that motherhood precluded. A woman who was thus made a part of a marital system when she was still a child is so accustomed to role reversals that she truly believes her mother cannot survive without her strong emotional support.

In spite of the difficulty of individuating, however, the woman religious must undertake the task if she is ever to resolve the conflict with her mother and correct her dysfunctional relationships with her fellow religious. In striving for individuation, she must face the same emotional upheavals and learn the same new behaviors as other conflicted women.

SUBTASKS OF INDIVIDUATION

Developmental psychology theorists and clinicians, including Margaret Mahler, D. W. Winnicott, and others, have found that the task of individuation for a woman consists of the following subtasks: (1) giving up the ideal of a perfect mother and of being mothered unconditionally; (2) moving from merged attachment to separated attachment; (3) becoming truly dependent on internal approval and self-affirmation and processing the anger resultant from being loved too little or pampered too much; (4) learning to tolerate what feels like guilt after having been true to oneself; (5) learning to accept human limitations, processing the rage resultant from abuse, and appreciating the good done to oneself by others; and (6) curbing generosity toward others and becoming generous toward oneself, thereby combining self-in-relation with self-in-the-world. A conflicted woman religious, then, is challenged to address one or more of the subtasks of individuation that lie at the heart of both her unfinished business with her mother and her dysfunctional relationship with her fellow sisters.

Sister A, for example, must focus on subtasks 1, 2, and 5, and be prepared to face deeply felt feelings of anger and depression. She may need the help of a professional to deal with the painful feelings of abandonment this realization brings: her mother was not and cannot (even if living) be the kind of ideal mother she always wanted. She must mourn

the loss of that ideal, feel and express the full impact of her anger, and submit to the reality that she can compensate to some extent for being abandoned by combining reasonable self-love with a limited but nonetheless sincere love of others. She can enjoy separated attachment only if she renounces her unrealistic hope of merged attachment.

One moves from merged attachment to separated attachment by replacing psychological fusion with nourishing connectedness in the context of autonomy—in other words, by replacing emotional dependence with emotional interdependence and a mutual support system. This can be achieved through the following steps: (1) identifying one's own unique needs and desires; (2) articulating them, especially to oneself but also to one's mother; (3) tolerating feelings of anxiety and guilt if one's needs and desires are opposed to one's mother's needs and desires; (4) taking primary responsibility for meeting one's own needs and choosing according to one's own desires, even when this meets with disapproval from one's mother; (5) getting support in doing so from persons other than one's mother; and (6) returning to one's mother and being open to the possibility of mutual support for meeting both persons' unique needs and desires. A woman thus moves from merged attachment to separated attachment by becoming the primary source of need fulfillment for herself and by relating to her mother as one of several secondary sources of need fulfillment.

Sister B, on the other hand, must focus on subtask 3; she must be willing to experience the anger resulting from being either overindulged or approved of too little. She must learn to tolerate, rather than give in to, her anxiety, and she must find out that going to others will reduce her anxiety only on a temporary basis. She must learn that she can survive on, and even benefit from, self-approval, even though she might feel unapproved of by others. She must overcome the fear that keeps her a virtual child, afraid to risk losing her mother's love, afraid to live alone emotionally and psychologically.

Sister C must focus on subtask 4. She must allow herself to incur what feels like guilt in tolerable doses and learn to live with whatever happens when she owns and expresses herself. Expecting to experience sadness and even depression, she must grieve over being shamed as a child whenever she was true to the self that her mother did not want to see. She must become an expert at distinguishing guilt (which results from violating her own moral values) from shame (which results from being devalued by others for reasons of their own).

Sister D will more than likely need professional help as she focuses on subtask 5: dealing courageously and patiently with depression over feelings of abandon-

ment and the rage it inspires. Because she was indeed abused and/or neglected by a trusted caregiver, she still feels the rage and deep sadness, even despair, that she felt as a child. What happened to her cannot be denied. The trauma and its psychological aftermath should be acknowledged and dealt with in a safe, psychotherapeutic environment.

If Sister D eventually confronts her mother to demand an explanation of why she was abused, neglected, and unprotected, she will probably hear her mother tell the story of her own abuse and neglect. She may also hear that her mother feared the loss of her lover or spouse if she dared to bond with, care for, and protect her child. Sister D must then learn to nurture and protect herself, accepting the fact that others will never meet her needs as fully as she would like.

In time Sister D may learn to break down the specific components of her mother's love, as Richard C. Robertiello (author of *Hold Them Very Close, Then Let Them Go*) recommends in Nancy Friday's book *My Mother/My Self*—that is, by separating the ways in which her mother loved from the ways in which she abused. Sister D may even begin to appreciate what her mother provided for her in those misguided but often benevolently motivated attempts to teach her skills for survival in a cruel world.

Sister D must also learn to face a reality even more threatening to her self-image than the abuse she once suffered: her present abuse of others. If she hopes to maintain the life-giving relationships she desires with other women, she must take responsibility for her part in the ongoing destructive cycles of abuse and neglect.

Sister E must focus on subtask 6, learning to use more discrimination in doing good for others and overcoming her fear of meeting her needs for achievement and power in impersonal or transpersonal realms (e.g., art, music, writing, athletics, computers, gardening). She will then truly become an empowerer of her sisters, recognizing their coadulthood and facilitating their growth toward full maturity. And she herself will become a truly well-rounded person, able to give as well as receive, and able to enjoy both self-determination and trust in the self-determination of others.

TRANSITION TO TRUE ADULTHOOD

Several common threads run through the individuation work of Sisters A through E and, indeed, characterize the resolution of mother-daughter conflicts for all women. In all cases the woman who has completed her task has transformed her self-image from that of a needy child, dependent on another for a sense of security and goodness, to that of an adult who can be interdependent, and even dependent at times, because she has learned to be independent. She can rely on others at secondary

levels of need fulfillment because she has learned to rely on herself at a primary level. She can ask others to contribute to the sustenance of her emotional life because she has given herself that life in the first place and continues to make a substantial contribution to its sustenance.

Furthermore, the woman who has completed the task of individuation has a firm-enough sense of self to be able to recreate the relationship with her mother to the extent that her mother is able and willing to do so. No longer dependent on her mother in her emotional life and able to forgive her for what she did badly, she can appreciate what her mother did provide. She can allow an expression of that appreciation to infuse new life into what was a life-destroying relationship. She can enjoy a friendship with her mother, or at least a pleasant acquaintanceship. She can even consider nurturing, as a mother would a child, a person whose experience of mothering was flawed at best.

In addition, the individuated woman has faced and processed her anger over imperfect mothering. She has called it what it is; she no longer fabricates a false inner harmony by ignoring facts or minimizing her emotional reaction to those facts. She has accepted the idealization of motherhood as an essential aspect of her life's history, processed the anger resultant from renouncing that idealization, and learned that life continues—even flourishes—after idealization is replaced by an acceptance of reality and of the limitations of all persons involved.

Finally, the woman who has completed her task of individuation can contribute to societal changes both by mentoring other women and by helping to transform the very definition of motherhood—freeing both men and women from sentimentalized and unrealistic expectations of the roles mothers or mother figures should play for them in adulthood.

RECOMMENDED READING

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