

1-1-2012

Holding On by Letting Go: Personal Agency as Maternal Activism

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Citation Information

Kinser, Amber E.. 2012. Holding On by Letting Go: Personal Agency as Maternal Activism. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*. Vol.3(2). <http://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/36295/33013> ISSN: 1913-9330

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Holding On by Letting Go

Personal Agency as Maternal Activism

Despite the efforts of maternal advocates and feminists through 150 years or more, a great many mothers today feel dissatisfied, shortchanged, and/or inadequate in their own lives. Even those who have reckoned with the fact that standards for mothering are absurdly out of synch with the real lives that families are living in contemporary times, or have carved out comfortable personal and familial space for themselves just beyond, or far beyond, the margins of mainstream motherhood ideologies, often struggle nevertheless with a needling sense of unrest and lack of personal agency. Further, women who agree that maternal empowerment is an important point of focus for social justice may not feel positioned to organize on behalf of mother activism. This essay explores ways that mothers can hold on to the continued struggle for maternal empowerment by letting go of some of the psychological barriers to living fully and purposefully as mothers. Focusing on personal agency as a form of maternal activism, Kinser examines ways for forgiving and embracing the humanity of our own mothers or maternal figures, our selves, and our children that can serve as powerful catalysts for significant change on personal and political scales.

Through much of the work in Motherhood Studies, and much of the work in this volume, we redirect the aim of social critique away from mothers and toward social structure and policy. We redirect discussions about childrearing away from simple claims about nature and instinct and toward more complex claims about maternal labor and resources. We deconflate womanhood and motherhood. We look at resistance to and agitations of the disciplining of women into mothers and the disciplining of mothers into agents of the state. While what I attempt here is related to all of that, it also diverges from that course because it encourages a look inward, a look at the *internal maternal*. I focus specifically

on mothers themselves, on strengthening a campaign for social change that centers on mothers for their own sake, rather than only or even primarily for the sake of the children (O'Reilly 2010). Improving the conditions in which women mother, a foundational component of motherhood activism, advocacy, and agency, means expanding maternal life beyond the limits imposed by the dominant discourse of motherhood (Horwitz), which "causes motherwork to be oppressive to women because it necessitates the repression or denial of the mother's own selfhood" (O'Reilly 2010: 369). The most important thing we can do for a mother, following Adrienne Rich, is to "illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities," to "expand the limits of her life" (246). Work that pushes back against repression or denial of a woman's selfhood, then, makes important strides in improving conditions for mothers and mothering, thus fostering conditions nurturant to maternal empowerment.

Creating more breathable space for the selfhood of mothers is guided by the work of several maternal scholars from whose work I draw to: first, articulate necessary elements for a mother's agented selfhood and, second, link to emotional maternal grips that constrict mothers and their agency but which they (we) might well be able to release. To begin, we can ground our attention to and underscore the selfhood of mothers in the notion of "outlaw motherhood," which troubles and counters "patriarchal motherhood" by actively resisting ideas, for example, that: a mother's needs are always subjugated by children's needs; that mothers "must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood," and that mothers will operate from a position of maximum responsibility but minimal power (O'Reilly 2010: 369). We might also ground our efforts to recognize and authorize the selfhood of mothers in some of the "many faces of resistance" modeled by empowered mothers, as articulated by Erika Horwitz. Particularly for our purposes here, I want to highlight two such faces, namely: 1) resistance that makes the mother "count" by affirming and enabling the mother's pursuit of self-care, of interests beyond children, and of spending time without children; and 2) the redesign of the *role* of the mother through rejection of responsibility for children's every behavior and outcome and through the assumption that mothers have a broad emotional repertoire regarding children and mothering. We might further ground our efforts to authorize the selfhood of mothers in the work of Judith Andre, who works from Sara Ruddick's notion of preservative love to say that such is not only core to the care of children but is equally core to the care of the mother herself. Self-directed preservative love is, Andre suggests, implicit in Ruddick's work and finds form in the maternal virtue of "honoring oneself." Honoring oneself includes: the mother's effort to "recognize and name her own losses" (Andre 85); resistance to the ways that motherhood, in its all-consuming forms, can "interfere ... with every element of honoring oneself" (84); and a pushing back

against the ways in which dominant ideology either impedes the honoring of oneself or idealizes its absence (79).

Guilt, blame, accepting full responsibility for children's outcomes, restrictions on the maternal emotional spectrum, suspicions and dismissals of the choices mothers make for their own lives, expectations that children represent the whole, or even most, of a woman—all constrict the selfhood of mothers. Finding ways to let them go authenticates and invigorates maternal selfhood; it helps women to articulate a “counter narrative of empowered mothering,” which recognizes that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of “agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy” (O’Reilly 2006: 45). Letting go as a counter-narrative offers not just a vision, but an articulated way of living, that pries loose the hold that dominant discourses of motherhood have on the internal life of mothers and therefore on way they position themselves, and some of the ways they are positioned, in the world.

I focus for the remainder of this essay on multiple nodes of internal, personal activism that mothers could pursue to good end alongside the external, social activism toward which we already focus much of our energies. Specifically, I focus on some ways we might release ourselves from the oppressions we internalize and turn against ourselves. Given that, sometimes, the most scathing critiques we suffer through are rooted within, I attend here to how we could uproot these and thwart their growth by learning to be more forgiving. In particular, I encourage honest and deep explorations of what may be subconscious emotion about ourselves and about those who shaped our lives and whose lives we shape, and then compassionate views of the seemingly harsher emotions we find. Confronting and letting go of these is, I submit, a critical element of maternal empowerment.

I look at some utterly human parts of maternal emotional life with our children, our own mothers or mother figures, and our selves. I start here with my own life considerations and extend them to experiences beyond my own. I do not purport to speak of all mothers’ experiences here, and though I use a generalized “we” I know that no piece can be written that speaks to all mothers in a general way. Even so, in my reading and writing and learning about motherhood, and in talking with other women and hearing their stories, I have come to see that a great many mothers feel caught in our own grip—a grip that is characterized in part by guilt or resentment or regret, or maybe all of these in some way. And this feeling caught is restrictive of other movement that might emancipate us. I hope to identify some possibilities for exploration, areas that, for some of us, perhaps many of us, could probably use a little forgiveness and that could be released from our grip so that we can hold fast instead to methods for acquiring and exercising agency and power.

First, I'd like to suggest that our mothers could use a little forgiveness and that if we were to offer it up, even if only in our own minds and souls, we could live in more empowered ways. We might consider forgiving our mothers or mother figures ...

...for not being omnipotent. It is probably exceptionally difficult, for even the most learned or most empowered or most progressive among us, to not internalize mother blame, to not expect that mothers should be all-powerful and therefore culpable for whatever surfaces in family life, to look at troubled children and not wonder what the mothers' contributions are to those troubles or to their fixing. Intellectually, we know this to be problematic but, even so, we struggle with it. Few of us are wholly immune to the thinking that mothers, including our own, have great power to determine lives. It is hard to resist the thinking that children ought represent the whole of a woman when we cling to wishes that our own mothers should have made us matter more than anything else. As Audre Lorde has said, "it is as hard for our children to believe that we are not omnipotent as it is for us to know it, as parents. But that knowledge is necessary as the first step in the reassessment of power as something other than might, age, privilege, or the lack of fear" (76). It's not unlikely that one reason we can't forgive our own maternal imperfections is because we are still holding onto blame of our mothers. For "few women growing up in a patriarchal society," Adrienne Rich argues, "can feel mothered enough" (243). Maybe we haven't reckoned with the ways we bought into maternal omnipotence, into the belief that somehow our mothers or mother figures really were capable of determining how we'd turn out. If they had just done this differently, or that, perhaps, it might have all shaken out quite differently for us. Indeed, it might very well have. Sometimes we haven't processed the humanity of our own mothers, so we can't then be convinced of the justifiable limits of our own. We probably do need then, many of us, to forgive our mothers for not being powerful enough to undo whatever it is that we wished they'd have undone and thus take a needed step toward changing how we think about our own maternal self. Some of us may also, or instead, need to forgive them...

...for their partner choices. Or for the unfortunate mismatch between the partner's personality and our own. For not extricating themselves from persons and patterns that constrained them.

...for loving someone, or some thing, else in ways we found painful—a sibling, some organization, some tradition, some cause, some vice.

...for wanting us to be different somehow—more of one thing, less of another, better at this, not so driven toward that.

...for being the voice inside our head, now as an adult, even if we rather created that voice and put it there on our own, amplifying it in ways that speak

more to our own judgments than it does to our mothers’.

...for dying. For not living long enough to undo things or to say things or to repair things.

...for living. And for not ensuring that their older age would be easy for us, or even palatable.

...for existing instead of living. For exemplifying compromise instead of insistence, setback instead of resilience, content with half-fulfilled promises.

Intellectually, we might not blame our mothers for any of this. But spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, it is perhaps a different story. We are indeed susceptible to the pervasive thinking about mothers’ culpability in all things family, and this thinking impedes personal agency. So we would probably do well to work at excising it and letting it go.

Perhaps even trickier to wrestle through than our thinking about our mothers or maternal figures are the darker facets of our relationships with our children, the murky emotions we really cannot bear to sit with. We are not immune from the constricting cultural views about maternal emotion; at some level, we are affected by the idea that a good mother loves, and only loves, her children. But there are some areas where we harbor other feelings about our children. People do have complex emotional responses to other people, even when these people are mothers and children. So we might consider whether we would benefit from forgiving our children, for example...

...for the timing of their entry into our lives. For coming at a time that, up against our other involvements, rather complicated things, or disrupted possibilities.

...for needing us too much. For needing us too little. For not needing us back.

...for needing us at a time, or in a way, we couldn’t deliver. For the sense of inadequacy that thus emerged so cunningly that we forgot about the scores of times that we did deliver exactly what they needed, even when they didn’t realize it.

...for not knowing us by now. For not being better at dodging our triggers and for still not grasping the simplest of moves that would ease us.

...for knowing us all too well, and rendering our flaws salient and visible. For taking on those inclinations of ours that we thought might keep, undetected.

...for their memory. For recalling experiences differently than we do, for narratives that implicate us in ways that fail to account for our humanity, that elude or elide the context of our mothering choices and the details that gave them sense.

...for having a better life than we did. For having family experiences that provided more stability, greater patience or understanding, better family fit or finances, less anger or critique than we had. And then for still wanting or

needing more than that, when the life we made with them was the one we could muster.

...for not being all those things we wanted to be, but weren't. And, though we can hardly bring ourselves to confess so, it seems we really did need the child to make up for what we weren't.

...for in fact being all those things we wanted to be, but weren't. And, though we can hardly bring ourselves to confess so, it seems we really needed the child to not be them either.

...for complicating our partner relationships, marriages, divorces, for making "blended family" a misnomer. For all the times we wanted to immerse ourselves in the mutual love of another adult, to crawl inside the skin of a lover and reside there for a stretch, but alas were called to shed it and re-emerge elsewhere, in the company of others less mutual.

...for learning so incompletely the important lessons we taught them: about how to keep bridges from burning, about lithe movement around triggers, about caution in friendship, about our own right to personhood, about the difference between coaching and reprimand.

...for learning so completely the inadvertent lessons we taught them, unwittingly and by example: about self-compromise, about consumption, about rage, about holding fast to things and relationships and fantasies that should be surrendered.

It is difficult for many mothers to admit that children do complicate our lives in deep and profound ways, that our lives pivot on those complications, and that such pivots can direct us toward resentment, frustration, and blame. If we can move gracefully among these knowledges then we will likely fare well, no worse anyway than in our other human relationships. But if we get stuck there, agoraphobically immobilized by the expansive possibility of maternal emotion, then we can hardly live authentically, mother with authenticity and autonomy, exercise agency; we block our own access to empowered mothering and to broader maternal empowerment.

Perhaps the place we need to direct the greatest of our compassion and forgiveness is toward ourselves, and in ways that are many and varied and that go far beyond what I suggest here. Even those of us learned about institutions of motherhood, who may be better at resisting maternal ideologies that could crush a woman's soul, confront vulnerabilities to such forces. Few of us have pursued our motherwork unflinchingly and without retrospective second guesses. So we might consider forgiving ourselves...

...for having the baby then, for not having the baby then, for adopting in those circumstances. For pretending the child could do for us what it was never going to be able to do. For knowing better, really, and not acting from that knowing.

...for the partners we chose. Or the ones we let go. Or the ones we haven't

yet let go. For being with them in a way that kept or keeps us from being with otherwise.

...for feeling ambivalent about motherhood. Or about this child. Or that other one. For not being able to accept the full impact of Ruddick's claim that, "thought-provoking ambivalence is a hallmark of mothering" (68). For feeling what humans feel about other humans but we think a mother shouldn't, even though, truly, we know better.

...for making work matter so much, for not making it matter enough, or in the right ways, or at the right time. For learning so late how to make work matter optimally, or for not having learned it even still.

...for the extent to which, to our surprise, we've not been able to convince our children of our full personhood. For struggling still to acknowledge the full personhood of our own mothers. For rarely getting from our children what our mothers rarely got, or even now get, from us.

...for not being more resistant to the emotional tugs or better able to pull back from them, for caring so unnecessarily about the details in raising a person. For coming late to the understanding that it doesn't all have to mean so much all the time.

...for not realizing that an issue was trifling, irrelevant, not worth the fights we had, nothing to lose sleep over. That tattoo, that partner, that time away from the family, that ordering of priorities, that disregard, that grade, that job, that move, that phrase, that silence.

...for not realizing, except in retrospect, until the time was past and it was too late to do it differently, that we chose a path with our children that was harder. Or meaner. Or, at best, just so much nonsense. For relinquishing so much valuable time and wasting so much energy on what, finally, called for much less of both.

...for our willingness to carry an unreasonable and undue share of the responsibility for how our children turn out. For pouring so much energy into worry, doubt, and insecurity about what kind of mother we might be and whether the children might be ruined by our maternal fumbblings.

...for not being feminist enough. Or intellectual enough. Or ethereal enough to unshackle ourselves from the motherhood prescriptions we so protest. For being only moderately able to view ourselves with the same compassion with which we consider others. For not being as good as we think we ought be about detaching from unreasoned maternal expectations. For judging ourselves so unduly when that which we know doesn't find form in that which we do.

Many of us internalize, despite our efforts to resist it, a cultural insistence on perpetual maternal happiness to the extent that we cannot bear to face darker facets of maternal life. We rail against the ways that others deny us our full humanity and selfhood but then, in turn, we deny our own. And one of

the ways we do this is to hold on to seemingly darker emotions but then deny we are doing so, and thus fail to reckon with them, allowing them to hold enormous sway over our lives. Beginning from a position of compassion and forgiveness doesn't mean we are not focusing on social structure, or resources, or institutions. We are doing that; we must do that. But it does mean we recognize that fixing those won't be enough and that we also have our own internal work to do. Letting go doesn't mean that we release these complex ways of thinking and feeling in an effort to free our lives of them. It means, in fact, acknowledging them, residing in them for a while, resisting the urge to ignore or repress them, allowing ourselves to be complex, and thus letting go of shame and resentment for *having* such thoughts and feelings so that we can look at them dead-on and make choices about how they serve us. It means releasing ourselves from the labor of denial and replacing it with preservative love, toward the children, toward the mothers.

Forgiving ourselves, our children, and our mothers for those choices and those outcomes that we can scarcely articulate are ways of paying homage to the complexities that shape motherhood and the difficulties with which mothers sculpt identities. Reckoning with the expansiveness of the mother's response to her life and the people in it is a primary element of counter-narratives of empowered mothering. It could be an important part of the difference that makes a difference in maternal empowerment. I hope we can begin to reckon, and forgive, and let go.

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