



# Mothers

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ISSUE 1: MOTHERS

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# AWAKENED VOICES

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see. hear. heal.





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## INTRODUCTION

Founder Jean Cozier’s personal experiences with her mother have helped conceive the very first issue. May is often thought to be synonymous with celebrating mothers, blooming, and rebirth. Our first issue highlights meanings that subvert the traditional concept of “mother.”

This issue was originally published in a blog post format and was updated to this format in 2022.

## CONTENT WARNING

The following issue contains material on the topic of sexual violence and other topics that readers might find difficult.

The intention behind this content warning is to prepare a reader so they can choose to bravely engage with potentially activating material, even if this doesn't always feel comfortable. May it also serve as a reminder that a reader can pause and take a break from reading. The stories will be here, ready when the reader returns.

## The Knots Between Us

*R.K. Riley*

My mother hated me  
the way I looked at her through my father's pale eyes  
the independent insurgence of a being  
where she wanted a porcelain-faced doll  
with peachy cheeks and white stark cold skin  
who never blinked at her vulnerability  
or turned from her naked cruelty  
My mother wanted a soft myna bird  
to echo back  
I love you  
I love you  
I love you  
across that battered orange formica table  
as my father's hand danced under my skirt  
My mother hated me  
horrified as she was of  
dirty things...  
human need,  
bits of life and grit and greed  
the ever-present residue of all our shame  
at being caught together, tangled in the brokenness  
pinned down to each other  
rusty needles baring our misery  
My mother hated dirty things...  
it would get under her nails  
she'd wash  
cringe

wash  
again.  
she never could get me out from under those  
pale  
peach  
nails.  
It turned her stomach  
I saw it rolling  
over in her eyes  
as the brush in her hand  
raked violent jerky tumbles  
over my knotted auburn  
brambles  
she never really got out those knots of me  
all balled up in her throat  
I heard her cough against them every night  
she just smoothed the  
hair on top  
the incessant evidence of her ineptitude  
at keeping me clean  
and neat  
and straight  
and hers  
My mother hated me  
I bled  
I breathed  
I needed





all over her  
clean fragility  
She never could let herself  
believe  
wish  
dream  
that I'd loved her for always  
anyways  
even with the  
blood and filth of my virginity  
under her dirty nails



ISSUE 1: MOTHERS

## A Mother's Place

*Adam Robison*

As the Executive Director at the Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center, I have had the privilege of seeing firsthand just how true – and powerful – this quotation is, particularly within families impacted by sexual abuse and sexual assault. In seven years as a counselor at ZCenter, I've seen a wide spectrum of truth. While every family and every abuse scenario is unique, the core role that mothers have in the development of their child(ren) is universal. When these maternal relationships are healthy and balanced, then the core building blocks for emotional and social development – strength, courage, and self-worth – can and do grow, and help a child navigate the healing process following abuse. However, when maternal relationships themselves are the source of pain and terror for a child, the resulting trauma can have massive consequences on these same areas of development, making the healing process increasingly challenging and complex.

While the crimes themselves are sexual in nature, sexual abuse and sexual assault are crimes of power and control. In this country, we know that 1 in 3 girls, and 1 in 5 boys will be sexually abused before they reach the age of 18. We also know that 93% of these cases will involve a perpetrator who is known to the child – a family

member, babysitter, coach, teacher, neighbor, etc. While stranger-danger does exist, and remains an important safety mantra to teach our children, the truth is that the majority of sexual abuse cases are perpetrated by someone the child has been taught to trust. At ZCenter, the majority of child survivors we see have been abused by someone within their own family.

Though most victims are abused by a male, far more females – including mothers – perpetrate sexual abuse than are thought to. In fact, this assumption that only men perpetrate sexual abuse adds to the manipulative power and control exerted by abusive mothers. On average, a child will have to disclose that they have been abused to seven adults before they are believed. I worked with one family where the mother severely abused her young children sexually and physically for several years before they were school-aged. During this time, the relationship with her was all that these children knew. They were too young to have friends, and their father was active in the military and subsequently out of the home for long periods of time. It wasn't until they were old enough to go to school and start having play dates in other homes that these children realized that their mother was abusive.



However, even after coming to this realization, it took multiple investigations before she was removed from their home. Throughout each investigation, this mother manipulated the system by blaming her children's abuse on their father – an active military member deployed overseas. This manipulation worked for several months, until the children's stories were ultimately believed and the mother was removed from the home. The emotional consequences of this chronic abuse took years of therapy for the children – along with their father – to process

We are taught from a very young age that all human beings need water, food, and oxygen in order to survive. However, we now know that an additional human need exists, and that is the need for connection in human relationships. Without a secure attachment relationship, children are unable to effectively develop social and emotional skills such as the ability to self-regulate their feelings. When such emotional regulation isn't possible, then the child – just like human beings of all ages – reacts to trauma with the survival instinct of fight, flight, or freeze. This automatic reaction kicks in to keep the child alive. The most effective way for a child to retract back from this survival state is to be engaged in a

safe and loving attachment relationship.

In the wake of sexual trauma, children instinctively seek out a “safe base” for comfort. When a child's mother is physically and emotionally available to be this “safe base,” then the child can navigate the stress of trauma from within a regulating attachment relationship. The children aren't made to feel guilty for the abuse, and can instead focus their energy on healing. However, when a secure attachment does not exist, or even worse, when this “safe base” is actually the SOURCE of the fear and stress, then the child's survival instinct kicks in and pushes others away. Often times the behaviors that are triggered in these instances help the child regain a sense of power, but these behaviors (e.g., stealing, lying, aggression, dissociation, etc.) are easily misunderstood by those around them. The common response by well-meaning adults can be to try to ‘control’ the child when they act out in these ways. However, typical disciplinary approaches only add further stress and fear to the children's experience, keeping them in survival mode rather than helping them regain a sense of control.

Understanding these key components of human need, development, and survival



highlights just how powerful a mother's influence is on her child – particularly within the healing process after sexual trauma. A healthy attachment with a mother can enable the child survivor to receive this necessary comfort and care in the wake of such terrifying trauma. A nurturing relationship can provide the child with the necessary space to experience, process, understand, and heal their emotional wounds.

However, this is much easier said than accomplished. The emotional needs and subsequent behaviors of child survivors can be overwhelming – not only for them, but also for their mothers and other family members. Again, the vast majority of perpetrators are known, not only to the child but to the mother as well. In these situations, the mother's own emotional needs become incredibly complex. A core part of her is hard-wired to “fix” her child's emotional wounds, but she also carries immense guilt and shame for failing to prevent the trauma from happening in the first place. In cases where the perpetrator is a family member, the mother then has another set of intense emotions to deal with. She may in the same moment find herself the mother of the survivor AND the spouse, sister, daughter, or even mother of the perpetrator. In

such cases, the intense and conflicting emotions that result require significant time and energy to navigate and heal. However, telling a mother to focus on herself, when her own child has just experienced trauma, is completely counterintuitive. At the same time, if she doesn't work on her own pain and instead remains overwhelmed, then she will remain in her own survival state and thus be unable to provide the safe, secure attachment relationship that her child needs. In explaining this to mothers that I have the privilege to work with, I often refer to the safety warnings delivered by flight attendants before every flight... “If the cabin loses pressure and oxygen masks fall from the ceiling, please secure the oxygen mask on yourself first before assisting anyone else...” Why? Because if our own needs are unmet, then we will remain stuck in our own fight/flight/freeze response. In such a survival state, our natural abilities to think logically and effectively form attachment with others become faulty. We are simply not going to be any good to anyone else – no matter how big our heart or how noble our intentions.

I have had the opportunity to see a great many amazing mothers who believed their children the very first time they disclosed that they were



being abused – even when the perpetrator was someone the mother also knew. I've seen countless mothers who effectively utilized their own support systems – even inventing one if it didn't already exist, or reinventing one if it had been destroyed by the impact of sexual abuse on family dynamics. These mothers could then provide the safe, empowering relationship that their children needed as they worked to heal and thrive. Many mothers spend months – even years – in therapy themselves, so that they can be supported while coping with their own intense emotional wounds and learning how to effectively support their children.

This brings me back to the opening quotation: “A mother is she who can take the place of all others, but whose place no one else can take.” When mothers are able to believe just how powerful they are, then there are no limits to the healing influence that their love can have with their children...absolutely no limit at all.

## Mother Love

Sara Connell

The story I played out growing up was The Ugly Duckling. For a time, even the nickname given to me by my mother was “Ug.” My two younger sisters seemed to move seamlessly from the womb into the family unit. I constantly felt the outsider: at worst, pathologized; at best, misunderstood.

“You’re too much,” my mother said to me often. “You feel things so deeply.” I was too dramatic, too emotional; my dreams were “delusions of grandeur.” To my mother, an introverted self who wanted above all to blend in with people and with life, my passion and my extroverted personality probably was just that — too much.

The disconnect was confusing because there was no doubt my mother was loving. She baked brownies for my friends after school. She let my sisters and me get dirty outside, build forts and mess up the house. When we wanted to play “hospital” with teddy bears and Barbie dolls, she made fake blood out of Karo syrup and gave us bandages and medical tape from the first aid kit. When I was older, she drove me to dance classes, theater performances, swimming. She was a “good mother” and the fact that my personality — something in my being — offended, meant that I must be bad. The more I tried changing myself to

receive the love I wanted, the love for the person I was, the less I succeeded. I left for college feeling demoralized.

After college, I moved to London with my fiancé. I remember the first months in England; I walked the neighborhoods and streets of the city for hours at a time, stopping in bookstores and museums, libraries. I was in the land of the classics: Shakespeare, Dickens, the Brontes, and all I wanted to read were Mother Books. I read *Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *White Oleander* — books about young women working out issues with their mothers. I read every mother book I could get into my hands. I felt like another duckling from the classic children’s book *Are You My Mother?*, asking everything I encountered “Are You? Are You?” I did not hear an answer.

I entered therapy although I felt even speaking about my family was a betrayal. “You have to learn to mother yourself,” the therapist said. “You have to grieve the way you wanted your mother to treat you and begin to accept both her and yourself as you are.” Doing so seemed to involve many days of her sitting in silence while I cried on her brown chenille sofa.

At night, I would creep upstairs to the guest room in the house I’d rented with my husband.



It was a small, square room, with eaves, that overlooked a garden and the Thames River beyond. Through the window, light would pour in, soaking the room in white when the moon was full. I had not grown up with a feminine idea of god. As a Catholic, we had Mary, but she was, to me, always relegated to a vessel role – a pawn for God’s bigger vision. Regardless, I experienced the light in that London room as feminine, as divine, as maternal. The white light poured itself around me. In the warm nucleus, I felt the presence of what I later read Carl Jung describe as The Great- or Archetypal- Cosmic Mother.

I kept returning to the room, under the eaves. The light beckoned me as if to say “give all your pain, your fear, your want to me. I will take it.” But the light asked something of me too. I was to stop playing out the little duckling role – the outcast. If I was to allow in the love I wanted, I needed to become a swan.

“What if you stop wanting all your mothering to come from your biological mother?” the therapist asked one day. According to her, I was limiting myself by demanding so much from one human person. “We will each have many mothers in our lifetime.”

According to her, as I filled myself with the

new self-mothering, wholeness, love, I could ask the “Are You My Mother?” question to others. Without words, I asked my new friend Sandy, a woman my mother’s age who was in the same counseling training program with me. She invited me for weekends at her home, brought out dishes of comfort foods, poured art supplies onto a table and said “Have at it.” I asked the professor in my new course of study to be my mentor. I asked a friend for a hug. I asked my husband to hold me. Yes, Yes, Yes. There were mothers and mothering, everywhere – if I were willing to open up and receive.

And then, during a massage session, the therapist asked me about my relationship to my biological mother.

“It’s fine,” I told her. Since I’d finished the work with my therapist, my mother and I had begun to talk. Calls went from once a month to twice. My husband and I moved back to the US. I visited on holidays now. My mother and I had found our common ground of books, theater and kept our discourse to those.

“You need to open your heart,” the masseuse said. “You need to let your mother back into your heart.”

I remember being offended. “Who are you to

give relationship advice? Who are you to suggest I haven't?"

I hadn't. Even with all the expanded mothering I'd received (from friends, colleagues, mentors, the light in my guest room) I'd maintained a habit of self-protection with my family. In relation to them, I kept myself as the wounded duckling — protected myself with emotional distance, as if I were standing behind a clear pane of glass.

The masseuse's words floated above my head when I walked through the grocery store. I woke up thinking about them at night.

A week or so later, I stuck my head out of my new bedroom window in Chicago. I declared to the light that had been with me in England that I intended to try.

Four years later, my relationship with my mother grew into a solid tree. We went to lectures together, and to a conference on feminism and the Sacred Feminine. We had more visits, long walks in the woods. We were two adult women now, forging a new bond. Daily conversations went deep, into uncharted territory. One day I told her about the light in the guest room in our house in London.

"I call it Divine Mother," I explained.

"Divine Mother- I like it," my mother said. She

nicknamed it "DM."

There was no way, I — or she — could have known what was coming.

Ensnared in our new life in the US, I couldn't get pregnant. Four years of stillbirth, miscarriage, fertility treatments and so many injections the skin on my buttocks was a constellation of purple and red.

"I have an idea," my mother told me one day on a visit. She handed me a letter. "Read it, and tell me what you think."

In the same cursive handwriting I remember from her writing notes on napkins in the lunches I took to school, she offered to be a gestational carrier [surrogate] for my husband and my baby. A year later, she became the oldest woman in Illinois to give birth to a child— our son.

We joked that DM had a hand in this wild experience. My mother moved in with my husband and me in Chicago. We lay sometimes in the same bed, curled around each other, our hands on the baby inside. Parenting books quoted the "it takes a village to raise a child" idea. We were a village doing a pregnancy. At 9:00 in February, the week after the largest snowstorm Chicago had seen in ten years, a team of doctors lifted my son out of my mother. As his first cry



crescendomed across the walls, the room erupted in tears. The doctors expressed awe at what they had helped happen. I cried at hearing the sound of my child's breath, a sound I had waited for, listened for, prayed for, for seven years and nine months. And my mother and I cried together. Life, the Universe— our Mother Love— this force that propelled us to this moment— had taken us over the brink of whatever walls we thought separated us, into a kind of oneness. I looked into her eyes and saw myself, and behind that, DM, or maybe the Soul.

On certain nights, I feel the presence of the light from my room in England pouring into my bedroom. To me, that light is probably the truest answer to the little duckling's refrain Are you my mother? I think, if we let it, life will bring us mothers of all types, and again and again to the Great Mother — the one who is always there, bringing us home.

## Heavy Metal

*Jean Cozier*

My mother entered a nursing facility on January 2, 2014, and thus I began yet another chapter in a long, dysfunctional story I really would like to stop reading.

At the age of 98, she still has the power to darken my life. I'm working on that – hence, “Heavy Metal.” The title popped into my head one morning as I jogged. Over the next six months the poem wrote itself, and un-wrote itself, in my head, as I attempted to come to terms with my new role as my mother's caretaker. I got stuck at the beginning, came back to it later, and then the ending wrote itself in one piece during one particularly sleepless night.

My mother told me last Christmas to pick one of the rings as a present. Which I did. But I still haven't worn it.



**Heavy Metal**

**(Beads and Chain)**

Bead

She stole from the house

Like a thief in the night.

With a burden so heavy

It would never be light.

Two pillowcases,

Stuffed full of jewels

From a life not worth living

Bought and paid for by fools.

Where's the philosopher,

Where is the stone

That could change this base metal

I don't want to own

Into something I value.

Something that's free –

Something I'd cherish

And still feel like me.

Chain

Here you can create the content that will be used  
within the module.



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## AWAKENINGS

*Awakened Voices* is a literary program of Awakenings, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating a physical and virtual artistic space in which to promote the healing of survivors through the arts and engage in an open dialogue that furthers awareness and understanding of sexual violence. Please consider helping us spread our message of healing by sharing and supporting Awakenings.

Awakenings' mission is to provide survivors of sexual violence with a trauma informed, inclusive art-making experience that encourages healing.



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**JUDITH'S CIRCLE**

