

## SONS of PASSIONATE MOTHERING

By Rosemary Balsam M.D.

*.....What makes the engine go? Desire, desire, desire. The longing for the dance stirs in the buried life. One season only, and it's done. So let the battered old willow thrash against the windowpanes and the house timbers creak. Stanley Kunitz from "Touch Me."*

Introduction:

*"The longing for the dance stirs in the buried life. One season only, and it's done,"* mourns the former Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz, This keening, (as in the lamentation at a Irish wake,) for the fullness of the life-span of the already dead, registering past desires both met and frustrated, seemed to fit in with some musings I have had about ageing women's relationships to their adored sons. Growing older has shifted some of my own views I about such women's mothering. When I was young I did not realize how much some women feel so strongly that all passion is over when their young fly the nest, because their children alone -- and not their husbands, friends or work --were their sole *raison d'être*, the apparent seat of all their desires. When menopause enters their lives, as their Fall and Winter, and their children have begun to disperse like autumn leaves in the wind -- this kind of mother loses her one fleeting season of warmth in the sun. Unlike the earth, a human maternal season is over. It's done. Their young sons, in particular, for some of them were their one chance to live with vigor, if vicariously. Their self-esteem as females was commonly so impossibly challenged by their own cultural familial history, that a life-long imagined existence as a boy-child was indeed their paradise, their acme of perfection, their escape from the sorrow of being born destined to be an individual and a woman. It was not through analyzing such mothers that I gained more insight and

empathy, but from analyzing their reflections in the psyches of their sons. I believe that it was *this* particular female state of mind that Freud `mistook as *the* universal condition of women.

“The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’” Freud disclosed to Marie Bonaparte in 1925, (according to her), about 10 weeks after she began analysis with him (2001, p 84). The timing is interesting. In this 1924-26 period, according to Zinnia Fliegel’s 1973 paper, Freud was feeling particularly needled by Karen Horney who so sensibly was challenging his boy-like view of adult females. This infamous cry from the depths of hurt puzzlement amid the maze of the “dark continent” was doomed by stumbling into echo chambers that repeated the same underlying sentiment as Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*: “Why can’t a woman be more like a man?” Freud and his all-male group as early as October 1910 in the Wednesday Society had a session on the emotional dangers of being the favorite or the only child that included mention of the mother’s favorite boy-child. Isodore Sadger reported that such sons were exposed by the overheated relationship to many developmental lags and preconditions for “psychic...impotence... homosexuality...and dementia praecox.” (Minutes p. 5 (p.122). It is well known that Freud’s mother doted on him and referred to him as “Mein goldener Sigi”, and that he was vastly privileged over his girl siblings. And in 1917 he wrote glowingly: “If a man has been his mother's undisputed darling he retains throughout life the triumphant feeling, the confidence in success, which not seldom brings actual success along with it.” My paper is a further elaboration on these themes of either benefit or damage that accrue to such sons that,

depending on given previous authors, seem slanted in one direction or the other. I will try to trace a dynamic path revealed in some of these sons' adult psychoanalyses -- and thus in their psychic development *continued into adult* life -- that can, I believe, accommodate both the advantages and the problems.

#### The Mother's Body Ego and Boy-Adoration.

Only a biological female has the actual experience of housing another person right inside her body. A girl who is very envious of boys, not having grown up with the physical experience of erections, for example with the *shame* encountered as well as the *pride*, has only a thrilled imagination of owning a penis that never includes its vicissitudes! A mother whose prehistory has disposed her to penis envy has a new opportunity in pregnancy to psychically merge with a joyful possession of maleness that is actually created from right inside her own womb. I believe that this concrete bodily experience lends a more reified caste to a previously wishful fantasy penis that she now treats as her rightful possession. The baby son that was literally attached to the mother's uterine wall, after delivery continues into the cradle of their joint interactive psychic register as her object for mirrored self-glorification and idealization. His individuality therefore becomes a special problem for both this mother and this son.

#### My personal complications with this issue:

Originally when I read Freud's view about how a woman's greatest desire was to give birth to a son, I thought him rather ridiculous. Coming from the mainstream British psychiatric culture, I read this for the first time in my early 30s as a psychoanalytic candidate in New Haven. Immediately it was crystal clear to me that one's family culture must be fundamental to whatever truisms one pronounced, such as this. My own family

was far more oriented toward valuing girls. Adding to my sense of the limits of our understandings being due to our own respective cultures, I later combine a theoretical and clinical fascination especially with processes of internalization, in which I was steeped by the influence of my teacher and friend, Hans Loewald.

Particular Mothers of Particular Sons:

In my early career, biased by my own cultural reasons then, I viewed the mothers who were so besotted with their young sons as a rather pathological lot. Reading the separation/individuation literature also, I was sure that their male offspring could not thrive emotionally coming from such a nest. As I grew more seasoned, I noticed that these overpoweringly strong mother/son bonds need *not* necessarily yield a powerless damaged sort of man, who is merely the passive tool of his mother's desires. My focus here will be on the quality of transference to me as a woman analyst that allowed me to build a more complex portrait of how the inner lives of these men. I was surprised that these analyses often revealed (as Freud had noted) many men with robust, healthy durable self-regard and exceptional accomplishments, whose main worldly characteristic could be described as being both effective and independent minded. However, I found that often in intimacy with women partners (or if gay, with male dominant partners)<sup>1</sup> though looking "big" superficially in their homes, they often behaved in overly compliant ways, haplessly unconsciously allowing themselves to be diminished in domestic life. They indeed tried to build their own heterosexual intimacies out of the stuff of maternal fantasy -- to reflect a wished-for fulfillment of an uninterrupted sense of worship from their controlling possessive and devoted mothers, now displaced to their wives. Mother

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<sup>1</sup> A different kind of complication for another day.

herself could never be talked to directly. Palliation, seduction and soothing were the son's specialty in his dealings with her. In turn, and in gratitude from the mothers, the sons would elicit worshipful blind love and endless indulgence. This special Goddess in their inner pantheon had conveyed to them with great clarity what she wanted. It was not mysterious to them. She frequently wanted them to succeed in every arena in which she felt second-class. For example, each time one of these men reported yet another business success to his mother -- his "dearest" as he called her, like the mother of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* -- she'd say seductively softly, "And what comes next up the ladder after this, Cedric?" My patient knew very well that she meant him to make the Fortune 500 before he turned 40. "Of course she'd deny it, were you to ask her. She'd say (imitating a falsetto saccharin tone) 'It's only what my Cedric wants for himself -- and what Cedric wants Cedric gets -- *you'll see.*'" I have often wondered if Freud's despair, disappointment and puzzlement about the inner life of women -- *other* than his mother -- came perhaps from imagining that *all* women wanted from him only his "goldener" aspect? My patients' judgments about women in general were certainly flawed in this way.

Clinical instance:

Mr. F, a CEO of a successful advertizing company, an only child, was 40 when I first saw him. His complaint, briefly, was that he was unable to get married, as he had troubles committing himself to his girlfriend of many years. His problem was immediately obvious in our first interchange. He replied to my phone call return with, "I hope you're having a nice day doc!" to which I said sharply, being in-between patients, "Sorry, I really don't want to buy anything. This is not a good time!" "No, no" he protested, "

You're very astute. I actually *am* in sales – but I wanted to arrange an appointment to talk about my troubles!”

The first level that we worked on in analysis was how *indirectly* he expressed himself to females who were emotionally involved with him. He believed firmly that he had an accurate read on all their psyches. I gradually helped him see, through interpreting his maternal transference to me, that his tunnel vision about women was actually one very particular familiar psychic pattern that was repeated over and over. One of its features was that the woman was too delicate to bear the truth. He spent much effort feeding her imagined narcissism. She in turn was supposed to appreciate toying with his elaborate disguises and reject any inkling of confrontation with unpleasant facts. This interchange was an art form of baroque manners to protect this female pained psyche from itself. In return the bargain was that she glowed approval.

Later, in speaking directly to me (but in a father transference), it turned out that his girlfriend was a woman whom he despised. He was ashamed of her. Their sex life was minimal and he felt trapped. He would go off to a conference, usually look for a younger woman to have a brief sexual fling, and come home to find his ever-loyal girlfriend in a pool of tears. “Didn’t she suspect your infidelity?” I asked. “Oh no, not at all. She just weeps at me when I go away and says, “Why don’t you marry me yet? What have I done wrong? We’ve been together 5 years and we’re not getting younger.” She was, according to the patient, “A doormat.” This densely wrought sadomasochistic bond served their mutual needs to remain static. F became aware that he was misreading his mother’s blind worship into this girlfriend, and simultaneously he acknowledged that he was punishing

her for not being a replica of mother. “Perhaps mother is the only woman I really want?” he’d say in nervous jest.

In the transference, similar echoes of going along pleasantly with something I suggested would reveal later that he secretly would think or act confidently on his private opinion, if he did not agree. Anything but confront me with a direct contradiction. Delay in interpretation allowed me some insight into the pleasantness of this mutual dance of seduction. In my younger day I might have been overly eager to interpret quickly the opposition and flattery as a clear defense against fear of being swallowed up by me as the possessive mother. I eventually became aware that he himself was quite conscious of his motives in this “Prince Charming” role. The analytic question for me became then, what element is *unconscious* here for this man? I noted that he talked to me directly in the margins of sessions as he rose or lay down on the couch – actually as a marginalized father, it turned out.

In his professional work Mr. F showed straightforwardness, wisdom, discrimination and caring both towards himself and others in running his business, features hidden from view in our interaction. He joked that he felt he could get away with anything because when all was said and done – echoing Freud’s confidence -- he knew that at least his *mother* loved him! I suspected though that this was only a part of the story.

Then he launched into the Internet for dates, usually for one night stands. He said that having such a wonderful, clever analyst like me allowed him to have an adolescence his parents never allowed. He was setting me up not to be critical in any way! Here is some live interaction from the analysis at this point two years into the 4times/week work:

Mr. F was arguing with me about my matter-of-fact statement that he seemed to be inviting STDs or AIDS by asking most of these one-night-stand women in coy tones if they would “do it” without a condom. His behavior seemed very rash to me, and I felt annoyed at him, and over-identified and protective of both of them. He hated my pointing this out. He was furious for the first time with me, and called me an “interfering bitch”. He felt I’d offended his intelligence. “It’s not life and death these days – they’ve all kinds of treatments.” His anger escalated: “Why would I risk this anyway? Tell me even one single time that I’ve EVER risked getting STDs or AIDS? Absolutely not. This is so unfair that you would think that of me. Give me one good reason why I’d do that kind of damage to myself! ” he taunted.

Not my finest hour.... I rose further to the bait, partially based on an analogy with my own feeling about what was aroused in me: “Because then you’d be back in adolescence, justify “confessing” to your mother all about your sex life, getting rid of your guilt and the hard struggle to be separate, and getting her to be alarmed and taking care of you again like a kid”. He was silenced. He was not expecting this. I felt I’d given him a low blow. Next day he came in blazing that I’d *always* been against his sexual pleasures, his internet dating for one –night stands with no strings attached, and that I thought everyone who went on that web site was nothing but a dangerous john or whore, whereas his latest would-be-lover was shy and gentle and might prove a perfect partner. “You’ll see” he argued, “I know I CAN find nice women on this site.”

I was calmer by that time having gotten a few rocks off at him, and more able to listen to what he wanted me to know ... And to show me how I’d made far too much of the incidents he offered disarmingly the following; “To help you understand...it would be

as if *you* were naked in bed with *your* lover, and he had his penis just teasing your clitoris and he was just playing it in and out of our introitus and around your labia...and you said (imitating me in the identical saccharin falsetto tone he used for his mother,) “UMM. *Without* a condom?” ...you can see now very well that it would be just you testing your lover to *see* if he’d do it without a condom. -- It would be your way of saying, “*Not* without a condom”. That’s what I conveyed to her – and you just jumped all over me that I was stupid enough to take risks or expose her to risks.”

I said, being quite confounded by all the layers of self- deceit, “A kind of confusing message though, don’t you think when you say it out loud?”

He shot back instantly, “I guess she didn’t say, ‘Hey dude, what the hell are you doing!’ .... if that’s what you mean.”...

That was EXACTLY what I meant. I didn’t need to say anything more. I was grateful for his new demonstration of conscious awareness, and for this moment I felt he was in charge again – in charge of his own body ...he was importantly able to imagine the mind of the other person, and I felt released into a more comfortable separateness from some kind of sadomasochistic wrestling match where I had felt alarmed for his welfare and the consequences of his sexual exploits. He revealed to me here that the less conscious, but far more mature ego functioning was couched in the ability to imagine his sexual partner’s possible outrage at his sexual behavior. *This side of him was the one that was capable of emotional directness and linked to his CEO capabilities. I felt that this was a bridge to the integration of the two sides of his functioning.*

F showed here that he was *not* so easily swayed by what he imagined was my “maternal” objection to him having sex with women. Also in a thinly disguised way he

had imagined making love to me in this session. Once an Oedipal pattern began to emerge, his father at last entered the previously dyadic stage.

#### Unconscious internalization of the Father.

Father had been a worldly successful but blustery, angry presence, whom the boy and his mother often ganged up against at home with fierce denigration. In loud contrast to father's "grossness" as she called it, mother adored the preadolescent, innocent, more *asexual* apparently compliant charming "good" boy in young F. They loved the book *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. At bedtime, they lingered admiringly over little Cedric's looks: "a graceful, childish figure in a black velvet suit, with a lace collar, and with lovelocks waving about the handsome, manly little face, whose eyes met ...[others] with a look of innocent good-fellowship." It was this version of himself that seemed so fused as the apple of mother's eye. However, almost in secret, this boy grew also in a repudiated identification of the father. His vigor, his ability to stand up for himself, his ultimate leadership positions in business were all not just to please mother "dearest", but in association to his unconscious admiration for father. At one level he thought himself mother's better lover – but as he matured he became stalled – partially looking for a woman of his own, trying to share his youthful sexual escapades with his titillated mother both to elicit her admiration but also to defy mother's preference to keep him childlike. He pursued unsuitable women, For F to develop autonomously sexually, he ran a danger of spoiling this gratifying latency merger with mother and own being more like his father.

#### Conclusion

Such a physically and mentally maturing young male's identity therefore may become split off and repudiated in favor of the loyalty to a mother who is wildly devoted to her

“one and only, her last hope of staying in a maternal summer. She loves best the beautiful young latency boy with his whole future before him. Both mother and son need never grow old. Hence the sad sense that when the boy’s childhood naturally comes to an end, the mother can feel useless and old, left alone with father, as if “*the battered old willow thrash [es] against the windowpanes and the house timbers creak.*”

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