

Column

I Wish People Would Ask, “WHY WERE YOU UNABLE TO MOTHER YOUR OWN CHILDREN?”

Sagewoman, 1996

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I “abandoned” my children to their father’s custody when they were five and seven years old. That was 24 years ago. How could that have happened? Why was I unable to mother my own children? And, perhaps more important, what has happened since? Has there been a healing?

To address these questions, I present a series of vignettes that will, I hope, introduce you to the actual living process of one young mother’s life.

May, 1964. The birth of my first child, Sean, is “natural.” Conscious breathing, no medication, my feet in stirrups, enveloped in sheets, chrome, steel, and artificial light. Underneath the hi-tech veneer I surrender to ancient bodily rhythms and, as his head crowns, I plummet into the blinding glory of continuous creation, *goddess consciousness* — though I do not know it. All I know is I have opened to eternity, to mystery. That I will never be the same again.

I do not mention this to anyone.

Several days later, I am sitting in the rocking chair, my beautiful baby nestled to my breast, nursing. An archetypal scene.

I *know* Sean. I have known this soul forever. As he was handed to me, I knew his features, his body, his being. But something is wrong. This is supposed to be the most

beautiful experience of my life, and I don't feel it. I don't feel anything. I am numb, in shock.

June, 1964. I read a just-published book by a woman named Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. In it, she identifies and analyzes “the problem that has no name.” I want to shout aloud! Friedan describes my world, exactly. I am not alone. But there is no one here to talk to.

June, 1965. After nursing Sean full-time for a year, partly to make sure I didn't get pregnant, I have just gone on the pill. My husband comes home from a week in the National Guard and, despite my insistence that we refrain from sex until the pill protects me, he forces me. He *rapes* me. I don't tell anyone. Inside, a slow, furious burning. First Sean, conceived in shame and guilt when I was 20 (after sex one time I did not get my period, and quickly married, just in case I was pregnant), and now a second child, conceived in rage. I cannot express this rage. I push it down — into depression. *Two* children? Now I will never be free. Just like my mother, with her eight children, and me, the oldest, “Mother's Little Helper,” I will be trapped by children forever.

February, 1966. Sean is only 20 months old and now there is newborn Colin, nervous, colicky, projectile vomiting. We take to the streets of Cambridge every day. I push the buggy; Colin lies swaddled, screaming; Sean sits on a seat on top, cheeks rosy, thumb raw from sucking. I *must* walk miles every day, no matter what the weather. Otherwise I will batter my children. I know this, know that the cat that I punish for no reason, that I throw against the wall, is being sacrificed for them. Thank God my husband is gone all day. So he won't see what I do to the cat. So I won't wish *him* dead.

June, 1966. Nancy and I begin to talk. About our husbands. About our roles as “wives.” I am afraid of what we will discover. I cannot stop talking.

September, 1966. I enter graduate school, part time, using neighborhood children for babysitters after school, riding my bike to Boston University. My husband is proud of me; now he can say his wife is “a doctoral student in philosophy.” Raises *his* status in this college town. Makes him look good. I know only that I am desperate — for meaning in my life, for real life beyond this domestic prison.

March, 1967. My mother-in-law comes to care for the children for a month while I study for my written comprehensive exams. I spend all day at the desk squeezed into our bedroom, while my husband has an entire room as a study and is rarely there.

March, 1968. My children hang on to me. Whenever I want to study, they squeeze their little faces between me and the book. I resign myself to studying only during nap time and in the evenings. I resent them. I love them. I feel for them. I wish they didn't whine so much. I wish I could fly.

May, 1968. Washing the dishes at the kitchen sink. Suddenly there is a whooshing noise inside my brain. The universe opens. Infinite. Unknowable. I shudder, contract, close it down.

Nancy and I continue talking. Nearly every morning now, she arrives for coffee and cigarettes. Children underfoot, we analyze our lives.

June, 1969. I tell my husband that I am leaving with the children to spend the summer in a commune on a beach south of Boston. He forbids me to go. I go anyway. My first act of outright defiance. Colin, my spirited little Aquarian, thrives in the freedom of a tribe of children. Sean, my shy, sensitive Taurus, sucks his thumb harder, freezes into terror, goes numb. His eyes are glazed over. I notice this. I cannot afford to notice this. He reminds me of myself. I spend most of the summer in my room reading, or lying on the beach, listening to others' conversations, wondering why I have to first internally compose any sentence I wish to speak.

September, 1969. I am in the hospital, feverish, hooked up to antibiotic IVs and Demerol, my entire stomach swollen from general abdominal peritonitis, brought on when I took mescaline for the first time, danced like a dervish from dusk to dawn alone, and my IUD punctured the left ovary. I told my husband to take the children to Vermont, as planned. This is my time. Seven days have passed. The doctor comes in, says he doesn't know what more to do, that he is running out of antibiotics.

Abruptly, this question: "Am I going to die?"

He is shocked, defensive: "I don't know." Embarrassed, shrugging his shoulders, he backs out of the room.

A deep male voice I have never heard before thunders through the fever, resounds through the room.

Live or die. It's your choice. You must choose. Now.

Suddenly I *know*: there is no big daddy god in the sky. No god to judge me, find me wanting.

Therefore, *I am free.*

Therefore, *I am responsible.*

For nine months I process internally the implications of my soul's sudden entrance, its challenge: my decision to live.

April, 1970. I ask my husband to leave the apartment. For the next two years my children and I shuttle from one difficult living situation to another, on graduate student fellowships. Sean's eyes are still glazed over. He sits in a chair and does nothing. Colin runs around, manic, destructive. I am free of my husband, my depression lifted, my fury rampant. Underneath, I love my children, and feel their desperation, mirroring my own. On the surface, I barely tolerate their huge neediness.

November, 1970. Now there are four of us. Linda, Karen, Nancy and I gather at our kitchen tables several times a week to dissect men, hate men. Secretly, we each long for Prince Charming and take turns breaking up our children's fights.

June, 1971. Summer at my parents' cabin in the mountains of Idaho, to write my dissertation. The children are in Cambridge with their father. I am ashamed to discover that I do not miss my children. My dissertation writes itself.

April, 1972. I have been accepted as a full-time teacher at New College of California, near San Francisco. Their dad refuses to let the boys go. Says he will take me to court, put *them* through whatever it would take to make me look bad to the judge. I

hate him. I must take them with me. He cannot have them. Inside, I wish I could be free. No, that's not true! It can't be!

June, 1972. Linda says to me, in a moment of excruciating clarity: "Taking your kids to California just because you don't want him to have them is not a good reason to take them to California."

November, 1972. The weekly phone call from California. Awful. Stilted. Hearing their wan little voices from so far away. "Hi Mommy . . ." It breaks my heart. I must not cry. Be strong! I long to comfort them, hold them . . . I cannot afford to feel this longing. I shut down, go numb.

I am the first woman I have ever known who has left her own children. I *abandoned* my children. I committed an immoral, unnatural act. My family is horrified, my culture calls me crazy. I am *not* crazy. I *must* be crazy. I cannot go back.

October, 1974. I have just moved to my old Idaho hometown to marry my high school boy friend. He has two children, one his own, one not. Their mother deserted them. Now I am a stepmother to two children while separated from my own! I *must* have my own children back. I cannot mother these children unless I have my own back, too. Their father refuses, adamant.

April, 1975. The girl hates me. Thinks her real mother — who makes constant promises to see her and seldom does — is perfect. I try to love her, but I cannot. My unfinished business with my own children is too present. It begins to be painful. This marriage melts walls, opening me to both pain and joy.

June, 1975. The girl moves, to live with her mother. I am relieved. I feel guilty.

July, 1975. On the road to meet my children at the Salt Lake City airport. How will we greet each other this summer? Will I feel stilted? Will they? What do they look like now? How long will it take this time to feel comfortable?

Always, during these summer visits, a frustrated feeling: as if frozen. Frozen out of their lives. Frozen inside.

January, 1976. I have moved out of my beloved second husband's home into my own apartment. My soul is calling me, and I must follow. I cannot do my work and remain married to him. What is my work? I have no idea.

August, 1980. I tell the boys, now 16 and 14, that they can remain with me for the school year if they wish. That it is time for them to make their own choices. That *I will love them no matter what they decide*. Their father threatens to "send in the U.S. Marshall" if they remain with me. They return to Massachusetts. He calls me to say that he "will make sure they never want to see you again."

October, 1980. Another awful phone call. Worse now. Horrific, suffocating tension. I get off the phone and resolve not to contact my own sons again until they are adults. This much tension between adults is too painful for children to bear.

The joy and the pain that I was beginning to be able to feel close down again. Desolate.

December, 1984. The abyss, so long denied, has closed over me. I am in hell. All I can do is feel it. I read Alice Miller's *Drama of the Gifted Child* and begin to feel into my own buried pain. The children I could not mother were preceded by the unmothered child, myself. I name this inner child, "Orphan Annie," and begin to claim her, honor her, rock her in my arms. The rage against my seemingly cold unfeeling German father now extends to my mother, who, as a war widow during World War II, was depressed, numb, frozen, unable to be there for me, her first-born child.

November, 1987. I return to Massachusetts, to face my children's father, and through that reunion, to regain access to my children. My own mother has agreed to accompany me. After four hours, during which he rants, berating me as evil, awful, horrible, *a mother who abandoned her own children*, his venom is at last spent. As I sat there during his recital, I saw the inner child within him, the abandoned little boy who, when he was five, saw his father die and his mother go to work. When I left him and our little boys, that old horror was catalyzed, and his hatred of me since then has been one long scream to his own mother, "No! Don't go!"

It has now been over nine years since my reunion with my children, who, I am happy to say, are loving and wonderful young men. Their long-term girlfriends have become my unexpected allies in our continuing process of healing. These young women honor the path I forged for them. They help my sons understand who their mother is, and they tell them how lucky they are to have a mother like me.



Christmas in Seattle with Colin, Sean, and Kreilkamp family, 1989, two years after our reunion.