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Motherlogues

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MOTHERLOGUES


"Motherlogues," the dramatic reading that follows, is drawn from some 200 tape recorded inter­
views of mothers by women's studies students at Jersey City State College. In 1979, with a
generous grant from The New Jersey Department of Higher Education, Office of Separately
Budgeted Research, we launched a two year project entitled "Mothers and Daughters: The
Changing Lives of Ethnic Women." Using students as paid researchers, we began exploring the
responses of their mothers (ages 40-60) to questions about education, marriage, motherhood,
homemaking and employment.

We wanted to find out how a generation of working class and lower middle class women from
a wide range of ethnic backgrounds had changed—in attitudes, values and expectations—over the
past twenty years. We were curious about our subjects’ mothers’ lives. Did they regard their
mothers as models? For what notion of womanhood had their mothers prepared them? We were
also interested in learning how these mothers viewed their daughters’ lives and whether the experi­
ences of the younger generation had had an impact on the outlook and behavior of the older.

The interview, our basic research instrument, grew out of a unit in a “Women’s Lives” syllabus
(“Women’s Lives” is the introductory course in women’s studies) which has been in effect since 1974. It is
reprinted in full at the end.

From the beginning, we saw the research as an extension of our teaching—as one way of
studying family history—and as a venture in community building. We were simultaneously involved
in another, parallel family history project: assembling an exhibit of photographs from the albums
and collections of women’s studies students and staff. The activities overlapped and reinforced one
another. Some of the mothers who were interviewed—along with their mothers, grandmothers,
sisters, aunts and great aunts—figure prominently in “Generations of Women,” the photographic
exhibit. In both cases, we wanted to engage our students in retrieving the female side of family
history, and we wanted to return those histories to them and their families in ways that would be
compelling and readily comprehensible.

The dramatic reading which took place at Jersey City State College on March 22, 1981, was
an attempt to report on the research “findings” to our subjects (the mothers), our co-researchers
(the daughters), their relatives and friends. Staged in the college’s Vodra Art Gallery, in the
presence of “Generations of Women,” “Motherlogues” was an unusual community event.
Experiences which most students and their mothers considered ordinary, dull, and hardly worth
the telling came irresistibly alive in the gallery performance. Our subjects joined the stream of
history.

Of course, the methods of art and the goals of social science are not always compatible. While
it was never our intention to quantify the results of the “Mothers and Daughters” project, we were
certainly looking for patterns and trends. Yet one cannot make good theatre out of composite
portraits and careful, scrupulously qualified generalizations. Reading through hundreds of pages of
transcriptions, we were determined to capture both the common chords and the cacophony of
voices. Our familiarity with hundreds of similar but abbreviated interviews conducted for four years
prior to the research project would, we hoped, serve us well.

In editing “Motherlogues,” we were struck by the flatness of representative statements; con­
versely, we were attracted to the idiosyncratic, the melodramatic, and the quietly poignant. Still, we
struggled toward an intuitive balance between unique “truths” and familiar experiences. Would the
“interested parties” in our audience feel justly treated, we asked ourselves? Would less articulate
mothers recognize themselves in the poetry of others? Would the many less than candid subjects
identify with the revelations of the bolder, uninhibited few? Would everyday simplicities be heard
amid traumatic tales of disease and death, poverty and violence? Could the mixed messages of a
generation of mothers be appropriately decoded? We can report that an audience of 500 accepted
“Motherlogues” as their own.
STAGE DIRECTIONS
In the gallery on white walls are 70 sepia and black and white photographs of women and some men, dating from 1860-1981. The photos, some enlarged to 36" x 72", many to 20" x 30", are arranged thematically: Portraits, Romance, Friendship, Mothers and Children, and Occasions. Three actresses, one Black, one Hispanic, and one White, enter the gallery. They move among the viewers toward a low, black, multi-levelled platform in the center of the room. They take their places and turn to the audience.

PROLOGUE
All right, daughter. Get your tape recorder going because I'm ready to talk. You're asking me all these personal questions, about my mother and how I grew up, about my marriage and being a mother, about Women's Liberation and my life today. Yes, I've a few things to say; so hear my voice.

Escuchame, hija mia. Tengo mucho que decirte, y comienzo ahora mismo.

MY MOTHER
My mother was born in this country, but her views were taken from the old country. She was so old fashioned it was pitiful. You got to do it the way she says. You couldn't deviate one iota. My mother died when I was 43 years old. To the day she passed away I was afraid of her. If my mother told me, "You don't do it," you don't do it. And I already had three children.
My mother came to this country young. She was illiterate and she still is. She always wanted to learn how to read, but their old fashioned way was that a woman didn't go to school. Life was working and raising a family.

My mother was very happy—because she loved my father, and my father loved her. They were together 66 years.

My mother took in washing and worked in a box factory. She got a widow's pension, which was $16 a month, and my uncles gave her $9 a week for washing their clothes. We never had enough to eat. We had breakfast and supper. But I don't remember having lunch. Not until I got married.

My mother kept herself as a model before us. Whatever she might have done wrong she kept from us. All we knew was that she was somebody who was trying to do right.

**MARRIAGE**

My mother wanted me to be a good girl, keep myself nice and attractive and honest. She wanted me to be respectable, not do bad things, not fool around with boys until I got married. I decided to get married because I thought it was the thing a girl should do.

My mother wanted me to get married. She figured that if I got married I would be safe—she was a widow and she didn't have any money and she meant well. It turned out she had the right idea but the wrong person. I wasn't ready for marriage. Anybody 16 years old is not equipped mentally or physically to be married. I was out of high school, and bingo I was married. She married me against my will.
I lost my identity with your father. Everything was the way he wanted it. He was a serpent.

Maybe if we had been educated like the Chinese—that women were made to serve men and please men—we would have been happy with our lot.

My best friend is my husband. He’s been that all my life. He’s always there. Whenever I’ve needed him—in any situation, in any crisis, he’s been number one there.

My relationship has gotten better over the years. As you grow older you mellow; and things that would have bothered you don’t bother you anymore. He’s retired. We are home together; we go places together; we do everything together.

When my husband and I went to bed, there was no love, no hug, no touch, no pat, no leading up to ... In bed, it was wham bang, thank you ma’am.

My second marriage was much better. I got everything I expected. By then I was working. We bought a house. We had children; he raised my son from my first marriage. He was a good man, a good provider. I loved him.

Mine was an old school-type marriage. You stay home, barefoot and pregnant.

I haven’t been just a homemaker for some period of time, and I don’t feel that I ever will again. Daddy is becoming a good homemaker. He’s a nice old lady.

MOTHERHOOD

I had children right away. There was no waiting like the kids do today. I had four, one right after the other, and I accepted it and loved it. I did raise them strict, and I did give them the strap when I felt they deserved it. I guess I’ve been very lucky. None of them ever gave me any problems. No drug addiction or anything.

I took a course on how to raise children, how to care for babies. I read Dr. Spock which was recommended at Bamberger’s.

I tried to do everything for my children that wasn’t done for me. I couldn’t see having so many children that whoever had the biggest hole in their shoes got a new pair that week.

You can take anything in life, let’s put it this way, but you can’t take it when it hits your children because that hurts the most. I accepted your father’s death—who the hell cared—but I could not accept what happened to your sister, and all the more, I could not accept what happened to you, because it was hereditary. Of all the families, why did it have to hit here? You know, it wasn’t carried down anywhere else. If there’s one poisoned egg in 52 thousand dozen, we would get the poisoned egg in this house.
When you was coming up, I whipped you. There was nobody to say I shouldn't have whipped you. Now today if you hit a child, they call it child brutality. The child will go call the cops on you. Now how is you going to chastise that child if he can have you arrested? I'm glad that I lived in a time when you loved your mother whether she whipped you or not. You just loved her, because you knew she loved you. Today, we don't have time to listen to what the kids are saying. Everybody's on a hustle-bustle-mother-go, father-go, and the kids take care of themselves. But, see, they need some time for you to put your arms around and say, "I love you."

SEX

Sex: Wow, was that a no-no in the house. Believe me, that was something that was not discussed at home. When those special or delicate days came along, I wasn't even prepared for it—I thought I was dying. I got up yelling, screaming, "I'm gonna die, help me!" Then Nana explained it to me the best she could, and that's what I learned. The rest of it, I learned through girl-talk, and believe me, it wasn't much.

To me, sex was always the icing on the cake. The cake was the caring and all that.

I think that it's good that sex is talked about freely between mother and daughter, and that the daughter comes to the mother and talks anything out with her. However, living with a man before marriage—I can't go along with that, I'm sorry. You're trying out something that you shouldn't be trying out ahead of time. Don't you want to have the beautiful thing come later when you're married?
If my daughter gets pregnant through her own willing, knowing what it will cost me, not in money, but me, my feelings, I think I will die of shame.

Two years ago I probably would have been shocked at the idea of premarital sex. Sometimes now, I think it's not such a bad idea; maybe living together, you'd get to know each other before the heartbreak of marriage and then divorce.

I don't think the girls today have any morals. It's like a girl changes a pair of underpants or a dress—the way they change fellows.

If my daughter wants to have any sex life or any private life with a man, she would have to marry. That is definite. My son, I wouldn't really be that fussy about him. Men, it's different. They're not virgins. But my daughter, definitely, she would have to get married if she wanted to have any kind of intercourse.

I think that the children today should know as much about sex as they can. A lot of people think that sex education gives the kids the idea to try it. I don't believe that. I believe that if you know what's in store for you, you don't take risks unnecessarily.

My daughters have already dipped and dabbed into pre-marital sex—uh, as long as they know what they're doing, if they're taking precautions, that's their business. But if they do happen to have a little slip-up, and pregnancy results from this, I feel that's their responsibility. No one helped me with mine and I don't intend to help them with theirs.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Would you believe my mother was a suffragette? My mother was one of the first women to give the women the right to vote. As old fashioned as she was, she believed in women being liberated in the work force. But she never believed in women's lib in life and love.

What Women's Movement? Yeah, I'd like to know what Women's Movement. Every once in a while you see a blurb in the paper where some big ass takes a pot shot at Gloria Steinem or one of those other people. I'm always amazed—they're 20 years behind me. Nobody gave me a movement. I just decided this whole thing I'm doing is crap and a crock, and I had had it. So I'm going to do for myself, because if I didn't survive, my children wouldn't—so I had to become more me, more healthy and more whole to bring my children up as more complete human beings.

I did not have a marriage where the wife was at the stove while the husband was out working; there was complete sharing, so the women's movement really doesn't mean anything to me because I had what they're looking for.

The Women's Movement has made me realize that there's a big world out there, that there are a lot of things that I can do in it, that I should try to discover some hidden talents that I may have within myself. It's also made me realize that my daughter does not have to grow up and get married, have children and become a homemaker—she can become a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer, or practically anything she wants to be.
I'm not really with the Women's Lib. I mean, I don't let men go over me. I'm proud of my own principles. I think it's stupid, too, the Women's Lib. I really think it is. We do have a position today—why does she want more than we have?

I don't believe in equal rights for women. I believe the man is still the man and should be higher than the woman, as old fashioned as that may sound.

I feel that the Women's Movement has made me much more independent. I feel that I could go on and fare without a husband or a man in my life.

Women should stay home more, play a major role as mother first, and then, if there's time, go out in the world, but, for me, the most important thing is the house.

Women's Lib? I think it's a crock of shit used as a banner for some people who are really looking for something else. The only part of Women's Lib I fully agree on is the right of a woman who is qualified for a particular job to compete for the job, to get it and to be accepted.

No. I didn't go out and burn a bra, but I'm for the ERA.

CHANGING TIMES

For you, the world is different! The world is different! A woman's still got an uphill struggle, but there's nothing that's closed to a woman anymore. A woman can get an education. A woman can do much more than just be a cook or a secretary. She's a person: she's not an appendage to somebody else.

Abortion in my day wasn't as free as it is now. You went to what we used to call the butcher shop, and if the person who did the abortion was able to do one, fine, great. If not, you were mutilated. But since abortion is done so much easier now, and under the care of doctors—oh, yes, by all means.

Twenty years ago I believed that, if you married and had a child, you stuck it out even if you were miserable. That is wrong. Not today: if you don't get along you get a divorce.

Society is different nowadays. Or supposed to be. If I got bored with my own company or whatever I was doing, I should have the freedom to pick up, go to a bar and sit. And if I saw an attractive man, I could say, "Hey, do you want to dance?" or "What are you doing Friday night?" You may do that, but the man will think you're a nymphomaniac or the bartender will say, "Poor soul."
THE FUTURE

I think my future looks very bright. If my health improves, there's no end to where I can go. I never let my chronological age affect anything I do. I hope to get back into night clubs, get a band together, and give up working in an office. I'd like to get remarried. I never give up. I'm still in there pitching.

I'd like to go back and get some more education. I just sort of feel that's an unfinished part of my life.

In the next 10 years I would like to be living right back where I was born in Puerto Rico. I would like to have a house there—the same as I have here—and take my kids back and show them where I was born, how people live and how people react.

I would like to see my daughters marry and raise a family. If not, I'd like to see them marry and have a career they're happy with. I'd like to see myself married. I'm independent and I've become stronger. But I would still like to rely on someone, I would still like to take care of someone.

I'd like to travel more. When your father and I went away it was always down the shore or Niagara Falls. I've never flown; I'd like to fly. I would like to write a book, a book about how to cope. You know being forty is like being near eighty.

Everything don't stay on one even keel. Everything don't stay bad all the time, and everything don't stay good all the time. So in life you have to take it as it come, and if you take it one step at a time, then even when the bad hits you it won't be so bad. A lot of people wind up cracking up and jumping out of windows because they can't take it. But see, if you're one step up that ladder and you fall down, you can pick yourself up and shake yourself off and go back up that step.

I would like to be a grandmother now. I would like to see my children settle down. I realize, of course, they'll do it in their own time, when they're ready.

I'm proud of the fact that starting with nothing, absolutely nothing, I raised a family and provided a life for my children and myself. I'm proud that I don't owe anybody any money, proud of my accomplishments on the job, proud that I can hold my head up and walk anywhere. Here I am at age 44, really just starting out all over again. I'm alone, I'm going to be alone. I'm going to provide for me, and I'm going to survive.

"Brakemen." Bremen, Germany, c. 1918. Collection of Sandy Shader.

FINAL DIRECTIONS

Second actress reiterates, "And I'm going to survive." Third actress echoes more forcefully, "And I'm going to survive." Actresses bow in unison, leave the platform one behind the next, and merge into the gallery crowd.
DAUGHTERS INTERVIEW MOTHERS: The Questions

PART I  EARLY LIFE
1. What kind of relationship did you have with your mother? How did you feel toward your father?
2. How did you feel about your mother's life? Did you attempt to model your own after hers?
3. What expectations did your parents have for you? What kind of young woman did your mother want you to become?
4. As a teenage girl, what were your expectations for yourself?
5. How did you learn about sex? How much did you know prior to marriage?

PART II  MARRIAGE
1. Why did you decide to marry?
2. Was marriage what you expected it to be? How did it differ from your expectations?
3. What do you expect from the man in your life? Are these the same expectations you had 20 years ago?
4. What important changes have there been in the course of your marriage? (Decision-making? responsibilities? quality of relationships?)
5. How would you describe the place of sex in your marriage? Has sex been satisfactory for you?
6. How are relations between men and women changing? How do you feel about these changes?
7. For mothers who are widowed, divorced or separated: What critical adjustments have you had to make as a result of death or divorce—or serious illness?

PART III  CHILDREN
1. How were decisions made about having children?
2. Did you use birth control? What methods?
3. Where did you get your ideas about bringing up children?
4. How did you feel about raising children? (Was it easy or difficult?)
5. What are your expectations for your daughter(s)?
6. How do you feel about pre-marital sex for your daughter(s)?
7. How would you react if your daughter became pregnant out of wedlock? What would you advise her to do?

PART IV  MOTHERS AND CHILDREN
2. Are there some things that you have tried to change your mother's mind about? Explain. Did you ever try to change her behavior or influence her in any way? Did you succeed?
3. Are there some things that I have tried to change your mind about? Have I tried to change your behavior or influence you in any way? Did I succeed?
4. In what ways are things different for me as a woman than they were for you at my age?
5. In what ways are things different for you today than they were 20 years ago?
6. Are there some things that you have changed your mind about since I was a child? Marriage? Divorce? Living alone? Abortion? Careers for women? Family size? Other?
7. What is the best conversation we ever had? Why did it go well?
8. What do we fight about? Are these the same fights that you used to have with your mother?
9. How open do you think we are with each other? What makes it easy or hard for us to be open?
10. What important things do we know about one another even though we don't speak about them? How do we know?

PART V  PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
1. What interests do you have outside of the family?
2. What role does religion play in your life?
3. How much education do you think that it's important for a woman to have today? Do you have enough?
4. What is the place of friendship in your life? Who are your close friends?
5. How has the Women's Movement affected your views about your life? How do you think it has affected my outlook on life?
6. How would you describe your life today? What are areas of satisfaction? What are the disappointments?
7. Are there some things you have always wanted to do but never had the opportunity?
8. What are the personal issues that sometimes keep you awake at night?
9. How do you feel about your future? What would you like to see happen to you in the next 10 years?
10. If you could redo your life, what changes would you make?
11. This is a fantasy. A television play is going to be made about your life. What dramatic moments would you want to have included?