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“AND HER CHILDREN SHALL RISE”
The Long-Term Effects of Early Mother Loss

by

Caroline Goldberg, BSW

A Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Social Work

School of Social Work

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario

July 1999

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acceptance of the thesis

"AND HER CHILDREN SHALL RISE"
The Long-Term Effects of Early Mother Loss

Submitted by Caroline Goldberg, BSW
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Social Work

Thesis Supervisor

Director, School of Social Work

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Sept 7/99
Date

*In loving memory of my mother
and with sincere gratitude to all of the
remarkable people who have
'mothered' me in her absence.*

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the various ways mother death is talked about, perceived, and experienced many years after the initial loss. Qualitative interviews were conducted with three women and three men whose mothers died when they were children or adolescents. Gender differences were found in the areas of grieving styles, anger, roles taken on in the mother's absence, life goals, and in some of the things sons and daughters missed about their mothers. In spite of these gender differences, many common themes were noted in the ways male and female interviewees have coped with and experienced the death of their mother throughout the years. Some of these themes include a longing to talk about one's mother and her death, dramatic changes in the family system, and a sense of always feeling incomplete. Interventions and areas for further research based on findings from this study are suggested in the conclusion.

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CHAPTER ONE

A TIME TO LEARN ABOUT LOSS

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven . . .
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).*

MY POINT OF ENTRY

I had just returned home from handing in the last assignment toward my degree . . . the culmination of five years worth of papers and exams. As I walked in the door I heard the phone ring. I picked up the receiver and heard the familiar and cheerful cry of Allison's¹ voice. "Congratulations" she shouted. "Congratulations to you too, I still can't believe we're done" I replied. "Do you want to go out and celebrate?" she asked. "For sure, give me twenty minutes and I'll meet you." I answered. We wandered down the main street of a nearby neighbourhood to buy a couple of 'Jones Sodas' and then giggled all the way to the park. We each grabbed a swing and began pumping our legs to see how high we could go. After having to act like responsible adults all year, we both enjoyed retreating to childhood...at least for the rest of the afternoon.

Most adults act childish every once in a while. Our behaviour probably wasn't that unusual. Yet, as the two of us laughed at how silly we were being, we could not help but analyze our compulsion to act this way. Allison and I both lost our mothers as young people. We agreed that we had to grow up very fast and in many ways didn't get to be children for as long as most people do. Did we act childish like this to make up for our untimely passage into the adult world? Or was our behaviour the result of 'arrested

¹ All names have been changed

development' (Edelman, 1994:42; Fleming, 1963; Solomon & Hersch, 1979), a theory I was taught in class one day? According to this theory, when a mother dies, a child often has to mature rapidly in many ways. He or she must take on a variety of new responsibilities for himself or herself and often for the entire family. At the same time, as a way to preserve a relationship with the dead mother, the child may maintain many features of the developmental stage he or she had reached at the time of the death (Edelman, 1994:42; Fleming, 1963; Solomon & Hersch, 1979). As I said, I'm sure most adults act childish sometimes. In fact, I'm almost positive our desire to play in the park wasn't so much linked to early mother loss as it was to the need to unwind after a long and hard academic year. However, we had both learned such theories in classes, in books, and in our daily interactions, and attempted to use them to figure out how our personalities and behaviours relate to our early loss. Probably, some of what we said that day reflects the truth, or at least points to it, but some of it also likely reflects our learning of a discourse on mother loss. Some of what the two of us said that afternoon reflects the ways we have learned to speak of our experiences.

Whether or not our conversation that day was 'truthful', our words were interesting to me. Our words either taught me something new about the long-term effects of early mother loss or about the way the experience is often perceived and talked about by motherless people. Probably, what was said that day was somewhat true and somewhat false. In a sense though, the validity of our statements did not concern me at the time. True, false, or somewhere in between, our conversation intrigued me.

Our talk at the park that afternoon rekindled my desire to learn more about early mother death, a topic that I spent the majority of my teenage years grappling with. On

one level, I had thought I had long since let this topic rest. I thought that perhaps it was best to give up searching because it seemed that answers were nowhere to be found. On another level, I knew that I wouldn't let it rest forever. I knew that soon enough it would be time to search again. Talking with Allison made me realize that whether or not there were any answers to my questions, when the time was right for me, the search would be engaging and very worthwhile. Exploring this topic continued to spark my interest. Even if there were no clear-cut answers there must be some messy ones. After all, the similarities in the way Allison and I spoke of our loss experiences, particularly with regards to our personality traits, seemed too unlikely to be mere coincidence.

As Allison and I continued speaking of our comparable early loss, we began noting more similarities between us, like our inexplicable sense of feeling like we would always be a child in an adult world, our fear of abandonment, and the way we both somehow ended up playing the roles of mediator, communicator, and nurturer in our families of origin. We wondered whether or not these similarities were the result of having lost our mothers early in life. At first, we agreed they were, but as we analyzed these personality characteristics further, we realized that our brothers, who had also lost their mothers as young people, seemed to be very different from the two of us in some important ways. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this talk Allison and I shared would provide me with a point of entry and introduction to this work. It would also help me define the question I wanted to ask in my thesis, "how does gender influence the long-term effects of experiencing the death of one's mother early in life?"

Twelve years of grieving my mother's death probably would have lead me to the same general thesis topic, but this one conversation I had with Allison clarified the

question that intrigued me the most about this particular form of premature loss. I always knew my brother and I framed and coped with our loss differently. This would be the first time I ever stopped to consider gender as a possible reason for these differences.

When I arrived in Ottawa this past September, and began attending classes at Carleton's School of Social Work, I was encouraged to explore structural variables like gender, race and class in relation to a variety of social issues. My learning at Carleton reinforced what I had only a few months earlier began sensing. Gender affects the majority of social issues, so it also may affect this one. In writing a paper around my identity as a motherless person for one of my classes, I was able to make what I thought of as meaningful links between my loss and my ethnicity, my class background, my age, and my gender. It was the first time I had consciously attempted to make these connections. As I reread my own typewritten words, these connections became 'real' to me. A combination of common sense, academic knowledge, and instinct made these links feel right. While I found all of these connections personally meaningful, ties relating gender to the experience of mother death continued to captivate my interest the most.

EXAMINING GENDER DIFFERENCES

As the connections between the long-term effects of early mother loss and gender became clearer and more evident to me, I began searching the existing literature on this specific topic. I noted that there was very little information available that did not lump male and female children into one category. It appeared that "writings about death and

dying have [largely]² assumed that there are no significant gender differences" (Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997:5).

Researchers in the field of death and dying are very often more interested in locating commonalities of human reactions than in differences by gender or other variables (Stillion in Adams & Deveau, 1995:29). Much of the existing literature on death and bereavement therefore does not examine male and female experiences separately. For example, Kubler-Ross (1983) describes stages of mourning, which she believes all bereaved individuals undergo. These are: 1. Denial and Isolation, 2. Anger and Guilt, 3. Bargaining and Confusion, 4. Disorganization and Depression, and 5. Acceptance. These stages of mourning do not take into account individual differences based on social structure, like gender socialization. A male child might experience isolation as part of his first stage of grief work. If his socialization experience taught him independence and individuation, isolation is a likely outcome. However, for a female child, isolation may be less likely to occur. A girl's socialization process is likely to encourage the seeking out of social support in dealing with grief. In her book, In a Different Voice, Carol Gilligan explains what she believes to be the reason behind this phenomenon of girls and women seeking out social support and boys and men avoiding it:

Relationships . . . are experienced differently by women and men. For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation. Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. (Gilligan, 1993:8)

² Where square brackets are used I have slightly modified words from their original form.

In short, there are likely many gender differences when it comes to experiencing grief. Yet, such distinctions are largely ignored in the existing literature.

Most of the studies that do address gender differences insist that "the sex of the child seems to make little difference in the effects of parental bereavement" (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:125). However, as Berlinsky and Biller also point out in Parental Death and Psychological Development, "this finding may reflect more the minimal exploration of this possibility with regard to a variety of topics than the fact that no differential effects occur" (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:127). As Judith Stillion points out in chapter three "Gender differences in children's understanding of death" of the book Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Factors Influencing Children and Adolescents' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Death, "there are [actually] very few well-designed studies that examine gender differences in respect to death and childhood" (Stillion in Adams & Deveau, 1995:29). For this reason, as other researchers indicate, "there is little data showing sex differences in children's behaviour following the death of a parent" (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:121), and even less examining such differences in relation to death of a mother (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:121-126; Moss, Resch, & Moss, 1997:47).

Findings that do exist in this area indicate to a large degree differences in the types of studies which have been conducted among male and female children as opposed to actual existing differences (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:124). The choice of subject matter has been guided by investigators' beliefs and assumptions about bereaved children and gender (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:126). Studies on parental bereavement in females have traditionally examined topics like dependency and males have been more frequently studied in relation to delinquency and cognitive-academic functioning (Berlinsky &

Biller, 1982:117-124). Overall, female grief has been much more studied, which is "a reversal of the usual trend in psychological research to generalize from a largely male sample" (Carverhill & Chartier, 1996 in Stroebe & Schut, 1999:204). "Our understanding of masculinity and loss is still very much in its infancy - we still have a great deal to learn about this important topic" (Thompson in Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997:87). The various ways that issues of gender intertwine with issues of loss need to be explored in greater depth (Thompson in Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997:76).

While gender issues are still largely overlooked in the bereavement literature, some researchers have begun focusing on this area. Hope Edelman's work, Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss, seems to be unique in that she focused in depth research on the experiences of women. Her work was inspiring to me and after integrating what I learned from her book with my personal experience, I felt that I had a pretty good idea of how this profound loss affects a daughter. Yet, I was left feeling even more curious about the ways that the experience of early mother death affects a son. I have been unable to locate any work of similar magnitude that examines the long-term effects of early mother death on male children.

In their study, "The role of gender in middle-age children's responses to parent death", Moss, Resch, and Moss examined the gender differences which may occur as a result of losing a parent in adulthood. They found that the gender of the adult child does impact the way the child responds to the death of an elderly parent and that daughters express much more emotional upset, somatic symptoms, and have a stronger tie with the deceased parent. Sons were found to be more accepting of the death (Moss, Resch, & Moss, 1997:59). Without dwelling on these findings, because the population is different,

the fact that these researchers found that differences do occur among males and females may be indicative of the importance of this type of work. Furthermore, these researchers point out that "men and women are similar and different in their response to loss and bereavement" (Moss, Resch, & Moss, 1997:45). This is a critical point. It is integral to honour both the differences among men and women and the similarities among grieving human beings.

The existing literature in the area of gender and early mother loss did not allow me to answer the various questions I had. My curiosity and longing for more information dominated over my desire to continue on in my state of emotional rest concerning this topic. I decided I wanted to learn about any similarities and differences in the ways male and female children frame and cope with this loss; this was important to me on personal and professional levels. My interest in exploring this area came from being a motherless daughter, the sister of a motherless son, and the child of a father and grandparents who have nurtured two motherless children over the past twelve years. I am also interested in exploring gender differences in relation to early mother loss as a new social worker, hoping to work in a hospital, hospice, or other setting with bereaved boys, girls, women, and men. I decided I wanted to learn more about the ways that this early loss affects males and females differently with the hope that men and women can learn from one another. My search began with a strong desire to learn more about gender differences in relation to the long-term effects of experiencing the death of one's mother early in life. The methodology section of this chapter will explain how this focus shifted somewhere along the way.

GOALS OF THE RESEARCH

I had several goals in mind when beginning this research. First, I wanted to learn, from adults who have lived with the loss of their mother since childhood how they believe it has shaped a variety of factors in their lives. Such factors included personality variables, emotional variables, a variety of life choices, and quality of familial and other personal relationships. Second, I wanted to uncover more about the variety of ways children dealt with their loss, and how these differences influenced their mourning processes. For example, I was interested to know if children who kept a journal, or who went for formal counseling coped more effectively than those who did not do any of these things. Third, I wanted to find out whether others whose mothers died in childhood felt silenced, or encouraged to talk about their loss, and further I wanted to know why such differences occurred. I wanted to learn about the ways in which these individuals felt that either being encouraged to talk, or not to talk, about this experience shaped their future development, goals, and relationships. Last and most significantly, as previously mentioned, I wanted to explore the role gender played in structuring these individuals' coping mechanisms and in their development as motherless people.

My curiosity to learn more about these areas was coupled with a strong belief that any increased understanding of the ramifications of early mother death would be comforting to those who have experienced such a loss. In spite of each person's unique make-up, individuals whose mothers die early in their life share a profound loss. Knowing that there are certain fears, uncertainties, thoughts, and behaviours shared by motherless children might help these individuals to understand more about the ways their early loss has shaped so many aspects of their current lives. My hope was that any piece

of knowledge uncovered through this research, might assist this group of motherless individuals to understand and accept some of their less desirable traits, and to recognize and take pride in some of their very positive personality characteristics.

In addition to being beneficial for motherless individuals and their loved ones, I believed that if any new information relating to practice methods or practice implications was determined from this study, it might also be helpful for social workers and others working in this area. In learning more about the various ways in which mother loss in childhood is currently dealt with, and the myriad ways the effects are manifested years later, I hoped current interventions could be improved in some small way. I thought that perhaps new information might even be found relating to working with adults who experienced mother loss in childhood, but who have only recently begun consciously working through their grief.

HOW COMMON IS PREMATURE MOTHER DEATH?

Mother Death in Current Times

There is limited data relating to the numbers of children who experience the death of a parent (Zall, 1994:220). It is estimated however that 5 percent of American children lose one or both parents before reaching the age of 15 (Kliman, 1979 in Zall, 1994:220; Palombo, 1981:3) and that approximately 1.4 percent of the population lose their mothers to death before reaching the age of 18 (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:1). Nevertheless, as an increasing number of women participate in the workplace, the number of injury related deaths among mothers is expected to rise (Zall, 1994:220). The current statistics relating to the premature death of mothers are relatively low, but as Zall points out in his article, "The long term effects of childhood bereavement: Impact on roles as mothers", these

numbers still "warrant increased knowledge about the effects of this trauma on surviving children" (Zall, 1994:220). Furthermore, these statistics are not representative of the greater number of individuals actually affected by this social issue, including remaining caregivers and other loved ones. The effects of this loss are long lasting, and perhaps they are even multigenerational (Freeman, 1992; Freeman, 1996).

The History of Mother Death

Mother loss is a consequential and significant social issue today. Yet, it was a much more prevalent reality in past times. In their book, Motherless Families, George and Wilding explain that in the mid-nineteenth century, being motherless was much more common due to high rates of "maternal mortality" (one in every hundred births) (George & Wilding, 1972:1). In these times, it was not as common as it is today for children to be raised by their birth mothers. While it is commonly assumed that families were more "intact" in earlier times than they are today, this was actually not the case. In the past, families were "broken by death, probably at least as often as they are now broken by divorce" (Dally, 1982:41). Lawrence Stone noted that, "indeed, it looks very much as if modern divorce is little more than a functional substitute for death" (Stone, 1977 in Thurer, 1994:91). In the mid-nineteenth century, blended families were as common as they are today. Losing one's mother to death as a child was common in these times. A man was likely to "have several wives in succession, each of them dying, often in childbirth, and each leaving behind a family of small children" (Dally, 1982:41). In fact, until seventy-five years ago, "death and children were in comradeship" (Kavanaugh, 1972:125 in Pope, 1991:7) and large numbers of children grew up motherless and/or

fatherless (Dally, 1982:40). The word 'orphan' which was a common term in these earlier times, has almost vanished from our language today (Dally, 1982:40).

Today, there are few orphans but in premodern Europe only a minority of adolescents had two living parents (Stone, 1977 in Dally, 1982:40). Almost one in ten children under three years of age, and one in five of all children living at home had lost at least one parent (Dally, 1982:31). Among all social classes, approximately one in five of those in their middle twenties were orphans, and two in three had lost one parent (Dally, 1982:40).

The average life expectancy has increased from 47 years of age in the early twentieth century to approximately 76 years today (Stillion & Wass, 1979:202 in Pope, 1991:8). Therefore, the chances of a mother dying while her child/children was/were young was far more common than it is today. In earlier times, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis; diphtheria; and typhoid fever caused rampant death (Dally, 1982:31). In the nineteenth century, cholera epidemics were frequent and the last big outbreak in 1887 is thought to have killed 250,000 people in Europe and 50,000 in America (Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th edition, in Dally, 1982:31). In Russia, in 1892, a million people are thought to have died from the disease (Chambers Encyclopedia, 1959 in Dally, 1982:31). While many mothers died of such diseases, one of the greatest hazards that women faced throughout history, until the 1930's, was childbirth (Dally, 1982:31).

Maternal Death in Childbirth

In the book of Genesis it is written, "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (The Old Testament in Thurer, 1994:171). Childbirth was feared in earlier times because it often went hand in hand with a mother's death (Thurer, 1994:171). In fact, in earlier times, "most women had witnessed, or known of, the death of someone in childbirth" (Thurer, 1994:171). Also, pregnancy and childbirth were such common causes of mother death that it was standard for women to make arrangements for their funerals "as they prepared for their confinement" (Thurer, 1994:171). Hemorrhaging, infection, obstructed labour, 'hypermeses gravidarum'³, eclampsia⁴, and puerperal fever⁵ all too often lead to the death of expecting mothers (Dally, 1982:33-35). Twenty percent of all married women who died in Florence around the early fifteenth century died in childbirth (Thurer, 1994:126). In the mid seventeenth century two thirds of the women in a public hospital in Paris, Hotel Dieu, were killed by "childbed" or puerperal fever (Thurer, 1994:171). Between the years 1652 and 1862, there were two hundred epidemics of this disease (Dally, 1982:31). In Lombardy, it was reported that for over a year, no woman survived childbirth as a result of this disease (Shorter, 1977, in Dally, 1982:32). Today, it is very unlikely for a woman who follows the advice of her physicians, to be in any danger of

³ A serious condition attacking women early in pregnancy. It is an exaggeration of the common 'morning sickness' whereby the expectant mother vomits so much that if she is treated inadequately or not at all she may die. This condition still occurs. However, in current times, few women are left untreated (Dally, 1982:34-35).

⁴ This disease occurs in pregnancy and if not detected and treated it leads to severe fits and often a rapid death. Today, eclampsia only tends to occur among women "...whose prenatal care has been poor or non-existent" (Dally, 1982:33).

⁵ Puerperal fever is an infection that usually occurs during delivery but manifests itself days later. Death usually occurred 8-12 days after the baby was born. The cause of this infection was learned in the nineteenth century and ways of preventing it detected. However, it continued to be common until the 1930's (Dally, 1982:31).

dying during childbirth (unless she suffers from a severe disease, perhaps of the lungs or kidneys) (Dally, 1982:38).

CARING FOR MOTHERLESS CHILDREN

"Today it is rare for a child to have no living mother" (Dally, 1982:41). If a child is separated from his or her mother, she is more likely to have abandoned or deserted the child, to have been physically or mentally ill, and/or unable to cope with the responsibilities of childrearing. There are few orphans today, but there are many children in care living away from their parents for a variety of reasons (Dally, 1982:41).

Various generations have had distinct trends in caring for motherless children. While trends are changing, and a variety of family forms are increasingly common, the "husband-wife" family form is still by far the most usual, representing 77.2% of Canadian families in 1991 (Che-Alford, Allan & Butlin, 1994:16). The result is that today, in many cases fathers are the remaining caregivers for motherless children. In Canada, male lone-parents make up approximately 2.3% of the parent population (Che-Alford, Allan, & Butlin, 1994:17). While this percentage may seem low, the concept of male lone parenting is actually a rather new phenomenon. George and Wilding explain that in the mid-nineteenth century, the common solution to mother death was finding another woman to fill her role. Children remaining with, and being cared for by their father, does not appear to have been a viable option. In these times, the extended family absorbed the motherless, or if there were not relatives available to help, the middle-class father would hire maids and governesses. If none of these options was available,

motherless children would be taken into the care of the parish or the union⁶. These solutions are less available, acceptable, and desirable than they once were as a result of social and economic change (George & Wilding, 1972:1). The results of these changes, I believe, are very positive. Fathers are now, more often, taking on the roles needing to be filled after the death of a mother.

Probably, fathers' increased desire and willingness to take on childrearing responsibilities relates to changes in public perception of single parenthood. Well into this century, it was still believed that parents, particularly fathers, could not care for children on their own. As George and Wilding wrote in their 1972 work Motherless Families:

It is generally accepted that a child needs two parents -- partly because earning a living and caring for children make up jobs for two, and partly because two parents are thought to be necessary for a child's satisfactory emotional development. (George & Wilding, 1972:181)

Lone parent families now account for more than 13% of all families (Che-Alford, Allan & Butlin, 1994:17). Seventeen years since this book was written, it is no longer "generally accepted" that a child needs two parents to "develop satisfactorily". Public perception of what a single father can, or can't do, is likely to greatly influence how much he does. Today, I hope most Canadians believe that fathers are able to raise children on their own.

⁶ In those times, "the loss of a mother. . . frequently [meant] the children were placed in a charitable institution and then reclaimed at an age when they could be put to work" (Chernomas, 1999:3). For more information regarding the care of children after the death of a mother in earlier times refer to Bettina Bradbury's work, "The fragmented family: Family strategies in the face of death, illness and poverty, Montreal, 1860-1885" in Joy Parr's book, Childhood & Family in Canadian History (1982).

WHY A THESIS ON MOTHER LOSS?

Being brought up by a single father is far more unusual than is being raised by a single mother⁷. The feeling of growing up differently from one's peers may in itself raise certain issues for the motherless child. Furthermore, one needs only glance at statistics illustrating the economic differences between single parent families headed by women and men to realize that mother death and father death leave a family with very different concerns⁸ (National Council of Welfare, 1998:17). People have asked me, "Why a thesis on mother loss, why not father loss, or parent loss more generally for that matter?". While it is true that there are likely to be some similarities in the long-term effects of losing a mother and a father, there are also very real differences in the ways a mother and a father fill both instrumental and emotional roles in his or her child's life⁹. Mother loss and father loss are two very different things, with very different short and long-term effects. A thesis on father loss would be every bit as telling, but the findings would be different. I have chosen to concentrate on mother loss because of my personal experience, and therefore greater interest, in this particular area. Furthermore, since fatherlessness is a more prevalent condition, (at all ages, deaths of men are disproportionately high relative to deaths of women) "most of the studies focusing specifically on the loss of parents of one sex, have been concerned with loss of the father" (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:69). It seems then, that gathering more information about mother loss would be beneficial.

⁷ 82.4 percent of lone-parent families are headed by women. This distribution has remained virtually unchanged since 1976 (Che-Alford, Allan & Butlin, 1994:17).

⁸ The National Council of Welfare's Poverty Profile 1996, illustrates with bar graphs that in 1996, 61.4 percent of poor families were headed by single-parent mothers. The percentage of poor single fathers is so low that it does not appear on these graphs (National Council of Welfare, 1998:34).

⁹ A number of studies indicate that deprivation of maternal care seems to have a unique and significant effect on human beings. Refer to Attachment and Loss by Bowlby (1980).

METHODOLOGY

This research locates 'generalizability' in the social organization of people's lives (de Montigny, 1996; Smith, 1990). There are common discourses, or ways of talking, associated with bereavement and loss which contribute to the construction of mother-loss as a particular type of experience. Children experiencing the death of their mother learn these discourses through their everyday participation in the social world. They learn to use certain words and phrases, and perhaps even a certain tone of voice in speaking of their loss. As Jim Thomas explains in Doing Critical Ethnography, our culture largely determines the ways in which we learn to communicate, reproduce, and transmit meanings (Hoggart, 1971 & Lyotard, 1988 in Thomas, 1993:13). Some of what motherless children say reflects their actual experiences, or at least point to them, and some of what they say reflects the ways they have learned to speak of these experiences. As we shall see, at times motherless children, like all people, are unsure what parts of their story are 'fact' and what parts are reworked to the point of being fiction.

Years of living the role of a motherless child results in one being socialized to answer questions, and talk in a particular way about the experience. While on one level, the purpose of a qualitative interview is to "capture lived experiences outside the interview" (Mehan & Wood, 1993:51) on another level the qualitative interview is itself a historically embedded moment of "talk in interaction" (Schegloff, 1996:468). Complex socially organized beliefs and understandings of how one should talk about early mother death and what words will stand as cogent, particularly in the interview context, will influence what is said.

The interview is a new experience and is only vaguely related to the experience that it is supposed to represent (Mehan & Wood, 1993:51). In the telling of stories, there will be an inevitable gap between 'what actually happened', and the way a respondent chooses to talk about or communicate this experience (Kohler Riessman, 1993:10). One of the greatest challenges of conducting qualitative research can be distinguishing between 'what actually happened' and learned talk. Separating 'truth' from talk, and determining where they overlap, may perhaps even be an impossible task. Interviewees' words revealed various ways motherless children speak of their loss. In other words, the interview process helped me uncover a common discourse among motherless children. In examining this discourse, I was able to locate some 'truths', or what I believe are truths, about the experience of early mother loss.

In examining interviewees' words, I was also able to locate some possible 'truths' regarding gender differences in relation to the experience of early mother loss. However, such findings were not as numerous or as convincing as I anticipated they would be. Furthermore, my desire to locate gender differences, coupled with the interview context and interviewees' knowledge of my interest in this area, means that the 'truthfulness' of these findings remains questionable. While my search began with a strong desire to learn more about gender differences in relation to the long-term effects of experiencing the death of one's mother early in life, somewhere along the way, this focus shifted.

I discovered that my findings pointed more to similarities than to differences in the ways males and females coped with and understood mother loss. I also learned that gender can be understood as a rich source of explanation for long-term outcomes in relation to this loss if such explanations are looked for. However, such findings do not

promise that differences actually exist or that such explanations are based in reality. Such findings do however indicate that certain gender differences in relation to early mother loss are perceived to exist and are talked about and understood as if they do. I discovered that gender may be a rich source of explanation for understanding and for making sense of the long-term effects of early mother loss, but may not reveal 'true' differences. While I began this research hoping to focus on gender differences, I ended by transcending this area of study and returning to another source of explanation for my findings. Some of what respondents said regarding gender differences reflects the truth, or at least points to it and some of it reflects a learning of a discourse on mother loss.

Data Collection

The words a researcher hears during an interview do not necessarily represent the respondent's 'true' experience. Because of this reality, the literature emphasizes the use of triangulation as a way to improve the accuracy of the account (Denzin, 1978 in Thomas, 1993:39; Geertz, 1973 in Gilgun, 1994:375). I collected my data through administering both a short questionnaire, consisting of mostly closed questions, and a qualitative open-ended interview¹⁰ with each participant. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain necessary demographic information that might not have come up in the context of the interview. My main source of data gathering was in-depth face-to-face interviews that ranged in duration from fifty minutes to one and a half-hours. This face-to-face method was selected mainly so that I would have the opportunity to probe for information as necessary.

¹⁰ See Appendix B to view the questionnaire and interview schedule.

Structured questions were used in the interview for the most part. However, I did not hesitate to use an "unstandardized" (Mark, 1996:242) approach at times when this seemed more appropriate. Allowing an "unstandardized" approach to occur probably resulted in participants playing a greater role in guiding the interview, and thus in the themes which were brought up (Mark, 1996:242). This helped to ensure that the study would be inductive in nature.

Sampling or Selection Procedure

In order to obtain the fullest and most honest accounts possible, Thomas explains, "It is crucial to identify the types of informants who are most likely to possess an 'insider's knowledge' of the research domain" (Thomas, 1993:37). I therefore opted to examine this topic primarily through talking with people who have lost their mothers, as opposed to speaking with other family members, such as caregivers of motherless children, or only through a review of the literature.

I opted to speak with adults who experienced this loss as a child as opposed to speaking with children who have recently lost their mothers to death as I was interested in examining their talk and experiences of the long-term effects of this loss. The population from which I selected a sample were motherless adults who are now between the ages of nineteen and sixty-five, but who were younger than eighteen years old when their mothers died. A time span of at least seven years was to have occurred since the death. Since I was interested in examining the different ways men and women speak of the long-term effects of early mother loss, I decided to interview males and females. I selected participants using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method (Rubin & Babbie, 1993:700).

The Respondents

Three respondents were male and three were female. Respondents' ages at the time of their mothers' deaths ranged from four to sixteen years old. The mean age was eleven, and the median was twelve. The length of time since the death ranged from seven to fifty-seven years, with a majority of interviewees having experienced the loss of their mother between ten and fifteen years ago. Current ages ranged from twenty-three to sixty-five years old. However, as the following profiles will illustrate, all but one respondent were in their twenties. Three respondents were single, two were married, and one was widowed. All respondents could be described as "middle class" using a variety of indicators of socio-economic status such as occupations and education of parents and of self. For example, deceased mothers occupations were: two "stay at home moms", a teacher, a receptionist, a dietitian, and an agency president.

Craig is a Jewish male in his mid-twenties. He is currently attending law school although his first degree was in film. He dreams of being a filmmaker, a comedian, or a scriptwriter. Craig's mom was "killed instantly" in a car accident when he was twelve years old. His parents were divorced at the time and he was living with his mother. After her death he and his sister moved in with their father, who became their primary caregiver.

Julie is a social worker in her late twenties. She has a strong Christian faith. Her mother was ill since Julie was nine years old and she died of lung cancer when Julie was fourteen. After her mother's death she continued to live with her father and her brother. Approximately six months after her mother's death, her father remarried and her stepmother moved in with them. Julie and her grandmother always had a very close

relationship, but they grew even closer after her mother's death. Julie became her grandmother's primary caregiver in her mother's absence.

Anna is a sixty-five year old French Canadian. She went to business college and worked in the areas of marketing, market research, and sales. She currently volunteers at a non-profit agency in the city where she lives. She has three children. Her husband died many years ago. Anna's mother died when she was eight years old of an illness. However, Anna is not aware of the specific cause of her mother's death. Immediately after her mother died, a woman was hired to look after the home and the young children, but when this arrangement did not work out, Anna's older sister ended up quitting school to care for the younger siblings.

Andy is a twenty-three year old First Nations man. He has strong spiritual beliefs but does not affiliate himself religiously. He is currently a Cultural Enrichment Worker at a community centre. His long-term goal is to become an actor. Andy's parents divorced when he was five years old. Although he had always lived with his mother, he had moved in with his dad, for unrelated reasons, about a month and a half before his mother's death. Andy was sixteen years old when his mother died unexpectedly of complications relating to her diabetes.

Victor is in his late twenties. His family moved to Canada from South America when he was a child. He has a strong love of nature, which has guided his career choices, his hobbies, his lifestyle, and his academic focus. He completed his post-secondary education in the area of forestry for example. Victor was in grade seven when his mother died of cervical cancer. After her death, Victor's father cared for him and his two siblings.

Stephanie is also in her late twenties. She has recently completed her Master degree in social work. She is a Roman Catholic of Scottish/Italian descent. Her mother drowned after saving the life of a young child at the lake when Stephanie was only four years old. After her mother's death, her father became the primary caregiver of her and her two sisters. Her father remarried less than two years after her mom died but Stephanie never felt close to her stepmom.

Tape Recording and Transcribing

I decided to audio tape and transcribe the research interviews. This occurred with verbal and written permission from all participants. Not having to attempt taking detailed notes during the interview provided me with greater ability to listen actively to respondents. This also ensured that I could participate more fully by asking any important questions that were not included on the interview schedule, and by omitting those questions which no longer seemed appropriate to ask a particular respondent. Having to take detailed notes would also likely have resulted in much information being lost by what I did not have time to write down. Note taking on its own would likely have only provided an overview of the interview. Many powerful words might have been lost. In short, I wanted to obtain more detail and accuracy than I believe I could have if I were only taking notes.

While tape recording and transcribing is likely a more effective method for this type of research than is note taking on its own, transcribing is also "incomplete, partial, and selective" (Kohler-Riessman, 1993:11). There are a variety of different ways to transcribe talk, and meaning is constituted in very different ways depending on which form of transcription is used (Mishler, 1991b in Kohler Riessman, 1993:13). Some

investigators, particularly conversation analysts, may transcribe various features of talk in great detail. For example, they may attempt to preserve intonation, pauses, sound stretches, and emphasis in their transcriptions (Psathas, 1995:12). My transcriptions do not include such great detail, as I was more interested in the themes and ideas respondents presented, than I was in the ways they presented them.

Data Analysis

A researcher's analysis decisions, personal experiences, and ultimate goals may greatly influence findings. Catherine Kohler Riessman, in Narrative Analysis, explains that the researcher will end up creating "a metastory" by analyzing what the interview narratives signify, and by editing and reshaping what was told. In the weaving together of respondents' stories there is always a possibility that the researcher may impose her own story over that of the respondent (Kohler Riessman, 1993:14). While our goal may be "to tell the whole truth, our narratives about others' narratives are our worldly creations" (Kohler Riessman, 1993:15).

Researchers often attempt to accurately depict the experience of participants, yet in the end, this may not be entirely possible. Important information can often be disregarded or misinterpreted in research for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons include disregarding themes that do not fit; allowing one's bias to guide areas of focus; and imposing meaning on data.

Many researchers disregard "outliers" and "unpatterns" (Miles & Huberman, 1994:269) by ignoring "bibbits that do not find a home" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:159). Thomas states that, "It is important to note and to pursue findings that are contradictory and do not fit into common themes" (Thomas, 1993:40). These anomalies

can lead to surprising and often critical information (Thomas, 1993:40). While my main form of analysis was locating common themes, as part of this, I also describe important themes that arose in the data, but which were not common among respondents.

Certain themes are also likely to be neglected by attending to certain segments of talk and therefore overlooking other segments. Researchers are likely to make certain phenomena more meaningful than other equally important issues (Kohler Riessman, 1993:9). Like many researchers, I was inevitably drawn to certain ideas at the cost of other information. While I made a concerted effort to avoid this trap, the knowledge and bias I held going into the research remained with me, throughout the entire research process, but especially as I analyzed the data. While I could not avoid this altogether, I did attempt to be as open-minded and accepting of new ideas as possible.

I was also careful to not prejudge or impose meanings or interpretations on the data (Weber, 1946 in Thomas, 1993:22). Thomas emphasizes how important it is to "let the data speak to us" rather than imposing our preferred meaning on respondents' words (Thomas, 1993:22). As I wanted this research to be inductive, based in 'grounded theory' (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), I used the data to guide the analysis and writing of this work to as great a degree as possible.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Confidentiality issues were addressed in a variety of ways. My tapes, and notes were numbered and colour coded. Furthermore, in this thesis I in no way identify any individual's name, address, or any other direct identifying information. All names and locations have been changed or omitted. I have also been, and will continue to be, sure not to identify respondents in any way in discussing my research. Furthermore, all tapes

and transcripts will be either erased or returned to participants dependent on their requests. Any computer files with data, other than my completed work, will be modified to conceal identities.

Participants signed a letter of consent before participating in any aspect of this research project¹¹. This form briefly described the topic at hand; the length of the interview; that the interview would be audio-taped; that participants could withdraw at any time; that the results of the study may be deposited in the Carleton University library; and that participants' names and identifying information would be kept confidential.

There was no deception involved in this research. Participants were completely informed about the interview process, and about the ways in which the research data would be analyzed and used. There were also no anticipated risks associated with this research. However, the topic at hand had the potential to be emotionally upsetting to interviewees and therefore provisions for proper debriefing and more serious follow up were made. The Distress Centre of Ottawa & Region agreed to provide counseling and referral services to participants of this research project if they were needed¹².

OUTLINE OF THESIS

This introductory chapter describes my point of entry and outlines my reasons for wanting to explore this particular topic, as well as my goals for this research. Current and historical statistics relating to the prevalence of mother loss, and the ways motherless children are and have been cared for are also examined. In addition, the methodological approach used in this study is summarized. Brief descriptions regarding data collection,

¹¹ See Appendix A to view the consent form

¹² See Appendix C to view a copy of the letter from Mary Stern, the Executive Director of The Distress Centre of Ottawa & Region.

sampling, the respondents, recording procedures, data analysis, and ethical considerations are provided.

Chapter two examines the question "what is a mother?" through the analysis of participants' talk. Here, a traditional view of "mother work" is explored as well as a view which considers the significant diversity existing among women who are mothers. Perhaps, the most universal trait of mother today is "nurturer". However, all mothers do not share even this quality. An exploration of other historical times and cultures illustrates how very different all mothers are.

In chapter three coping is explored and a variety of coping mechanisms are addressed in terms of their effectiveness in helping motherless children through the mourning process. Denial and avoidance are discussed as significant coping strategies. The usefulness of talking as a form of grief work is also explored. The barriers that often prevent this form of sharing from occurring, including gender socialization, societal attitudes, and having nobody to go to are described. The effects that feeling silenced can have are also examined in this chapter. In addition, turning to role models and to culture, religion, and spirituality in coping are also explored. Friends, humour, and aggression are other outlets discussed here, although these coping strategies were viewed as both adaptive and maladaptive by interviewees. This chapter concludes by emphasizing individual differences in coping.

Chapter four looks at the changing nature of relationships after the death of one's mother. Interviewees all discussed significant changes in the family system after their mother's death. In some cases family members withdrew and in other cases they came closer together as a result of this experience. According to interviewees, changes in

familial roles were also common occurrences after their loss. Female children were particularly likely to become caregivers, nurturers, homemakers, confidantes, communicators, and mediators to other family members in their mother's absence. Partnerships, marriages, and friendships, were also all said to be affected to some degree by this premature loss. Fear of death and abandonment, a feeling of neediness, and a strong sense of cherishing people are some other common themes relating to relationships described in this chapter.

Chapter five explores the long-term effects that early mother loss may have on identity. The literature and respondents' words indicate that there is a tendency for motherless children to mature faster in some cases and to experience arrested development in others. Life goals and accomplishments, as they relate to early mother loss, are also described in this chapter. All of the motherless daughters interviewed linked their participation in caring activities in their employment or volunteer work to their early loss. This was not the case for male respondents. Finally, respondents talked about the ways in which this experience changes a person on an emotional level, often leaving them with strong feelings of anger, sadness, and a sense of incompleteness throughout their lives. This sense of incompleteness is thought to be quite consequential, particularly for female children.

The final chapter suggests interventions for working with the maternally bereaved population. A series of interventions at the individual, familial, and societal levels based on the literature and interview findings are recommended. Interventions suggested in this chapter may be useful for a diverse audience such as motherless individuals, their caregivers, teachers and many professionals working with the motherless population.

However, recommendations are more specifically aimed at social workers and the various ways they can assist bereaved individuals and families through direct intervention and through advocating for necessary social change. Strategies at the societal level include: promoting changes in societal attitudes about death and about what appropriate grieving constitutes; providing death education to Canadians on a larger scale; emphasizing that good counseling be available and accessible to bereaved individuals; and encouraging the use of a "dual process model of coping"¹³. Interventions suggested at the individual and family level include: emphasizing the availability of adult relatives, family friends, or volunteers to provide female role modeling to young women and men when desired; encouraging and cautioning family involvement throughout the grieving process; advising adults to be there for children and to talk with them about their mother and her death; accentuating the importance of interventions for the surviving parent; advising counseling as appropriate; and respecting the individual differences of children. This chapter concludes by suggesting areas for future research.

¹³ As described by Stroebe and Schut in their article, "The dual process model of coping with bereavement: Rational and description" (1999) in Death Studies, 23 (3) (pp.197-224).

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS A MOTHER?

*I look around and see a mother...and wonder what it must be
like to have a mother...when you're a child or a grown up...
when you get married and you need her. I never had those
things and so to me...you wonder what it means to have a mother
(Anna¹, Personal Interview, 1999).*

INTRODUCTION

In the most basic sense of the word, a mother is "a female parent" (Merriam-Webster, 1985:774). However, this definition of 'mother' suggests that all female parents are mothers, which is certainly not the case². This definition also suggests that those who are not female, or are not legal parents, cannot be mothers. Motherless children are perhaps more likely to be opposed to such a definition as many of them have been nurtured and cared for by special people other than their natural mothers throughout their lifetimes. As one respondent explained:

When I hear the word mother, I think of my own mother, but I also think of a lot of people for example my wife's mom and my friends' mothers that are kind of motherly. My wife's mom is a big one ...she's like a mom to me. When I think of the word mother usually I think of people who really care about me as opposed to only my mother because her job didn't stop where she died. It always continues and other people do pick up the slack I think. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Interviewees expressed the belief that there are many caring people in their lives who have 'mothered' them throughout the years. These people have helped to fill some of the roles that needed to be filled after their mothers died. These individuals have cared and nurtured with the kind of selfless love that is often presumed only a natural mother can

¹ All names of respondents have been changed

give. Interviewees shared their thoughts about the exceptional people in their lives, who although not legal guardians, have been as much of, or even more of a mother to them than their legal female parent was:

I was very close to my grandmother even before my mom's death and that just continued on. She was my mom's mom. They were very different people. She was always I think a little bit more my role model than my mom was anyway. I really strive to be like her and have always really valued and respected her. She was always full of dignity and grace and all those things. She still is today. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Most interviewees who said they were mothered by others felt that a woman was needed to fill the void left after their mother's death. As Victor explained "women just have mothering habits" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). In trying to fill the gap that motherless children so often feel it seems that the tendency is to seek out females. Victor's words help to explain why this may be so:

I think my mom's death is the reason I married a little earlier and why I really value that time with women just on a friendship level, and I think even a lot more so than other people because I miss. . . I don't have. . . it's like a void. . . I don't have the motherly touch and affection which was a big part of my life and I think that is one reason too that I do have quite a lot of female friends. . . really good, close intimate friends and I think that's part of the reason. . . is that somehow I seek out a lot of that you know aaah. . . femininity. I seek it out because it is a void in my life. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

One respondent however did speak of a male person being the one to take on this role. Stephanie spoke of her father being the one to nurture and care for her after the death of her mother. She explained:

Oh, he was definitely a mother to me. He ended up a couple of years after my mom died...he had a bad back so he had to stop working and so he was home. He was home the majority of the time so he got to be the mom. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

² In her book, *Absentee Mothers*, Patricia Paskowicz (1982) shares the stories of female parents who, for a variety of reasons, have been unable or have opted not to "mother" their children.

Stephanie's father, like so many fathers, was a wonderful nurturer to his children. Interestingly though, she also mentioned later on in the interview that while her father did carry out the mother role, he could not fill the void that her mother's absence left. In speaking of her reasons for missing her mom she said, "I mean I had my dad but it's just different" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). She also shared that, "I think I've always been looking for that kind of relationship that I would have had with my mother." (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999).

During the 1960's and 1970's there was a drive to repudiate biological determinism. Biological explanations for gender differences were largely replaced with social ones (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1994:107-126). With such shifts in thought, many fathers were provided with the reassurance, encouragement, and approval they needed to begin taking on a variety of 'motherly duties'. As Pat and Hugh Armstrong write in their book, The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work, it became acknowledged that "what children need is tender loving care and [that] this care can be provided by any human being who has the time, the means, and the desire. It was finally understood that a female body does not necessarily create any of these aptitudes" (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1994:120).

Nevertheless, there are, I believe, in many circumstances meaningful differences between mothers and fathers. While men's and women's roles in the family are much more interchangeable than they once were (George & Wilding, 1972:3), it is my position that a father will never be able to replace a mother. The literature indicates that "it is generally accepted that all children are in need of parental involvement, but that males and females may look to each parent for the fulfillment of different needs" (Berlinsky &

Biller, 1982:117). Perhaps, for motherless children, it is not the things their mothers did that are missed so much as the way they did them. My father has always given me a tremendous amount of support, encouragement, and unconditional love. I'll never stop appreciating his willingness to try to compensate for my loss, by trying to take on so many of the roles typically carried out by a mother. Yet, I laugh fondly when I reminisce about his attempts to fill my mother's roles throughout the years. I was so often left feeling embarrassed and awkward.

I remember for example "back-to-school shopping" with my dad when I was a teenager. I would look around the store and see all of the other girls my age with their mothers. My heart would sink as I watched them pick out clothes together. When I went to try things on the situation usually got a little more dramatic. The other daughters would come out of the changing rooms and their mothers would say "oh, that looks nice" or "those pants are a little too tight on you". I never knew quite what to expect when I came out of those doors. Sometimes I would walk out and my father would call out, "Can we get some help over here!" As everyone in the store looked over at us, a saleswoman would come over. Dad would point to me and ask her, "Does that look right? Is that the way that's supposed to look?". Other times as I walked out of the changing room my father would be standing there holding some ridiculous dress or blouse in front of him. He would look at me with a hopeful smile and ask "Is this nice?" I may have felt awkward and embarrassed during these times, but the fact that he was always there for me, trying so hard to help, made all the difference. The fact that he always tried to carry out these 'motherly' duties left me feeling very loved.

Probably, it isn't only fathers' gender which makes them unable to replace their children's mothers. While some motherless children explained that the right person or persons can fill some of the void that losing their mothers has left, they also expressed that nobody, male or female, can quite replace their mother. One interviewee who was raised by her older sister after her mother's death explained, "I'm sure my sister tried her best, but a sister is not a mother" (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999). She explained that nobody could ever replace a mother because a mother is irreplaceable:

I remember going to visit this particular family, and I know that [the wife] wanted to be as friendly as a mother, but [she] was not a mother, [she] was a stranger. Even though I remember that lady had been very kind to me, it wasn't a mother. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Anna said that nobody could ever replace 'a' mother, but perhaps what she meant was that nobody could replace 'her' mother. 'A' mother is conceptual. 'A' mother may very well be a homemaker, a mediator, a nurturer and so many of the roles deemed 'motherly'. Yet, one's own mother transcends these roles. She is a scent, a face, a touch, a voice, and a feeling. In short, she is a material presence. My mother's unique presence, her sincere smile, her neurotic anxieties, her hearty appetite, her yelling, her joy for living, the way she laughed. . . these things cannot be replaced by anyone. She cannot be replaced. However, many of the roles she carried out were. From talking with adults who grew up motherless, it seems that while others can be instrumental in nurturing and caring for a child, nobody can quite replace one's own mother.

Through respondents' talk of what the word "mother" means to them, one begins to understand that the above definition of a mother as "a female parent" does not even begin to skim the surface of describing what a mother really is. Nancy Chodorow explains in her book, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology

of Gender, "being a mother. . . is not only bearing a child - it is being a person who socializes and nurtures" (Chodorow, 1978:11). However, perhaps mothers are this and more.

The majority of respondents described a mother as Chodorow does, as someone who socializes and nurtures. They described a mother as "somebody you could go to for help, for love, for affection, and for nurturing" (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999); as "someone who takes care of you and encourages you" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999); as "someone who is there to put Band-Aids on your cuts and to help you through things" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999); as someone who helps a child with his or her homework (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999) or as someone who "puts her child to bed or reads him or her a story...or doing things like cooking for her children, making sure they get to skating lessons and hockey lessons...that kind of thing" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Finally, one respondent explained that you can't describe a mother "because she is more of a feeling" (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). Of all the ways to describe mothers, perhaps this is the most compelling.

The word 'mother' is often one of the first words a child learns, and the word is often viewed and understood as if it were a simple one. Yet, the meaning of this word is extremely profound, provocative, and complex (Chodorow, 1978; Apple & Golden, 1997) and probably is best described as a feeling. One's mother is so much more than all of the things she does. She is a presence. This is only one of many reasons why it is so challenging to answer the question "what is a mother?". This question is almost impossible to answer. As one respondent explained, it is difficult to define the word 'mother' because "everybody has their own vision or own interpretation of a mother. . .

There's so many things [to consider]...it's such a big question because there are so many things mixed in with it..." (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). A seemingly endless number of variables must be taken into account in attempting to answer this question. A mother and her role changes through time, and with culture, religion, social class, age³, ability, and so on. In contrast to stereotypes of women which insist they are all born with a nurturing intuition, every mother's personality, temperament, and nature is unique. These factors will also greatly influence how a mother views and undertakes her role.

Motherhood is not a static concept or a homogeneous category (Apple & Golden, 1997:XIII). Every society has imposed unique restrictions and expectations on women who act as mothers (Dally, 1982:17). Yet, for all the differences which exist among mothers, there are also many existing assumptions about what it is they do. In examining the question "what is a mother?" it is therefore necessary to look at both traditional and critical arguments. Drawing out and understanding both traditional views of 'mother-work' and the myriad differences that actually exist among mothers can be very useful to mothers, to motherless children, to caregivers, to social workers, and to others working with mothers and/or the motherless.

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF MOTHERING

Traditional views of mothering tend to be insensitive to issues of class, ethnic background, and national differences. They tend to assume that all mothers share common features and carry out similar types of duties. These traditional views assume that all women mother in a particular way. They also largely assume that all children

³ The experiences of teen mothers are particularly unique. Refer to Patricia Flanagan's chapter, "Teen mothers: Countering the Myths of Dysfunction and Developmental Disruption" in the book Mothering

have such a mother in their lives. Traditional views regarding the nature of mothers and their work, may relate strongly to what a motherless child feels he or she is missing.

The existing literature, and the personal interviews I have conducted for this work, seem to point to numerous types of traditional 'mother work'. This work includes caring, encouraging, teaching, socializing, homemaking, mediating, communicating, and more. Yet, these duties can all be understood under the broader category of nurturing. A traditional view of mothering suggests that mothers have a way of carrying out even instrumental every day tasks in a nurturing way. Karen Swift, in Manufacturing 'Bad Mothers': A Critical Perspective on Child Neglect, describes the range of tasks, all part of the nurturing role, which are often expected of mothers in Canadian society:

Caring by mothers involves both the obvious physical activities such as feeding and diapering babies, but also the minutiae of care such as finding lost mittens, fetching drinks of water, and bandaging up wounds. Caring also involves the considerable 'emotional work' of attempting to meet the needs of others. (Swift, 1995:104)

Mothers as Nurturers

There are an endless number of traits and duties associated with traditional mothering. However, the 'mother work' which is most frequently cited in this respect is nurturing (Ribbens, 1994; Dinkmeyer; 1965; Che-Alford, Allan & Butlin, 1994; Swift, 1995; Apple & Golden, 1997:XIII). Nurturing refers to the emotional realms of caring such as demonstrating affection. However, nurturing also refers to more tangible tasks such as "providing consistency, teaching the child to behave appropriately, coordinating the child's relationship with schools and day care, supervising diet and television viewing, providing careful discipline, and so on" (Dalley, 1988 as cited by Swift, 1995).

Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers, edited by Cynthia Garcia Coll, Janet Surrey,

Part of mothers' nurturing also includes protecting, homemaking, mediating, and communicating in a variety of ways. For example, as Karen Swift points out in "Contradictions in Child Welfare: Neglect and Responsibility" being a good homemaker is often understood as going hand in hand with being a good mother and thus a good nurturer. Swift demonstrates this with a case worker's chart that reads: "Place was a mess, empty beer bottles were scattered all over. Kids appeared neglected, baby was soaked" (Swift, 1991:248). In this quote it is as if the first sentence regarding the cleanliness of the home helps support the second sentence regarding the care of the children. Mothers tend to do much of the "homemaking" as part of their nurturing. As part of their nurturing duties, mothers are also "mediators". They are mediators between their children and the outside world. As Ribbens (1994) writes in his book, Mothers and Their Children: A Feminist Sociology of Childrearing, "women are caught between love and understanding for their individual children's views, and pressures to make children conform". Mothers are also commonly the "communicators" of the family (Ribbens, 1994:199). In this sense, mothers are also often described as the glue that holds the family together (Edelman, 1994:XX; Julie, Personal Interview, 1999).

A mother's nurturance means many things. It means providing for a child physically and emotionally. While these forms of nurturing may often go hand in hand, Bowlby insists that one form is more critical than the other. A study conducted by Harlow and Zimmerman indicated that monkeys who were "maternally deprived" preferred a soft terry cloth artificial "mother" that did not provide milk to a hard, wire "mother" that did (Harlow & Zimmerman, 1959 in Birns & Hay, 1988:50). Bowlby used this evidence to suggest that the mother-infant tie was based primarily on warmth and

and Kathy Weingarten (1998).

softness as opposed to feeding and other more instrumental needs. Bowlby suggests that the primary role of the mother is to provide the young child with emotional sustenance and that the relationship between infant and mother is more critical than her providing for the child's physical care (Birns & Hay, 1988:51).

While interviewees described a mother's role in terms of fulfilling instrumental and emotional needs, it seems as though the emotional needs of nurturing and affection is what they recalled most fondly or missed most deeply about their own mothers, especially as they reached adulthood. One respondent explained that "mothers give you lots of encouragement so things are more even" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999) and another shared that "when I was younger I missed her because she couldn't drive me around...and then I hit my early twenties and missed her as a friend" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999).

Literature from the 1960's and 1970's suggests that, "It has been commonly accepted that an affectionate and nurturing mother is essential for the complete development of the child" (Dinkmeyer, 1965:374) and that "mother-love is. . . [necessary] for long-range normal growth" (Blumenfeld, 1975:181). Today, many Canadians, like myself, would disagree with this statement. Many people believe that motherless children develop "normally", especially if other caregivers are able to play a nurturing role in a child's life. Still, the absence of a mother's nurturance probably does play a consequential role in the development of a child and thus in his or her later life.

Respondents all described an empty feeling inside them throughout their lives as the result of their mother's death. They explained that this empty feeling was the result

of missing their mother's nurturance⁴. In various ways they described how the loss of their mother, and her nurturing, has affected them throughout life. Craig explained that "with all the criticism [I got] from other kids, and teachers, and Dad I guess [having my mother's encouragement would have] kind of balanced it out maybe" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor shared that missing his mother's affection and touch resulted in him searching to find this in others, particularly in his friendships with women. He said "You know I look for it...you know you look for [motherly affection]. I don't look for it consciously but looking at my life from afar I think I definitely have looked for it. I have so many friends that are women...and more so than guys...I must have looked for it" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Anna spoke of the lack of attention she felt after her mother's death. She said "I didn't have a mother [and] the attention and the love and the affection [that I needed]" (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999). Mothers are, for the most part, nurturers. Motherless children share an intense longing to be nurtured by their mothers. Even those interviewees who said others mothered them throughout the years reported a longing to be nurtured by their dead mothers.

DIVERSITY IN MOTHERING

In examining the question "what is a mother?" it is also necessary to consider the variation among mothers. The traditional view of mothering suggests that nurturing is a universal trait associated with 'mother work'. Yet even it, as we will see in the section on history to follow, is not a characteristic shared by all mothers at all times. In examining mother death it is also necessary to take into account the differences that exist among mothers and the roles which they play in their children's lives. As Nina Lyon

⁴ Respondents spoke of missing their mother's nurturance, however as previously discussed, at the root of

Jenkins explains in “Black women and the meaning of motherhood”, “there is no single meaning or given experience of motherhood. The very term “motherhood” connotes a falsely static state of being rather than a socially and historically variable relationship” (Jenkins in Abbey & O’Reilly, 1998:202).

In “being there” for people who have lost their mothers it is critical to recognize and acknowledge the unique nature of the relationship between each mother and child. It can be quite problematic to lump all mothers into one group, assuming that they will all play the same or similar roles in their children's lives. Despite widely accepted notions of mothers as nurturers in North American white, middle class culture, mothers are not all nurturers, and they do not all nurture in the same way. Some mothers are abusive, some are overprotective, some play a small role in their children's lives, and others play a large one. Some mothers are patient, encouraging, and supportive and some mothers are not. Some mothers have disabilities and some women are the mothers of children with disabilities⁵. Some mothers are financially well off and others are homeless⁶. Of the motherless children interviewed one man described his mother as strict, and another man said his mother let him get away with everything. One woman said her mother was dominant in the family, and another said she cannot remember her mother playing much of a role in the family at all.

everything that an individual misses about his or her mother, is probably her presence.

⁵ While some mothers of children with physical, cognitive, and developmental disabilities speak of “how mothering such a child is in many ways no different than mothering any child” (Greenspan in Garcia Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998:43) Miriam Greenspan explains that “however much [such] mothers are like ‘normal’ mothers, mothers of children with disabilities also do many things that ‘normal’ mothers don’t do and think about many things that ‘normal’ mothers don’t think about” (Greenspan in Garcia Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998:43).

⁶ Rebecca Koch, May Lewis and Wendy Quinones have written about the experiences of homeless mothers in their chapter, “Homeless: Mothering at rock bottom”, of the book Mothering Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers by Cynthia Garcia Coll, Janet Surrey and Kathy Weingarten (1998).

Women who are mothers view themselves in a variety of ways and also have a variety of perceptions and feelings about mothering. O'Connor, in her work "Women's experience of the mother role", indicates that while 44 percent of mothers interviewed for this study viewed their role in an entirely positive manner, the remaining respondents indicated that their mothering experiences ranged from being valued but not enjoyable to negative (O'Connor, 1993:360).

It becomes evident that even mothering duties and characteristics that are often assumed to be universal are not. Various factors work together in determining how each mother will define and feel about her role. Cultural, religious and class backgrounds; urban or rural living; personality of the mother and child; the scientific, legal, social, cultural, political, and economic climate of the time all shape the ways in which mothers carry out their roles (Apple & Golden, 1997:XIII). These various factors must all be considered in understanding motherhood. Since it is not possible to explore all of these variables within this chapter, I have opted to illustrate the diversity among mothers through a brief exploration of historical shifts and through cultural variation.

Time Changes the Nature of Mothering

One significant variable determining the nature of mothering is the historical era in which she lives or lived. Societal norms and expectations of mothers have changed significantly throughout time and these changes have had a great impact on a mother's perception of her role. In examining the word "mother" as a historically constructed ideology as opposed to a natural and biological role (Hays, 1996:X) one begins to realize how dynamic the concept of 'motherhood' actually is. The word "mother" evokes an image of a nurturer and a protector (Apple & Golden, 1997:XIII). An assumption is

often made that nurturing has always been an innate part of mothering. However, this belief has not always existed.

In the premodern era, high rates of infant mortality resulted in a variety of practices to prevent the depression and despair of mothers when infant death occurred (Elkind, 1995:43). Many historians believe that there were times when "parents lacked love for individual children, particularly infants, largely because it is a normal human reaction not to become attached to what one is likely to lose" (Dally, 1982:44). For example, one practice that discouraged maternal attachment was "swaddling" infants to prevent close physical interactions (cuddling, stroking, and kissing) that are so much a part of modern mothers' affection for their infants (Elkind, 1995:43-44). Other examples include the practice of "wet-nursing" and not naming children until they had survived into the second year (Elkind, 1995:43-44). In fact, it wasn't until the end of the eighteenth century, when a new stress was being placed on the survival of one's children, that an emphasis on women as nurturers of their children developed (Badinter, 1981:117):

But at the end of the eighteenth century a shift occurred, and some considered it less essential to train docile subjects than to first make more subjects, to produce human beings who would become the state's most basic resource. . .[A] new concern superseded the former preoccupation with the training of those who remained after the elimination of the weak links. The weak and defenceless now came to interest the state, which tried to save them from death. (Badinter, 1981:118)

In the latter half of the eighteenth century urban infants who were being wet nursed were dying at a rapid rate. Wet nurses were feeding their own infants first which left little nutrients for the others. With a new concern for the survival of all children, urban mothers began to breast feed their own babies. At this time, urban mothers also

began to watch over their small children who were previously judged as a nuisance, and 'swaddled' to keep out of trouble (Badinter, 1981:168). These changes allowed for more interaction, touching, embracing and affection between mother and child (Badinter, 1981:171). This seems to be the root of the concept of mothers as nurturers in our society. Motherhood began to be viewed not as a duty, but rather as "the most enviable and delightful activity a woman could hope for" (Badinter, 1981:146). Women also began to be condemned if they could not adequately perform the many necessary nurturing tasks (Badinter, 1981:206).

In 1839, the Reverend John Todd told readers of The Mother's Magazine that "God planted this deep, this unquenchable love for her offspring, in the mother's heart" (Lewis in Apple & Golden, 1997:52). In America, by the mid-nineteenth century it was widely believed that nature and God made women to be mothers by implanting in their hearts a pure, eternal, and unconditional love for their children (Lewis in Apple & Golden, 1997:52). This ideology of motherhood developed from writers who "could not imagine an America, as they wanted it to become, without a mother's love" (Lewis in Apple & Golden, 1997:52).

There has also been a significant change in mothers' roles as a result of this century's new infatuation with modern store-bought, machine-made goods (Elkind, 1995:42). The tasks associated with mothering and homemaking are quite different today than they were centuries ago. As David Elkind explains in his book, Ties That Stress, women were told that white bread baked in a factory was more nutritious than homemade bread, that coffee preground and vacuum-packed was tastier than coffee ground in one's kitchen, and that clothing made in sweatshops and bought in stores was more stylish than

clothing women could make at home (Elkind, 1995:42). These technological changes resulted in less time needing to be devoted to homemaking tasks and to a mother's role more generally. To some degree, these changes probably contributed to women being able to participate in paid work outside the home.

In the 1950's, 70 percent of North American homes consisted of a working father, a stay-at home mother, and one or more children (Pleck, 1985 as cited by Lee, Duxbury, & Higgins, 1994). Today, less than 10 percent of the population lives in this family form (Lee, Duxbury, & Higgins, 1994). Since 1971, the labour force participation rate of women has grown steadily. The rate increased from 39.9 percent in 1971 to 52.1 percent in 1981. In 1991 it reached nearly 60 percent. In 1991, women represented 45 percent of the total labour force⁷ (up from 34.6 percent in 1971) (Che-Alford, Allan, & Butlin, 1994). While freeing modern mothers to work and pursue careers, the feminist movement has not liberated women from being assigned the role of primary child caregiver and homemaker. Wage gaps between women and men continue to stem largely from "the fact that domestic work keeps many women but hardly any men from working year-round, full-time in the labour force" (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1994:41). As Elkind writes, "[the feminist movement] is only half of a revolution" (Elkind, 1995:34). Women, now often carrying out dual roles, are often left feeling as if they cannot devote themselves fully to either domain as the roles interfere with one another (Greenhaus et. al., 1987 as cited by Lee, Duxbury, & Higgins, 1994).

⁷ Women are participating more in the labour force than in previous times however they continue "to fill the demand for women's jobs like teaching and nursing" and continue to "enter occupations in response to shortages in the labour supply" (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1994:32-33). These "pink-collar" jobs are generally low-paid positions (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1994:42).

The role of mother clearly changes throughout time⁸. The previous examples have illustrated how very differently the nature of mothering has been defined throughout history. However, history alone is not enough to understand how truly dynamic and diverse the role of mothering can be. Mothering was very different in the seventeenth century for Euro-American immigrants, Native Americans, and African American slaves (Apple & Golden, 1997:XIV). Cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds are also integral to consider when examining what it is to be a mother. Many interesting differences may exist among mothers from a variety of cultural backgrounds. For example, one respondent explained that, "Latin mothers are very affectionate especially by touch you know" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Another respondent said that a large part of a First Nations mother's role is to share "the teachings" with her children (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999).

Culture, Ethnicity and Religion

The role of mothering varies across cultures. For example, "many black women have grown up with multigenerational models of mothers. Mothering [in the Black community] is usually not an isolated activity but is shared with others - multiple mothers" (Jenkins in Abbey & O'Reilly, 1998:206). In contrast, "the dominant, Eurocentric culture places a high value on independence [in mothering]" (Fraktman in Garcia Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998:90). However, it is also important to keep in mind that the way mothers of a common cultural background, ethnicity, or religion view and undertake their role may have as many differences as similarities.

⁸ This statement refers predominantly to the middle class. In current times, upper class children continue to be raised by nannies and/or sent to boarding schools. Children from lower income families may also have limited time with their mothers, who may have to work at several jobs.

In some cultures, mothers may be more alike than in others. For example, as Herberg explains in her book, Frameworks for Cultural and Racial Diversity, high context cultures⁹ provide their members with rich guidance in regards to appropriate behaviours, values and so on. In contrast, low context cultures¹⁰ do not offer many guidelines for carrying out particular roles. Members of low context cultures decide most things for themselves, including how to carry out any particular role. These individuals do not usually have to consider their family and/or cultural expectations to the same degree as those belonging to high context cultures. (Herberg, 1993:39). According to Herberg, the duties and expectations of mothers are more well defined in high context cultures. For example, among high context groups such as the Islamic and Jewish cultures, mothering is viewed as a woman's greatest responsibility. This may not be as consistently the case among low context groups (Birns & Hay, 1988:113; Herberg, 1993:39).

The Muslim religion and the teachings of Islam are more than a religion. They are “embedded in the very laws of the society, affecting notions of family and of property and describing how to deal with people who deviate from the mainstream” (Birns & Hay, 1988:111). The Muslim religion regulates women's rights and duties (Birns & Hay, 1988:111) and because of this lack of power and control in other areas of life, many observant Muslim mothers focus all of their attention, emotions, and love on their children (Birns & Hay, 1988:113). Often the result is mothers who are “overly possessive and affectionate, other times virtually abusive” (Birns & Hay, 1988:113).

⁹ The concept of “contexting” was coined by Edward T. Hall many years ago. “For high context cultures social life is coterminous with the network of kinship relationships. Messages are embedded in the network and do not need to be articulated” (Herberg, 1993:28).

Similarly, there is much emphasis in the Jewish religion on being a mother. According to religious scriptures, one is not considered a complete person without a family. The scriptures emphasize that women and men should "be fruitful and multiply" (Herzberg, 1961:25). Jewish women are very often socialized to be mothers, and also to be a very certain type of mother. A perfect Jewish woman is "clear, patient, hardworking, and silent, submissive to God and to her husband, devoted to her children . . . her own well being [is] unimportant" (Zborowski and Herzog, 1952 as cited by Herberg, 1993:40). It also seems that many Jewish mothers are socialized to be "overprotective" (Coser, 1992 as cited by Lopata, 1994:66). Lopata, author of Circles and Settings: Role Changes of American Women, interprets the stereotype of the "overprotective Jewish mother" as anti-Semitic (Lopata, 1994:66), but having been cared for by a Jewish mother and two Jewish grandmothers throughout my life, I must say that it seems to me this stereotype is grounded in the realities of day-to-day routines and relationships. Rather than dwelling on the accuracy or non-political correctness of this stereotype it is more useful to consider where this tendency for overprotectiveness among Jewish mothers may have originated from, if it does in fact exist.

It is helpful to understand the family as a multigenerational system (Freeman, 1992) and that this stereotype did not always exist. Before World War II Jewish mothers were portrayed as "wholly dedicated to the needs of others, [and] self-denying. . . The mother . . . was the emotional, if not the economic, backbone of the family" (Thurer, 1994:229). How did it come to be that at the middle of the century she became viewed in an entirely different light, as "gossipy . . .and overprotective" with an "uncanny ability to

¹⁰ "Low context culture. . . does not rely on personal kinship but rather on professional credentials, individually earned, and the context of each relationship must be defined" (Herberg, 1993:28).

cultivate guilt" (Thurer, 1994:269)? "Women's mothering is reproduced across generations" (Chodorow, 1978:3). A woman often learns how to mother from her mother. Her mother learned from her mother and so on. The skills and nuances associated with mothering are passed down from generation to generation. Only one, possibly two, generation(s) of Jewish mothers was/were affected directly by the holocaust, however perhaps the anxiety this unique set of historical circumstances created an impact on the next generations of Jewish mothers as well. One generation learned to be overprotective¹¹ of their children because lives were at stake. The next generations likely learned from their mothers to be overprotective of their children as well (Freeman, 1992:14). Thus, there are many overprotective Jewish mothers today. However, to reiterate an earlier point, there is likely nearly as much diversity within any cultural group as there is within the population at large. Clearly, not all Jewish mothers are overprotective.

Mothers within a given cultural group and within the population at large are as diverse as they are similar. However, information regarding the large variation among mothers in Canadian society is only beginning to become accessible. Current literature indicates that "we know far too little about Native American mothers, lesbian mothers¹²,

¹¹ Perhaps the term 'properly protective' would better describe these mothers.

¹² Two chapters within books have been located regarding the experiences of lesbian mothers. Please refer to Katherine Arnup's piece, "Does the word lesbian mean anything to you? Lesbians raising daughters" in the book, Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns, edited by Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly (1998). Also, refer to "Yes, I am a swan: Reflections on families headed by lesbians and gay men" by Laura Benkov in the book, Mothering Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers, edited by Cynthia Garcia Coll, Janet Surrey and Kathy Weingarten (1998). In this chapter, it is pointed out that "many lesbian couples raising children may struggle over how to share parenting responsibilities. . . Often women in these situations discover that the very family they have consciously created contradicts their own deeply held view of mothers as singular, all powerful, and all important to a child" (p.123).

adoptive mothers¹³, foster mothers, stepmothers, rural mothers, and mothers of many different ethnic and immigrant groups¹⁴” (Apple & Golden, 1997:XVII). As more information is uncovered regarding the variation in the roles of mother, social workers, teachers, nurses, psychiatrists and other professionals working with the motherless may gain a more insightful understanding about what a person really loses when his or her mother dies.

SUMMARY

This chapter has attempted to answer the question, “what is a mother?”. As expected, no one definition is sufficient to describe this intricate and emotionally laden word. Research findings suggest however, that after a mother’s death many other people help fill the void through their nurturing and caring ways. While most respondents felt that this void was best filled by another woman, one female interviewee believed that her father was the closest thing she had to a mother after her loss. Respondents agreed that a variety of other people could carry out the mother role, but of course these individuals could not replace their own mothers entirely. One’s own mother is irreplaceable. Her presence is deeply missed.

In order to gain a better understanding of what a motherless child lives without, the duties, traits, and experiences associated with mothering were explored. A traditional view of ‘mother work’ was considered as was the diversity that exists among women who

¹³ Betsy Smith, Janet Surrey and Marry Watkins have written a chapter titled, “ ‘Real’ mothers: Adoptive mothers resisting marginalization and re-creating motherhood” in the book, Mothering Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers, edited by Cynthia Garcia Coll, Janet Surrey and Kathy Weingarten (1998).

¹⁴ Refer to the books Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns, edited by Sharon Abbey & Andrea O’Reilly (1998) and Mothering Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers by Cynthia Garcia Coll, Janet Surrey and Kathy Weingarten (1998) for various works relating to motherhood among immigrant women and women of various cultural backgrounds.

are mothers. A review of the literature, and interviews, suggests that one of the most universal truths about mothers is that they are “nurturers”. However, even this is not true of all mothers. A brief look at other historical times and cultures was used to illustrate how diverse mothers actually are.

CHAPTER THREE

ABOUT COPING

*A child can live through anything;
so long as he or she is told the truth
and is allowed to share with loved ones
the natural feelings people have when
they are suffering (LeShan, 1976:3).*

Baba called me this afternoon. She was cleaning their apartment and came across a box of mementoes. In this box she found an essay I had written in the eighth grade, only a couple of years after my mother had died. The title of the essay was “Disillusionment” and it was a description of the deep sadness I felt the first Channukah without my mother. I had completely forgotten about that piece of writing, but I guess I had given it to my grandmother because it was a way of letting her know what I was feeling without actually having to say the words. Baba started reading the words I had written aloud, and I cut her off laughing, “Don’t read that to me, it’s embarrassing”. She answered with great pride, “Your words are beautiful because they are honest”.

She noticed the discomfort in my voice and changed the topic. She began recounting her daily events to me and my thoughts traveled back to the time I had written that essay for English class. I remembered the day Mrs. Wellington announced the assignment. We were to write about the experience of being “disillusioned”. She encouraged the class to share a situation or event that truly mattered to us and she asked us to write about this situation “from the heart”. I remembered coming home that

evening and sitting down to write. I remembered how easy it was to write that essay and how much I needed to write it. I needed to somehow put all the messy feelings inside my heart into words. As the words poured out of my heart and onto the page, I cried. It was probably the first time I cried since my mom had died. It was the first time my feelings became real. It was the first time I admitted to my great sadness.

“And then we stopped at the vegetable store and I bought two tomatoes and one cucumber and then we came home and now I’m going to make Zaida a steak for dinner because he didn’t have lunch today...only a muffin”, Baba finished telling me about their day and we said good-bye. When I got off the phone I sat still, almost paralyzed, and began thinking. In speaking with other motherless children over the past month I had heard a great deal about their coping mechanisms, but I had not once considered my own. It occurred to me that writing helped me through this experience. There was a time when I could not, and did not want to, talk about my mother’s death. When I discovered writing as a cathartic yet safe way to express and to learn about my feelings, I used it to help me cope with my loss.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO COPE WITH MOTHER DEATH?

What must be coped with or managed when a mother dies? There are numerous things a young person must cope with in the face of this tragic loss. First, the child must cope with the loss of his or her mother’s presence. No longer can the sound of her voice be heard, the touch of her hand be felt, or her facial expressions be seen. Second, he or she must cope with the knowledge that his or her mother died and that

dying probably brought her physical and/or emotional pain. Furthermore, the child's empathy for his or her mother may result in thoughts and fears regarding his or her own potential fate. Third, the young person must cope with the intense feelings that the death, and a variety of secondary losses related to the death, have generated.

What Is Coping?

A bereaved individual must cope with many thoughts, and feelings simultaneously. The dictionary offers only one explanation of coping. To cope is to "deal with and attempt to overcome problems and difficulties" (Merriam-Webster, 1985:288). Yet, when it comes to grieving, there are actually different levels of coping and different reasons that individuals participate in coping behaviours. On one level, coping is a cognitive experience. It allows the individual to reframe, synthesize, and better understand the death and his or her loss. For example, the process of writing or talking about my mother's death assisted me in understanding how this experience changed my life and my personality. In short, these coping strategies helped me sort things out. On another level however, coping strategies fulfill emotional needs. I also wrote and talked about my loss to "get it out of my system". Expelling the pain and sadness which builds up inside can be cathartic. In fact, it is widely believed that if one does not do this early on, and regularly, he or she will eventually suffer negative consequences (Schneiderman, 1979:73; Hurd, 1999:34; Rando, 1984 in Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:133; Weinberg, 1985:115; Murphy, 1986:219). This notion is a very popular one. However, as will be touched on in this chapter and described in further detail in chapters six, it may not necessarily be an accurate assumption, especially in

the case of many males. It seems that many individuals, particularly boys and men, may find coping strategies such as denial, avoidance, and keeping busy more natural and comfortable than forms of coping which emphasize grief work, such as talking, crying, or writing (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Factors Influencing Coping Styles

Every child who experiences a great loss copes differently. Many factors influence a young person's coping style and coping mechanisms. For example personality, age¹, ethnicity, religion, and gender may all play a critical role. However, it has been suggested by some writers that the most significant factors influencing a child's coping mechanisms is who and/or what he or she has lost. The role that the deceased played in the child's life is thought to be influential in the coping process (Kastenbaum, 1977 in Pope, 1991:27). Baker and Sedney further explain that "to understand a child's reactions to bereavement and loss, the first question to ask is: what has the child lost?" A child's reactions will vary greatly depending on the answer to this question² (Furman in Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:109). Understanding the missing relationship in the child's life can be very helpful in learning about the ways

¹ The age and developmental level of the child at the time of the death, and throughout his or her years of mourning, will play a significant role in the ways he or she copes. For example, young children may be more likely to convey their sadness by losing bladder control or their appetites, and by curtailing their talking and walking (Schneiderman, 1979:62). Older children are more likely to displace their feelings of loss onto someone or something else and to transfer their needs on to the nearest available adult (Edelman, 1994:37). Adolescents may be more likely to turn to friends for advice, support, and companionship after their loss (Schneiderman, 1979:68). It is also important to note that children of the same age are not necessarily of the same developmental and emotional level (Hersh in Doka, 1995:90). Refer to Coping with Death in the Family by Gerald Schneiderman (1979) (pp.61-69); Motherless Daughters by Hope Edelman (1994) (pp.26-54); Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies by William Worden (1996) (pp.87-90); Stephen Hersh in Kenneth Doka's book, Children Mourning, Mourning Children (1995) (p.90) and many others for in depth discussions of this topic.

he or she will cope. In a general sense, when a child loses his or her mother he or she is losing “a personally meaningful relationship”(Baker & Sedney, 1996:110). The child will miss the company of someone he or she cared about. The motherless child also loses an “attachment figure”(Baker & Sedney, 1996:110) with whom he or she identified, and who nurtured him or her physically and emotionally, attended to his or her needs, and who served as a source of security and protection (Baker & Sedney, 1996:110). Furthermore, the young person will also experience many “secondary losses” (Baker & Sedney, 1996:110) such as changes in home, in school, in daily routines, and in his or her care as a result of mother death (Baker & Sedney, 1996:109).

Respondents’ talk illustrates that a wide range of coping mechanisms can be used to help bereaved children deal with mother loss. Respondents described some of their coping strategies as very helpful and effective and others as less effective and even harmful³. In the following sections, I will outline the coping mechanisms that the six motherless children I interviewed talked about. I will begin by discussing the common themes that emerged. The first theme to be examined is the tendency noted among interviewees to deny or avoid the reality of their loss. As will be noted, this can be viewed as both an adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanism. A discussion exploring the usefulness of talking, a second theme, will follow. While a majority of respondents were not able to talk about their loss as much as they would have liked, they generally

² Chapter two explored various roles a mother may play in her child’s life. In chapter four this question is further addressed. Respondents describe what it is they miss most about their mothers.

³ These are labeled adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies in the literature (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:198).

agreed it would have been very helpful to talk about their mother and her death more. Interviewees' reasons for not talking about their loss as much as they would have liked and some effects of this silence are also described in this chapter. Other common themes relating to coping mechanisms discussed by interviewees include turning to role models; culture, religion, and spirituality; friends; humour; and aggression. This chapter concludes by emphasizing that in addition to the commonalties among respondents in this area, much diversity also exists in the ways they described coping with mother loss.

DENIAL/AVOIDANCE

The literature indicates that people who experience bereavement early in life frequently use a "denial through distancing" strategy for dealing with death (Taylor, 1983:80). Motherless children are "laced with the defense of denial" (Altschul, 1968 in Solomon & Hersch, 1979:43). In other words, they are likely to detach themselves from the reality of their mother's death in a variety of ways. While the literature indicates that bereaved young people are more likely to cope by distracting themselves and by denying the loss (Sekaer, 1987:201), denial, escape, and avoidance are also some common ways that people of all ages deal with the death of a loved one (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stephenson suggests that in North American society little interest is placed on how a child is feeling. Rather, the focus is on socializing the child to accept society's norms which include suppression of these feelings. Grief becomes something to master (Stephenson, 1985:145). This tends to be particularly true for boys (Thompson in Field, Hockey & Small, 1997:77).

Grief work is often defined as a “cognitive process of confronting a loss, of going over the events before and at the time of death, of focusing on memories and working toward detachment from the deceased” (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:199). Stroebe and Schut object to such a coping strategy which implies active, ongoing, effortful attempts to bring the reality of loss into one’s awareness as much as possible and which encourages “coming to terms” with the death (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:199). Such a strategy, these writers explain, views any form of suppression as pathological and as detrimental to health (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:202). In their “dual process model of coping” Stroebe and Schut insightfully point out that denial and avoidance are natural components of the grieving process, for all people but particularly for males. These writers emphasize that denial and avoidance can be adaptive and are even necessary at times. Their model proposes that healthy coping is composed of both confrontation and avoidance and that taking respite is an integral part of adaptive coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:197).

Other writers in the field of coping and bereavement have pointed out that avoidance and denial may be problematic. A study by Copeland and Forsyth titled “Childhood bereavement and adult well-being” found that if children were unable to participate in mourning behaviours they were more likely to experience loneliness as adults (Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:106). In fact, it has been suggested by many researchers and clinicians that when a bereaved child does not confront the death, he or she may be more likely to experience a variety of life-long problems (Rando, 1984 in Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:133; Weinberg, 1985:115; Murphy, 1986:219). Murphy

suggests that often what is most problematic for the bereaved child is “the lack of participation in the mourning process or grief work” (Murphy, 1986:219). There exists a popular notion in the bereavement literature that one “has to do one’s grief work” (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:197) and that denial and avoidance are maladaptive behaviours.

Much of the literature also speaks of denial and avoidance as though they are the same. Richard Kalish points out in his book, Death, Grief, and Caring Relationships, that while many people confuse denial with avoidance, they are actually two distinct concepts that arise from two different types of practices. Denial might take the form of keeping the dead person’s things untouched, continuing to engage in daily routines as if the dead person were present and so on. Avoidance, on the other hand, might mean deciding not to go to a funeral, to visit a cemetery, or to talk about the dead person. Denial, Kalish points out, is “an unconscious defense mechanism whereby the truth of certain thoughts, feelings, or wishes is disavowed because of its painful or threatening nature” (Goldenberg, 1977 as cited in Kalish, 1981:76). People may avoid talking about death and dying but they are generally not actually denying its existence (Kalish, 1981:76). Kalish further explains that although our culture does exclude death in some instances through the use of euphemisms or by removing dead patients from their hospital rooms without telling their roommates why, we are actually quite accepting of death in other ways. For example, cemeteries can be viewed from the street and are open to the public and obituaries are a standard section in our newspapers (Kalish,

1981:77). However, if and when denial of death does occur in our culture, it is probably because it is too stressful to contemplate (Kalish, 1981:77).

Denial of a death, or pretending it has not happened, occurs when the pain and confusion which has resulted from the loss becomes too difficult (LaTour, 1983 as cited in Pope, 1991:33). For a young person, the death of a loved one is often an especially stressful experience. It is an experience which is so painful that for some young people denial can be the only way to cope. For example, one of my respondents told me that he denied his entire loss experience:

Ummm, well the thing I did was I really forgot about her. I sort of erased the memory that I ever had a mother. I did this pretty much for almost ten years or something. I still pretty much do this but I think it's a little... well it's a little different now but it's pretty much still the same. I just forgot about it really because she couldn't...she wasn't there so there's no point in thinking about it so I just pretended that it didn't exist. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Avoidance was as common a theme noted throughout the interviews as was denial. However, respondents avoided confronting their loss in a variety of ways. For example, some respondents avoided dealing with the reality by keeping themselves very busy. Craig explained, "also for a while I watched a lot of movies. . .So I watched movies all the time so I didn't think about things as bad I guess" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor's strategy was similar, he said "I pretty much made myself as busy as possible" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Other respondents avoided by ignoring what was happening. The following quote is an example of how Julie and her family avoided an unpleasant reality when they learned that her mother had a very serious and inoperable form of lung cancer:

It was just sort of everybody pretending it wasn't really happening that's what I remember. . . We were told by my dad because my mom was still in the hospital when we got the news. Then she came home and nobody really knew what to say so we all just really kind of ignored it. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

For many bereaved children avoidance and denial occur for reasons beyond their control. Avoidance and denial are perhaps instinctive parts of grieving and are not consciously chosen by bereaved individuals as coping mechanisms. For example, Victor told me that, "I think too around the period when she died...I don't remember a lot of it. I think I kind of blocked it out" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). For Victor, avoidance was not conscious. Other bereaved children do not choose to avoid reality, but instead have this coping strategy chosen for them by the adults in their lives. For example, one respondent explained that her family taught her to avoid and deny her loss. Anna told me that the adults in her life believed that she and one of her sisters were too young to be exposed to death and to be near their dying mother. She said, "I remember that we were tucked away from the reality of it all" (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999).

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Young children are often tucked away from the reality of it all. However, they are not the only ones. People of all ages may have a tendency to stay far removed from death, especially if it is not their loved one who is dying or who has died. The North American societal tendency to understand bereavement as a private experience has resulted in a "social pathology of mourning" (Montalvo, 1984 in Rosen, 1986:7). We very often hesitate to discuss death or the deceased, as we want to respect a grieving

individual's need for privacy (Rosen, 1986:7). In our culture, people are generally taught to hide grief as much as possible. Canada has been described as a "death-denying" culture (DeSpelder & Strickland, 1982:19).

Our country is also made up of people from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. People from different cultures view death in very different ways, and these differences may influence an individual's grieving process. For example, I am Canadian and Jewish. While my participation and socialization in a secular world has resulted in an uneasiness to discuss death, I have found my religious background helpful in that it provides specific times when it is considered appropriate to express one's grief. The Jewish religion places emphasis on adequately grieving one's loss, especially in the first year. A prayer called the "Kaddish" is said every day during the first year after the burial of a parent to assist the mourner in re-establishing his or her faith in God (Moss in Gerber et. al., 1979:174). The "Kaddish" does not speak of sorrow or loss but rather of duty to God and to the living (Jung in Riemer, 1975:162). As Jung writes in The Meaning of the Kaddish, "[even] the most faithless Jew, he who has driven godliness from his [or her] life . . . will [find some magic in the Kaddish]" (Jung in Riemer, 1975:160). After the first year, Judaism continues to allocate a series of ceremonies throughout the year for "Yiskor" and "Yorzeit" services, which honour the memory of dead Jews, and acknowledge the pain of family and friends. Nevertheless, in many ways even Jewish traditions have perpetuated a mistaken belief within me that I need to grieve alone. The seven day Jewish period of mourning called "Shivah", a ritual that is intended to provide support to the mourning

family, may not always provide adequate social support (Rosen, 1986:7). I remember my aunt and I discussing how odd it was that when we “sat Shivah” for my mother very few people reminisced about her or expressed their deep pain and sadness:

While it is true that the Shivah still serves its traditional function of drawing the family together at a time of bereavement, there is a tendency for it to be used as a distraction from grief rather than as an occasion for its expression. Conversation with the bereaved person often takes the form of neutral chat and the expression of overt emotion is avoided, as it is in other “public” situations. (Parkes, 1972 in Rosen, 1986:7)

The literature indicates that other cultures acknowledge and speak of death more openly. Many South Asians, for example, accept death as part of life. Among Hindus, death is just another phase in the endless cycle of rebirths (Monk, Hofheinz, Lawrence, Staney, Affleck, & Yamamori, 1973:165) and is openly discussed by all, including children (Waxler, Morrison, & Anderson, 1990:177). Among the Amish people, a community of conservative Protestants, death is viewed in a similar manner, as a natural part of the life cycle. Preparing for one’s death and caring for those who are dying seems to be accepted with relative ease. To demonstrate how accepted death is among this group, Kalish gives the example of an Amish grandmother who “carefully washed, starched, and ironed her own funeral clothing [every month] so that it would be in readiness for her death” (Bryer, 1979:257 in Kalish, 1981:116). While some cultures are very open about death, others do not talk about it at all. For example, for Iranians, death and the dead person are not discussed for fear of upsetting close family members (Waxler, Morrison, & Anderson, 1990:112). Among the Japanese, rituals are actually performed to counteract “the essential pollution associated with death” (Waxler, Morrison, & Anderson, 1990:139). It is important to note, that in the same

way as it is unfair to assume that all Canadians are “death denying”, it is also problematic to assume that people belonging to any of these other cultural groups will all share a common philosophy on death. “Feelings and attitudes toward death, like all feelings and attitudes, vary considerably from person to person - even among individuals who have extremely similar backgrounds” (Kalish, 1981:78).

It is not only one’s nationality, ethnicity, or religion that makes a person accepting or non accepting, verbal or silent, about his or her loss but it is also the unique type of loss that he or she has experienced. As Hatter points out, “until recently, it was difficult, if not impossible. . . to publish a storybook for children that tells the story of a child whose mother. . . has died” (Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:131). Similarly, Hope Edelman explains, “we may have broken the silence surrounding sex, homosexuality, and menopause, but mother loss is still treated as taboo” (Edelman, 1994:XXIII).

I knew, even as a child, that my mother’s death was not a subject for conversation. Growing up I occasionally heard other kids talk about the death of a grandparent or of a pet. Listeners always seemed uncomfortably sympathetic. While any death tends to be an awkward topic for conversation, these deaths are generally understood as a natural part of the life cycle. Speaking of a mother’s death on the other hand is different. Most people in contemporary Canadian culture assume that a mother of young children will not die. Talking about it bothers and upsets people a great deal. One often feels that it is better to say nothing.

For many years I believed not talking about my mother or her death was the most comfortable approach for me and for the other people in my life. In not wanting to make myself or others feel uncomfortable, I was not saying many of the things I wanted and needed to say. In talking with interviewees I found that these feelings were shared by other motherless people. Many respondents explained that they were subtly taught the ethos of “silent suffering” and “keeping a stiff upper lip”⁴. Unfortunately, this approach may not be conducive to healing. While a child who does not want to talk about the death of his or her mother should not be coerced or forced, the majority of the literature stresses the usefulness of talking⁵. It is important for a bereaved child to feel that it is safe and acceptable to share his or her feelings. As Elizabeth Comack points out in her book, Women in Trouble, talking may be an extremely important form of grief work (Comack, 1996:59). Comack explains that, “to be able to heal. . .the silence. . . must be broken. . . and the social censure around the telling of stories. . . must also be addressed” (Comack, 1996:59). As one participant in my research explained, “a child who has lost her mother [is] looking for somebody to speak to and for someone who will be tender in hearing what [he or she] has to say” (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999).

Are Females Able to Express Grief More Openly Than Males?

In her book, Men & Grief: A Guide for Men Surviving the Death of a Loved One, Staudacher explains that traditional gender expectations allow girls and women to

⁴ The ethos of silence has been addressed by Rosen in his chapter, “The family as healing resource” (Rosen in Corr & Corr, 1996:226).

show their grief and speak of it more openly (Staudacher, 1991:8). Thompson similarly suggests, that a “division of emotional labour” within western society insists femininity requires intuitive emotional expressiveness (Thompson in Field, Hockey & Small, 1997:90). A girl or woman's grief is generally more evident, as societal rules make it more acceptable for females to show their pain and to undergo a more overt and intense period of grief (Staudacher, 1991:8). Meshot and Leitner support this finding. They note in their study “Adolescent mourning and parental death” that women reported a higher degree of overt mourning accompanied by crying than did men (Meshot & Leitner, 1993:287). Due to their ability to express grief openly, women are more apt to seek, receive, and accept social support. While society might view females as the more intense grievers, in reality, their process may be aided by their grieving style.

Male grieving is also socially constructed. Males may be more likely to repress emotions connected with their loss as they live up to the traits of independence and “emotional toughness”. Masculinity is thought to require emotional control (Hockey in Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997:90). While gender expectations allow men to express certain emotions like anger, aggression, or joy (at success at a sporting event for example), men are not encouraged to cry, as is described in the well know phrase ‘big boys don’t cry’ (Thompson in Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997:77). They may often appear to be doing fine, and so they may be less likely to receive the type of emotional support they require (Staudacher, 1991:8). Males are socialized to be strong, controlling, self-sufficient and to deny their sorrow. These characteristics work against

⁵ Chapter six addresses this issue in further detail and also emphasizes the importance of accepting and encouraging individuals’ natural grieving styles which may or may not include talking and other forms of grief work.

the open expression of grief (Sanders in Doka, 1995:78). In addition, 'good grieving' is often understood as the open expression of emotion. Such models tend to pathologize the more stereotypical male grieving patterns (Doka, 1989 as mentioned in Thompson in Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997:76)⁶.

Existing studies in this area indicate that the different socialization of males and females results in female children being more easily able to discuss fears with loved ones, and thus to be comforted more easily than male children (Stillion in Adams & Deveau, 1995:34). In their study, "Children's reactions in the early months after the death of a parent", Silverman and Worden found that there were significant differences in the ways girls and boys expressed their feelings of grief and that these differences related to the social reinforcement they received (Silverman & Worden, 1992 in Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:140). They found that girls are more likely than boys to share their feelings about the death with family and friends. Boys, on the other hand, were more likely to be encouraged to contain their feelings, and were also less comfortable with their feelings and in expressing them (Silverman & Worden, 1993 in Moss, Resch, & Moss, 1997:47). Other researchers have also noted that boys find it more difficult expressing feelings and needs regarding their loss (Attig in Adams & Deveau, 1995:43) and that gender greatly influences a young person's ability to express grief (Kranzler, Shaffer, Wasserman & Davies, 1990 in Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:107).

Evidence also exists suggesting that, for one reason or another, males seem to demonstrate greater difficulty adapting to the death of a parent. A study by Beck, Sethi, and Tuthill, "Childhood bereavement and adult depression" found that 37.8% of

⁶ This concept will be explored further in chapter six.

institutionalized men and 25.4% of institutionalized women who were diagnosed as being depressed had lost a parent before the age of sixteen (Beck, Sethi, & Tuthill, 1963 in Stillion in Adams & Deveau, 1995:34). Stillion explains that this preliminary evidence, though weak and unreplicated, may signify that male socialization results in them coping less well with death (Stillion in Adams & Deveau, 1995:34). Another study of college students who experienced the death of a parent early in life indicates that males showed more signs of disturbance than both men and women who had not lost a parent to death. Less extreme signs were seen in women who lost a parent early on; however they demonstrated more signs of disturbance than those who had not experienced the loss (Dietrich, 1979 in Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:124). In addition, a study by Kransler, Shaffer, Wasserman and Davies titled "Early Childhood bereavement" found that near the time of their loss bereaved boys were more vulnerable than bereaved girls to behavioural disturbances such as disruptive behaviour, depression, and anxiety. Three to four year-old boys were the most symptomatic group and they were also the least able to discuss their feelings of sadness with adult family members (Kransler, Shaffer, Wasserman & Davies, 1989:518). In addition, children who lose the same-gender parent are more likely to receive attention and support for their loss (Worden, 1996:92). This finding coupled with the belief that females are generally more expressive indicates that sons may receive significantly less support than daughters when a mother dies.

Women Can Also Be Silent

It has also been argued that while gender differences may be very real, males and females are actually more alike than different. Stillion stresses the concept of the "overlapping normal curve" to illustrate this point (Stillion, 1985:141). In many cases,

women also have great difficulty expressing grief. While “boys may find it difficult to show feelings or express needs that are thought to be incompatible with male independence or macho toughness, girls may also feel uncomfortable in allowing others to see them upset or crying (Attig in Adams & Deveau, 1995:54). As one female interviewee explained, “I remembered what I suffered and what I went through not having a parent, you know you’ve lost a parent and you’re all by yourself and you can’t tell anybody” (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999). Hockey, Field, and Small, in their book, Death, Gender, and Ethnicity, point out that in many instances, women are as emotionally inexpressive about their grief as men:

Women, like men, are susceptible to the requirement that nothing more than a limited set of clues as to the presence of grief should be manifested in public. The evidence for an emotional division of labour as an explanation for the prominence of women in representations of grief is therefore less straightforward than it might at first glance, appear. (Hockey in Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997:92)

Another interviewee, also wondered how much gender really had to do with one’s way of expressing and coping with grief:

Yah, I don’t know. I really don’t. I think it is so individual. I know I can judge it with my sister but I don’t know if it is just because it’s me and my sister and not gender related ummmm...I’m not sure if gender...if different genders have specific ways of coping with things...I’m not sure. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Is Talking Important for Everyone?

Russell Hurd found in his study, “Adults view their childhood bereavement experiences” that being able to talk with loved ones about the death of a parent is helpful for a young person as he or she learns to cope with the loss:

Children will be much more likely to resolve their grief in healthy ways during childhood with a reduced likelihood of later depression if they. . . experience strong emotional support from the surviving parent after the death occurs [and] if they are included in family conversations about the death and are consulted during decision making about the family's future. (Hurd, 1999:34)

Children of families that are open and talk to one another about their feelings are thought to have “the greatest opportunity to assimilate the sadness of grief without becoming overwhelmed with fear” (Sanders in Doka, 1995:72). A consistent adult who is able to assist the child in expressing his or her feelings of loss is a significant factor in determining how the young person will cope in the long-term (Worden, 1996:17). In his book, Coping With Death in the Family, Schneiderman also suggests that if young people do not have the opportunity to talk about their loss and show their pain, “they may develop serious personality problems later in life” (Schneiderman, 1979:73). Furthermore, Nancy Weinberg in her empirical study of health care social workers' role in facilitating grief work, found that the most useful activities social workers can provide to young people who have experienced a loss are talking with them about their emotions and talking with them about the loss itself (Weinberg, 1985:115). Talking is considered useful because it helps the grieving individual accept his or her emotions and because it encourages remembering the deceased (Lindemann, 1979 in Weinberg, 1985:115).

Interviewees said that they were generally silenced about their losses. Two respondents very clearly stated that they did not have adequate opportunity to talk about their loss or pain with anyone. Three respondents said they have had people with whom they could discuss their loss throughout the years, although they could not talk

about it with many of the “the important people” (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). The remaining respondent suggested that talking as a form of grief work is important for some people some of the time but that it is important to keep in mind that for other people at other times different outlets may be equally or more meaningful. When I asked this respondent if he was encouraged to talk about or to be silent about his loss this was his response:

A lot of elders came and they talked to us and said these are the things you should and shouldn't do. There were certain times when we were allowed to mourn and certain times that we weren't. We were encouraged from a lot of elders, even from my own dad. They encouraged us to deal with it in whatever way we needed to deal with it. I just found ways to deal with it. Singing was one. There's so many ways that I kind of dealt with what happened. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

For Andy, singing was a healthy and cathartic way to deal with his loss. Singing allowed him to express his pain and all of the other emotions that he felt. Andy further explained that, “everybody has their own experiences and everyone has their own path that they have to follow” (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). As other respondents' answers reinforced my belief of how important talking is, Andy's words reminded me that while talking may be very meaningful for some people, all bereaved individuals are unique. All motherless children do not need or want the same things as they grieve. Other coping methods will be discussed further in the following sections of this chapter. However, talking will be explored first in more detail as the other respondents did feel that it is quite consequential in the grieving and healing processes. Stephanie, for example, spoke of how much it meant to her that she could talk with her sisters and grandparents about the loss they shared:

I talked to my sisters about it and they're pretty much the best outlet for me. My grandmother, my mom's mother, she'll talk about my mom a lot. My grandfather used to carry a picture of her around in his purse. He didn't have anybody else's picture but he had hers and so he used to talk about her a lot. He passed away...about four years ago I guess now. And you know, those are the people that I could really talk to...mostly my sisters though because we're so close we can talk about anything. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

When You Can't Talk With Dad

Stephanie could talk with her sisters and her grandparents about her loss. At the same time, she told me that she and her sisters missed being able to speak to their father about their mother and her death. There have been two major barriers holding Stephanie and her sisters back from talking with their dad about their mother throughout the years since their loss. The first is the presence of their stepmom:

But see that's the thing I find it hard with my dad . . . and my stepmom being around. She's very resentful of my mother. So it's something very taboo in our house. We can't talk about it. When my dad . . . when we get my dad alone we can talk to him about my mom. Like my sister is pregnant right now and you know she wants to know how my mom was with pregnancy and she wants to know if my mom went through morning sickness and you know one day she had my dad alone and she was trying to talk to him and my stepmom came in and she stopped immediately. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

The literature indicates that "a step-parent has the potential to be the worst thing that ever happened to a family if [she] cannot [be supportive of] the children" and their need to reminisce about their dead parent (Schneiderman, 1979:71).

The second reason Stephanie and her sisters don't speak with their father about their loss is because they are worried about his emotional well being:

I think we've become really protective of my dad because of the problems he has had that we don't want to set him off. Like you're scared that anytime you say something it may trigger my dad and you...we just don't want to go through that again...like the breakdowns he's had and we've

seen how bad he's gotten that you don't want to add to that or make it happen again so it's really hard to talk to my dad because it's painful to see how my dad reacts to it when he talks about my mom. (Stephanie, Personal Interview 1999)

Victor felt that he could not confide in his father for similar reasons:

We have a lot of problem...we have a lot of problem talking about it. Like I have no problem talking about it with you, or with my friends, or with my wife, but I have a lot of problems talking about it. . .with my dad. We never actually really talk about it at all. I'm not sure why. It's very hurtful. I...I don't know why we went that way. Ummmm, I just knew that I didn't want to...like my dad was quite old at the time to be in a new country with three kids...to lose a wife of you know twenty years...so I couldn't burden him with me feeling bad, you know what I mean. I kind of had to deal with it. I knew that he was just not good right. He wasn't doing good at all. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Anna, another interviewee who felt she could never talk to her dad about the pain she was feeling said, "I never felt that close that I could go to my father when I was growing up because he always seemed to me as a closed person with his own grief and pain (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999). The way a father deals with his own emotional pain will greatly influence the child's loss experience. There is believed to be an association between surviving parents' capacity to cope and their ability to provide for the emotional needs of their children (Kranzler, Shaffer, Wasserman, & Davies, 1990:518)

Not being able to talk to fathers about one's loss seems to be quite a consistent finding in the literature and in this study. Fathers often become emotionally inaccessible because of their own grief (Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:128). After all, fathers are often simultaneously grieving the loss of their children's mother and of their wife. Furthermore, fathers are usually left with new responsibilities that were shared with the child's mother before she died. This added stress may also contribute to his being emotionally inaccessible to the child (Wolff, 1973:105). For these reasons, when a child

loses one parent, he or she loses the second parent in many ways too (Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:105 & Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:140). Four of the six interviewees explained that their father's grief and new stresses were barriers to his emotional availability. Interestingly, the two respondents who did not specifically mention their fathers as being someone they couldn't talk to about their loss were from families where their parents had been divorced for many years before the death occurred. Perhaps these fathers were more emotionally accessible to their children because they had fewer adaptations to make in their lives than the other men.

In addition to the presence of a stepmother, a father's own emotional grief, and new stresses, other barriers also made and continue to make it difficult for motherless children to speak with their fathers about the pain they feel. Julie shared a few of the reasons that she felt unable to talk with her dad:

My dad . . . didn't really encourage me to reminisce with him. I think he wouldn't have minded it but he didn't know how to draw me out. . . and just showing my emotions to my father and all that kind of stuff was. . . I very much kept everything bottled up. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

While the roles of mothers and fathers are perhaps more interchangeable than they once were (George & Wilding, 1972:3), interviewees' words demonstrate that in some cases men still have much difficulty speaking openly of emotions with their children. A dated study titled "Single parent fathers" indicates that "most fathers [feel] prepared to discipline or [take care of the instrumental needs of] their children but [are] less prepared for dealing with their emotional upsets" (Finkelstein Keschet & Rosenthal, 1978:15). In their "Child bereavement study", Silverman and Worden (1992) also found that "mothers tended to be more sensitive to their children's needs than were fathers" and that "men felt responsible for what happened to their children but rarely talked to them about

their feelings” (Worden, 1996:38). This study also indicated that generally speaking, children found it difficult to approach their fathers about their emotional pain (Worden, 1996:38). Silverman and Worden’s finding supports the feelings expressed by interviewees.

You Just Don’t Talk About It

One respondent told me that although she couldn’t talk with her father about her loss, it wasn’t only him she couldn’t express her feelings to. Anna confessed that she never had the opportunity to talk about her loss with anyone. There were numerous reasons for this, but she believes the most significant reason was the way society dealt with death when her mother died, over fifty five years ago:

You know in those days you didn’t sit around the kitchen table and discuss...I mean it’s sad. Nowadays you look at it very differently than you did in those days. . . When I think back to what happened in those days there was never never any discussion. Never never never any discussion within the family. . .There was nothing in those days. You didn’t have counselors. You didn’t have anybody to go to. . . I went to boarding school, with nuns and I tell you the nuns were not the type of people you could go to for comfort...they were very very strict. There was nothing, nothing that I can remember of any comfort, so there was nothing. From what I remember of when my mother died, and throughout the years, it was something that happened to you and was sad but you didn’t talk about it. So you kept all the pain inside and you did not discuss it with anybody and so you felt that great loss and it was kept inside. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Have attitudes of people in Canadian society improved with regards to talking about mother death over the last half century? The words of people who lost their mothers to death more recently, over the last decade or two, were not entirely dissimilar. For example, Julie shared feelings comparable to Anna’s. She told me that, “there was nobody who was sympathetic and who drew me out, there wasn’t that person who ever

did that” (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Interviewees gave a variety of reasons for their silence, but the bottom line was often the same. They had ‘nobody’ to go to:

I didn’t really have an adult figure that was really close because it was my mom and my dad...and obviously my dad like had so many things to deal with right. And aaah, so my dad had so many things to deal with and aaah and you know obviously me and my sister went our own ways instead of going together. I didn’t have her...and aaah so I didn’t have anybody really you know... like a lot of the friends of the family that I guess would traditionally help you out were in [our country of origin] you know...that my dad had built up over the years [there]. And aah...so I didn’t have anybody adult-like you know...to talk about it with...so I didn’t...you know...I just yah...I didn’t. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Another interviewee also could not talk about his loss with anybody:

I was probably encouraged to be silent because nobody else ever said anything. . . Well no one else wanted to talk about it so I didn’t really want to either. So that was pretty much what everyone wanted to do I guess. I’m not sure [why], maybe they all just felt really bad about everything so they didn’t talk about it. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999).

What Happens When You’re Silent For So Many Years?

Respondents’ words illustrate that many young people do not get ample opportunity to talk about their feelings. As Andy explained, this may not be important to all young people. However, it seems that more opportunities to talk, particularly with fathers, would have been meaningful to five out of six participants of this study. These individuals were able to clarify why talking is so important by telling me what they believed the effects of silence were:

Maybe if I would have talked about it, it would have been better for me in the long run so I would have felt better. But so long without thinking . . . I never dealt with anything maybe so it just sort of piled up over a lot of years. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Victor described other effects that he feels being silenced had on him and on his family:

Yah, I mean there must have been effects [of not talking about it]. I think it prolonged my healing exponentially... you know definitely. You know... yah it prolonged my healing. It separated our...my family a lot you know. Those are two things...enough to tell me that I would have liked to...you know. I wouldn't have wanted to talk to a social worker about it but I would have liked to talk to a family friend about it or something. . . The only...like my dad's sister I think would have been very helpful at the time. She was there...but you know she was only there for like two weeks. I mean she had to work too right so she had to go back [home]. Yah. I think it would have helped our whole family out had we had an outlet like that or something. But yah, I had no real avenue at all...yah. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Anna shared her understanding of how being silenced affected her throughout life. For example, she told me that she believes the pain she was never able to express as a young person influenced her communication style years later when she had her own family:

I think that not being able to discuss that with anybody was very detrimental to me, or it can be to anyone, if you're not given the chance to talk about it. If you're not able to talk about the pain with anyone...I think the pain and the grief that is kept inside have been very very bad and I'm sure to this day I still suffer. . . I think that it is very very bad to keep all of that pain inside and not be able to discuss it with anyone. I'm sure that later on it probably affected my way of communicating with my kids, my family, my husband. I'm sure it must have you know. Because if you don't have the nurturing and the closeness of a mother, and you experienced this loss and you have to keep it to yourself it is bound to affect you in your ways of dealing with family and even further than that. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

While respondents mostly spoke of the ways in which being silenced had negative effects in later life, Julie also mentioned some benefits which arose in the relationship between her and her brother as a result of the talking the two of them were able to do:

And I think in some ways my brother and I are closer in that we have something to talk about of a mutual experience. . . and so there's a bit more empathy and I think my brother sees me more as a person than his little sister because of it. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Talking for Information

Respondents told me that another reason they felt talking was important was to access information about their mother and about her death. As Julie shared, “I wanted to learn more about her as a person if that makes sense” (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Interviewees explained that they needed this information for a wide variety of reasons. They wanted to learn about their mothers for emotional and for instrumental reasons. On one level this information is desired for sentimental purposes. When someone tells me a story, any story, about my mother I feel a little bit more connected to her. For example, when Baba reminds me of the way my mother loved to eat, I feel a sense of continuity and warmth. I learn about my mother and I feel a sense of connection to her, because I too love a good meal. On another level however, this information is necessary for very practical reasons. When Baba continues by telling me stories about my mom putting weight on in her early thirties, this becomes important information to me. This provides me with insight into my future and even guides my eating patterns to some extent. For so many reasons, it is important for a motherless child to have access to information about his or her mother. Julie explained how she meets her need for more information about her mother:

My grandma was a very non-sentimental person, she doesn't reminisce, hardly at all, which is kind of rare. So, she wouldn't talk about my mom. She didn't want to reminisce about her, or about us, or about any of those things. We just kind of carried on and we just kind of coped. Now I'll ask her some questions like, “what was my mom like when she was a child?”, “what was I like when I was a child?” because she's the only one who knows those answers. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Motherless children look for answers about their mothers wherever they can. Anna, who was too young when her mother died to remember much about her, also told me that she

is still searching for information. She realizes that her older sister may be the only one who has some answers to her questions. She said, "If I go see my sister I realize now that there are some things I would like to talk about with her before she dies because she is the only one that would know about these things" (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999).

There are a variety of contexts in which a motherless child may require information about the deceased or her death in order to better cope and function throughout life. For example, in Attachment and Loss: Loss-Sadness and Depression, Bowlby emphasizes that children need to be told accurate information about a parent's death in order to understand what has happened and to cope better in the long-term (Bowlby, 1980 in Baker & Sedney, 1996:111). When this type of information is not available it can be very frustrating and very difficult for the motherless individual. Stephanie gives an example of how important information can be:

Like with my sister now...and I mean she's going through this pregnancy and she wants to know what my mom was like and she can't get that...except from my grandmother but my grandmother is older and she can't quite remember it either and she gets conflicting stories from my aunt and my grandmother. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

ROLE MODELS CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Often, the people who one would think have the greatest capacity to share information about a deceased mother are unable to share this information with the motherless child (as is the case with a grandmother who "can't quite remember" or a father who is experiencing too much grief to talk with his child about it). However, these individuals can still play a vital role throughout a child's healing process. Whether or not loved ones can provide information to the child, having someone to look up to and to count on can make a significant difference in a bereaved young

person's life. Erna Furman pointed out in "A child's parent dies: Studies in childhood bereavement" that with appropriate emotional care and support from adult role models, children are able to undergo a much healthier grieving process than those who lack support (Furman, 1974 in Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:111). Furthermore, studies illustrate that lack of positive role models after the death of a parent results in many difficulties in the long-term. For example Zall found in his study of childhood bereavement that long-term effects occurred when "bereaved participants. . . felt bereft of role models" (Zall, 1994:220).

Role models fulfill a variety of needs for the bereaved young person. They provide children with a model for grieving (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:117). They also provide encouragement and guidance in a variety of areas and assist them in formulating and reinforcing "ideas about their role in the family and society" (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:169). In addition, many daughters long for a female role model to help them learn about "being a woman"⁷.

All respondents who had caring role models said that these special people made all the difference in their lives since the time of their loss. Unfortunately, three of the six respondents felt that they had no consistent role model in their lives to help them carry on after their mother's death. In answering my question regarding role models, Victor told me that "I didn't really have any adult figure that was really close. . . I had no role model dealing with my mom's death, not that I can think of . . . I think it would stand out in my mind" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Craig also explained that "the problem is I don't think I had any role models really. Yah, I didn't really have any role models that

⁷ This topic will be covered in chapter five.

was kind of the problem, there was nobody. . . I never really had anybody really. . . There just didn't seem to be anybody that cared too much" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999).

The other three respondents felt that they did have significant role models in their lives to help them through all of the difficult times relating to their mother's death. Even though Stephanie and her sisters often could not talk about their mother or get the information they wanted and needed about her from their father, they could count on him to be a supportive role model. Stephanie said, "my dad was a big role model" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). She explained that she had her father to model grief and to teach her that it was acceptable to cry:

If there's anything I learned from my dad it's that it is O.K. to be emotional. I mean my dad watches commercials and he cries. Like most people say they've never seen their dad cry. I mean I've grown up and I've probably seen more than enough tears from my dad but I at least have that and it's something that's helped me in a lot of ways. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Julie's experience was similar. She did not necessarily have someone to talk to, but she did feel she had an important role model in her grandmother. She also felt that the special role models she came into contact with through her religious affiliation gave her strength to find positive ways of coping with her loss:

[My religious belonging] did give me a reason not to do drugs and not to be self destructive because I saw a lot of healthy people and I saw a lot of healthy people around me who had had far worse experiences happen to them so there was always that sense of "well, I'm not that bad off". (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Andy also told me about an important relationship between his cultural belonging and the role models who helped him through his most difficult times:

I remember as being younger, you know you idolize the movie stars. I idolized the movie stars and people who conformed. It kind of turned to

more cultural [after my mother's death] you know, people of my own [culture]. My own heroes are my dad, and my brother, my mom, and my grandparents. Just a lot of the teachings and a lot of the stuff they taught me. I have a lot of First Nations role models that I look up to . . . who help me cope. The list can go on and on. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

CULTURE, RELIGION, AND SPIRITUALITY

Culture, religion, and spirituality were also mentioned a great deal by interviewees. While culture, religion, and spirituality are three separate things for some people, for others they are strongly linked. Some people believe that "religion is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for spirituality" (deVeber in Adams & Deveau, 1995:296) and that "spirituality transcends religion. Some religious believers are not spiritual, and some spiritual persons reject religious beliefs" (Balk & Hogan in Adams & Deveau, 1995:63). Here, culture, religion, and spirituality will be examined together because some respondents have made connections between them. Interestingly, while much of the literature denies that young people have much sense of the spiritual world (deVeber in Adams & Deveau, 1995:302) interviewees spoke more freely and more often about spirituality than they did about culture or religion. In fact, it seems that for these respondents, a belief in the spiritual world was one of their most effective coping mechanisms near the time of their mothers' deaths and in the years since their loss.

Silverman, Nickman, and Worden researched this very issue and found that many young people are able to continue having a relationship with their deceased parent on a spiritual level. They explain that the bereaved child or youth allows a transition to

occur whereby active interaction with the parent is replaced by a more spiritual relationship. These researchers describe the various ways bereaved young people made this connection with their deceased loved one. For example, they explain that children often make an effort to locate the deceased (i.e., believe their parent is in heaven); to experience the deceased in some way (i.e., believe their parent is watching them); and reach out to the dead parent in some way (i.e., by speaking with their deceased parent) (Silverman, Nickman, & Worden, 1992:497 in Anderson Miller in Adams & Deveau, 1995:101 and in Worden, 1996:29). This continued relationship often assists the young person in coping with his or her loss (Silverman, Nickman, & Worden, 1992 in Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:146). Victor's words help to explain the new spiritual relationship that can develop between a child and his or her mother after she dies. He confided that maintaining a relationship with his mother on a spiritual level after her death is what helped him cope with his loss:

It's a stronger relationship that I have now than I would have had with her. . . I think I have a stronger relationship with her now because of the...you know...it's just completely on a spiritual level right...it is completely. Communication is much easier on that level than it is sometimes in the real world. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

However, Victor also admitted that he truly misses the normal "day to day conversations" with his mother (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999).

Many people also use spirituality, religion, or cultural values to make sense of the death of their loved one (Balk & Hogan in Adams & Deveau, 1995:64). Spirituality, religion, and culture all seemed to play a very important role in respondents' healing processes. While spirituality, religion and culture were talked

about by interviewees in a variety of contexts, the most common way these concepts were discussed was with regards to coming to terms with or understanding the death. There was a remarkable tendency for respondents to talk about their loss as though "it was meant to be". For example, in telling me about his mother's death, Victor explained that he did not blame the doctor who misdiagnosed his mother's illness even though her life could have been saved had she received better medical attention.

Rather, Victor feels that a higher power was responsible for his mother's death:

I don't believe that she died because the doctor misdiagnosed it you know what I mean...I think things are done on a different playing field you know... so I'm not bitter at the doctor. It's somebody else's doing that aaah...the work...you know what I mean...it's just the way it went. (Victor, Personal Journal, 1999)

In describing the events that led to the drowning of her mother, Stephanie also explained that she feels there must have been some element of fate or karma involved.

Like Victor, she also believes that in some way her mother's death was the doing of an inexplicable force:

It was really weird...the whole thing is just really weird because it was a rainy day like today...like a really overcast day...it was in the summer in July and we all wanted to go for a swim. That's the way my mom was you know, "The girls want to go for a swim so we're going to go for a swim." even though it was rainy and all the rest of it. And ah she couldn't swim...she never swam a stroke and she was scared of the water and...so...my aunt said, "Just wait...wait a little while...give me half an hour and I'll come with you. Don't go to the lake without me". "No, no no. The girls want to go for a swim". So she took us to the lake. It just seems like there's so many things that...it was almost meant to happen like...it's just weird. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Other respondents also experienced spiritual situations and feelings which has allowed them to better understand, accept, and cope with their untimely loss. Many

respondents explained that on a spiritual level they felt that their mothers were still there for them and that this belief made a significant difference in coping with their loss. This belief also led them to a deeper cultural or religious connection. For example Andy said, “physically the body’s dead, but spiritually she’s still here” (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). Andy believes that his mother’s death “allowed me to get more connected spiritually . . . especially with the cultural stuff” (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). He told me that these connections have helped him cope. Similarly, Julie shared a feeling of knowing that her mother lived on which likewise, led her to seek out a closer connection to her religion. She reminisced:

I remember very much the night she died being very struck with the fact that she was somewhere and just knowing that and just having it profoundly wash over me again and again of just...she’s somewhere...of just...something has lived on, and what that meant I didn’t really know but it was...it stuck with me, and her presence I knew was continuing and it was...I didn’t expect that. I had sort of anticipated her death because I knew it was coming and I thought well, I’ll be mad and I’ll be sad and I was sort of anticipating my emotions but I never expected that kind of profound spiritual awareness that came with it. So I was a Christian but I did go deeper with it. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Julie further explained that her belief in God grew stronger as she knew she would need something or someone to hold on to again one day:

Through that time as my relationship with God was developing that was a real strength to me. . .As I pursued that relationship with God that got deeper and there was more to hold on to and it was also more to hold on to because I knew my grandma would die one day, and I never actually expected her to live this long. So I was always kind of anticipating another loss of a very important person to me so I think that helped me hold on to the faith more and the person of who God is. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Respondents also explained other ways that their cultural and religious belonging and spiritual beliefs have helped them accept their loss. Andy told me about some of the First Nations teachings and how they have helped him understand his mother's death in a way that made it more meaningful to him:

The teaching is like give and take you know like my grandmother talked about that when my nephew was born. She said, "you know your mother was taken from us but you were given a nephew, you were given a son" and she just really emphasized understanding the connection between give and take and the lesson of giving and taking. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Another spiritual experience with a member of his cultural group also brought Andy a sense of security and a feeling of acceptance:

It was kind of weird because my brother, my dad, and myself were in a counseling session. There was four of us, the counselor, and the three of us we were talking about my mother's death. We were there probably for about an hour but umm the three of us went from there to where this elder was. I had never met this elder before, didn't know who she was but she recited everything that was said at that [previous] meeting and like any question or anything that we talked about at that meeting, she was like "you know your mom was there" but it was weird how she did it cause she just started talking about the [previous] meeting [we'd been at] and all the questions we had were answered and yah it just provided a feeling of acceptance. I knew that everything was going to be all right from that point. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Andy's words illustrate how very important spirituality and a sense of cultural or religious belonging can be for some people in coping with the death of their mother.

With much pride and strength he also told me that:

For the most part, my spirituality and my cultural identification which is so strong because of my mother's death...it has gotten me to where I am now. When I was fifteen turning sixteen, before my mother's death, my self-esteem was garbage. Now, I'm proud of who I am. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Being able to talk about one's loss, having role models, and having a strong religious/cultural affiliation and sense of spirituality were generally spoken of as especially helpful and even necessary coping mechanisms. Some of the other external and internal resources interviewees turned to in coping were more controversial.

LEANING ON FRIENDS

While Schneiderman insists that, "friends can give some of the things parents normally give - advice, support, and companionship" (Schneiderman, 1979:68), Anderson argues in her chapter, "Do children belong at funerals?" that "emotional support from peers is usually inadequate or unavailable" (Anderson in Adams and Deveau, 1995:166). Respondents talked about friends with ambivalence. They told me that friends could be both a great help and an inappropriate source for support. For example, while turning to friends for support was described as a great help by two respondents, one of these respondents saw both strengths and limitations in her friends' abilities to help. Julie explained that, "my friends were just incapable of really [being there]. We were all fourteen [years old] together" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie knew it was not realistic to expect her teenage friends to know exactly what to say or how to help her deal with this loss:

I think my friends didn't really know how to deal with it. They knew my mom and so they were grieving a loss as well but they were also very uncomfortable because obviously I'd suffered something huge and monumental and nobody knew what to say. So nobody said anything. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Victor similarly noted that while his friends cared about his loss, they couldn't truly relate or know how to be there for him:

Obviously your friends just have no clue what's going on. You know they're compassionate and they understand and stuff but they don't really understand you know. They're just thinking "oh thank god it isn't my mom that died". (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

The majority of respondents did not view friends as the best place to turn for support or strength. However, while Julie knew she couldn't expect friends to meet all of her needs, friends did play an important role in the way she coped:

I had a couple of friends who I'd write my feelings to and I'd talk to about missing my mom or what it meant and kind of get it out that way . . . That's what I did. I just kind of wrote to my friends and sometimes they would write back but more often than not they would just write back and write 'thanks'. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Andy was the one respondent who expressed certainty that his friends were helpful in coping with this loss. His situation was somewhat unique in that one of his friends was experiencing similar grief at the time of his loss:

My friends were I think the ones who helped me the most. One of the other guys in our group lost his dad a week after I lost my mom so the two of us you know we went through the same...the weird thing was we both went through it within the same two weeks. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

FINDING HUMOUR IN PAIN

Humour is another outlet which can be helpful in certain situations and potentially harmful in others. "The therapeutic effects of laughter include generating feelings of sharing, togetherness, and intimacy" (Cox, Deveau, & Adams in Adams & Deveau, 1995:75). Humour also encourages openness and communication (Cox, Deveau, & Adams in Adams & Deveau, 1995:76). For Julie and her brother humour

was the most comfortable way of speaking to one another about their mother and her death:

My brother and I never talked about it we just carried on and talked about other things. Once in a while we would, but we would talk about the funny things, “remember when mom did this” and we would laugh. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Julie remembers how humour was used in her family to cope with her mother’s illness before she died:

Then she started going for treatments for her chemotherapy and lost her hair and so we kind of made jokes about that and we all had a hair pulling party and things like that so there were parts of it that were fun. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Craig also used humour to cope with his loss. His need to be funny arose from a great deal of anger and led to him being critical of others:

I just thought that everybody ignored me when I needed attention so I was really mad at everybody. . . Well, I think I developed aaah I used to tell jokes and things cause I was sort of mad at everybody and at the whole system so I guess I criticized things all the time so I developed a bit of a thing for well. . . I guess I like to be a comedian because I like to criticize everybody cause they made me mad. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Turning to humour may have been a reasonably safe and adaptive way for Craig to cope with the anger he was feeling. Anger seems to be a common reaction to experiencing the death of one’s mother.

ANGER

The literature indicates that grief is sometimes disguised and expressed in anger. Some bereaved young people express their grief through anger (Black, 1978 in Worden, 1996:62). It has been suggested that feelings of abandonment may often

underlie such anger (Elizur & Kaffman, 1982 in Worden, 1996:62). When a young person has nobody with whom he or she can express his or her grief, he or she may express these feelings in more aggressive ways. When one does not have an outlet for expressing anger it may build up to the point where it is expressed in overt and perhaps even harmful ways. Boys are less likely to express their feelings through traditional forms of grief work, like talking and crying (Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997:77; Sanders in Doka, 1995:78; Stillion in Adams & Deveau, 1995:34; Silverman & Worden, 1993 in Moss, Resch, & Moss, 1997:47).

It is interesting to note that while male and female respondents expressed feeling angry for a variety of reasons related to their mother's death, the characteristics of their anger were different in certain ways. The male respondents spoke of experiencing more of a perpetual anger and expressing their anger in overt ways. Anger as an existential rage or long-term effect of early mother loss will be explored in chapter five. Here, anger will be briefly explored as a short-term coping strategy. Perhaps, anger is one way the body naturally expels and/or copes with feelings of sadness, frustration, fear, jealousy, loneliness, emptiness and so on.

Julie, the one female respondent who expressed feelings of anger, did not speak of herself as being an angry person, but rather as a person who felt angry at times when she was reminded of her pain and loss. Julie admitted that, "I would get angry at friends when they would have fights with their moms because I didn't have one" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999).

It seems that when anger is used as a short-term coping mechanism it is likely to be expressed in relatively covert ways. It is more difficult to uncover. For example, to some degree it seems that Julie was not entirely aware of her anger until a friend pointed it out to her. She explained:

I remember having a roommate whose mother phoned every morning and I got to the point where I couldn't even be civil to her I was just so angry and I would pick up the phone "Yah, yah, she's here" and my friend finally called me on it and I think that was a good thing cause I realized I was jealous and that was really why I was so angry. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Other circumstances related to life after her mother's death also left Julie grappling with feelings of anger. Once again, it seems that to some degree she was not able to admit or express these feelings. Julie explained that she was angry, but that she remained quiet about these feelings:

I was quiet but I was angry and I was angry that this woman had taken over my role as mother if that makes any sense. It was my house now, and I was the caretaker of this house and she would say things like "the house is a pigsty" and that was. . . it didn't really make me feel all that great sometimes. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Julie was the only female respondent who spoke of anger. I wonder whether she was the only woman who experienced feeling angry or whether she was the only one who talked about this feeling. Julie's words illustrate how difficult it can be to admit to and/or express anger. Could females be less willing to admit to angry feelings? Could they be less comfortable expressing anger than males? As will be illustrated in chapter five, male respondents spoke of expressing their anger in more overt ways than Julie did. They also spoke more openly about their anger.

To me it seems that in Canadian society anger is viewed as an undesirable feeling to have. Yet, it probably serves useful purposes in the coping process. It allows a bereaved person to expel a variety of feelings. It also works to disclose an individual's pain to others and to oneself. As long as one's angry feelings do not lead to behaviours that are harmful, I believe that it should be viewed more positively. Much like denial and avoidance, anger is often viewed negatively even though it can be adaptive at certain times and in certain circumstances.

Having said this, it appears that all coping mechanisms explored in this chapter have a positive and adaptive side to them. I believe that it is important to look for the positive side of every coping strategy. All coping strategies serve a function. They all help an individual through difficult periods of his or her life. Yet, some coping mechanisms clearly have maladaptive or potentially harmful components to them. One could argue this is the case for anger, denial and avoidance, withdrawal/isolation, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and a variety of delinquent activities. Respondents of this study either did not draw on most of these potentially harmful coping mechanisms or they chose not to talk about them with me. For this reason they are not described in this chapter. These areas could be explored in a different study, perhaps one involving a larger population.

DIVERSITY IN COPING

In talking with respondents about their coping strategies many common themes were noted. This chapter has for the most part explored the similar experiences among

these six motherless individuals. In concluding this chapter I would like to also honour the diversity that exists among respondents and their ways of coping.

Victor used physical outlets in coping with his grief. He explained, “physical outlets was a big one. I was playing every single sport in grade eight. . . track, basketball, volleyball, everything, skateboarding, badminton, you name the sport I was in it. I think physical outlet. . . was a lot for me. . . yah. . . big” (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Andy used music as an outlet, “from when my mother first passed away I started singing. I got involved in drumming and singing and I spent a lot of time with elders through that” (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie wrote letters to her friends to work through her grief, “I’d write my feelings and I’d talk about missing my mom or what it meant and kind of get it out that way” (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Stephanie turned to art. She said, “But I mean I’ve always been artistic and everything I mean that’s what I’ve always done to get...to relieve my stress and everything. I’ve always done crafts and. . . drawings” (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). Whatever one’s means of coping, it seems that the important part is that young people have some outlet whereby they can express their sadness, their rage, their emptiness and all of “the natural feelings people have when they are suffering” (LeShan, 1976:3).

SUMMARY

In this chapter coping was explored and a variety of coping mechanisms were addressed in terms of their effectiveness in helping motherless children through the mourning process. Denial and avoidance were discussed as significant coping strategies.

The usefulness of talking as a form of grief work was also explored. The barriers that often prevent this form of sharing from occurring, including gender socialization, societal attitudes, and having nobody to go to, were described. The effects that feeling silenced can have were also examined in this chapter. In addition, turning to role models and to culture, religion, and spirituality in coping were explored. Friends, humour, and aggression were other outlets talked about by interviewees. These coping strategies were viewed as being both adaptive and maladaptive. This chapter concluded by emphasizing individual differences in coping.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHANGING NATURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

The family dynamics changed very drastically. My mom died the night that I told you and instantly I think that people just started withdrawing and other people started coming together (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999).

One afternoon, about a week after I handed my “Disillusionment” essay to Mrs. Wellington, she stopped me as I was walking out of class. She said, “Caroline, can you stay a few minutes. I’d like to talk to you”. I became nervous. I wondered what I had done wrong. The only thing I could think of was that essay I’d written. Maybe she had failed me for getting too personal, or worse, maybe she thought I needed to go see the school counselor.

It did end up being about that essay, but it wasn’t quite about either of these things I had been worried about. She began by telling me that she was very touched and pleased with my work. She continued, “but, I want you to think about working on it some more. I think there might be an important part missing”. “A part missing?” I replied. She explained, “sometimes in a tragedy there are gifts to be found. I wonder if the loss of your mother has brought you any special gifts? Take your essay home and think about it. If you want to, add that piece and bring it back to me”.

As I walked home from school that afternoon I thought hard about what Mrs. Wellington had said. Part of me was disturbed, angered, and confused by her request and part of me was intrigued. At first, I really had no idea what she could have been referring

to. Nobody had ever talked to me about finding gifts in death before. All I knew, all I had been taught to feel, was loss. People reminded me of what I had lost all the time. I knew this list well. I had lost my mother, I had lost my home, I had lost my sense of security, I had lost my childhood. Now, Mrs. Wellington was asking me for a list of the things I had gained. Nobody had taught me this list. I wasn't sure where to find the answers she was looking for.

I arrived home and started doing other homework. An hour or so later my dad walked in from work. I ran downstairs to greet him and we started preparing dinner together. We talked and laughed until dinner was in the oven and as I headed back upstairs to finish my homework it hit me. My parents had been divorced since I was four years old and my brother and I lived with Mom before she died. We saw our father probably only about once a week. I hardly knew him. After Mom died, we moved in with our dad. The close relationship that was developing between my dad and I was one of the gifts Mrs. Wellington was talking about.

I also became closer to my grandparents after my mom died. They moved away from the city they'd lived in for over sixty years to be near my brother and I. They found an apartment five minutes away from the house we lived in with our father. The sacrifices they made to be there for my brother and I have always touched me deeply. The special bond I have with my grandparents grew out of our shared loss and pain and out of the ways we helped each other through this tragedy. I came to know and love them in a way I may not have if Mom were alive.

These are some of the gifts I wrote about for Mrs. Wellington. Ten years later these relationships have grown even stronger and more dear to me. I still wish Mom

were alive, and I still feel that I have lost a tremendous amount, but these special gifts have eased my pain and brought me a tremendous amount of joy throughout the years.

CHANGES IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM

The death of a mother can bring family members closer together. It can also cause them to drift apart. When a mother dies, many changes occur in the family system. General systems theory explains that a change in each part of a system affects all parts of the system (Greene, 1994; Janchill, 1969; Petr, 1988). If any loss occurs equilibrium is disturbed. When a family member dies all parts of the system are affected. Everyone in the family is affected by the loss and by each other's reactions to the loss (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:114). When a mother dies, the family system changes in numerous ways. Each person changes and the family as a unit changes (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:114). The child must carry on living within a family that is missing a vital member (Worden, 1996:35). Furthermore, an individual is not only affected by the loss of a loved one but by the significant changes that occur in the family as a result of the loss. It can be difficult to learn which changes in the young person occur from the death and which occur as a result of a changed family situation (Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:127). In their study on children and parental death, Silverman and Worden described bereaved children as having to deal "not only with the death of a person, but with the death of a way of life" (Silverman and Worden, 1992 in Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:141).

Whether or not the entire family unit was living in the same home before a mother's death, her absence will greatly alter the family dynamics. Mothers are often the parents who deal "with the affective life of the family and upon whom the stability of

daily routines [is] dependent” (Silverman & Worden, 1992 as cited in Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:102). According to interviewees’ words, it seems that family members can grow apart or come closer together as a result of a mother’s death. Many variables intervene to determine whether people withdraw or cling to one another in the midst of this type of tragedy.

Family Members Withdraw from One Another

As Weizman and Kamm note in their book, About Mourning: Support and Guidance for the Bereaved, “as time and pain continue, there is a tendency to pull apart. It is difficult to sustain the mutual sharing of feelings and support for each other during the prolonged process of mourning” (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:117). The majority of respondents described feeling as though their family grew apart in certain ways after their mother’s death. Various reasons were given for this. For example, when I asked Craig about family dynamics and whether he felt closer or more distant from family members after his mother’s death he responded, “More distant, cause I sort of felt like the people didn’t care about me very much and maybe I saw that they didn’t care about me very much” (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor also felt that his family grew apart in certain ways after his mother’s death. In a sorrowful voice he said, “my mother’s death really brought us apart as a family and we still haven’t really recovered from it. . . which is sad for me. I would have liked it to have gone the other way” (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). He provided an explanation of why he thinks this may have happened:

There’s a generation gap between my brother and me and my sister so he was you know in a completely different world. He was with my dad all the time because my dad had to take care of him right. He was the youngest. It gave me and my sister a lot of independence because we had to do our own thing right and aaah I think that kind of situation just made

us each cope with it on our own level instead of coping with it together. We kind of went our separate ways in coping and I think umm that did us more harm than good really. Because we have a lot of problem. . . we have a lot of problem talking about it. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Two respondents spoke of their stepmothers as a major obstacle in keeping the family together. Julie explained that her family could not overcome her father's marriage, a second dramatic change to the family system so soon after her mother's death. While she has been able to maintain relationships with her family members, the rest of her family no longer communicate with one another:

Within six weeks of [my mother's] death he had proposed to this woman so it was just knock you out shock, cause I never. . . well number one I never thought of my father as a sexual being so it was very bizarre. . . At the same time, this woman was very different from my mom. . . My grandma was very very upset and my dad had promised to take over what my mom had stopped in helping take care of her, buy groceries and all that stuff, and he never once held up on that promise. So that coupled with this new woman caused my grandma to rift...like really pull away and she was very upset and very angry so there was withdrawal there. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie also spoke of her stepmom being a major obstacle in keeping the family together. She reported that her family was able to come closer together after her mother's death "despite the fact that [her] stepmom [was] there" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). Still, she told me that it all happened so fast, which made the adjustment difficult:

They married like two years...not even...they married in 80 and my mom died in 78 but I think it wasn't even two years when they married. But, my father basically wanted to replace...wanted a mother for us and married her right away and my brother was born nine months later. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie also explained that it continues to be difficult to feel the unity of their family when there are no pictures of her mother in her father's and stepmother's home (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999).

Julie continued to tell me about the ways in which she feels her father's new wife contributed to pulling her family apart:

Then my stepmom's behaviour started getting a little more nasty and she started saying some nasty things to my brother which turned him against both of them and he just rebelled and withdrew and he became a rebellious teenager. He was about seventeen or eighteen at that time, and he was going out and never coming home, never telling anybody where he was going and getting more seriously into drugs and escaping with his friends. I don't think he ever cared, he was just doing his own thing. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Sadly, rather than healing and coming back together throughout the years, time only made this situation worse for Julie's family. She continued to explain that, "it's been ten, eleven years now and the rifts are even deeper. My dad doesn't even speak to my brother and they don't even speak to my grandmother, and I'm the only person who speaks to all of them" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie told me more about the reasons behind these growing rifts:

Yah so the rifts got deeper as people's behaviour exacerbated it. Like my brother's drug addiction got quite serious. He moved in with my grandmother. My dad kicked him out actually and then he moved in with my grandma and my dad was upset with my grandma for sabotaging his plan to teach my brother responsibility but my dad was never communicating any of that either. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

When Dad Changes

Respondents reported feeling as though they had, in many ways, been torn apart from the father they knew before their mother died. They spoke of changes in their father and thus in the relationship they had with him. For example, in speaking of her father Anna said, "I was told that my father was a 'one woman man'. . . he adored my mother, and when my mother died, he was heartbroken and my father was very very quiet after that" (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999). Anna's father's loss altered his personality

which also changed his relationship with her. This was also the case with Victor, who described significant changes in his relationship to his father after his mother's death. He said, "my dad was aaah he was pretty stressed out because of my mom right so at the time I just remember...I don't remember spending too much time with my dad then" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Stephanie also saw many changes in her father after her mother's death:

My dad well I told you my dad had several breakdowns after she died. . . I mean it caused a lot of problems with my dad. Like mentally you know, the breakdowns and everything. He was always a sensitive person but that just like totally put him over the edge. . .like obviously. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie further explained that these changes in her father led to a new type of relationship between herself, her sisters and her father. They became his caretaker in many ways. She said, "We've gone to him and kind of turned the tables a little bit" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie also noted changes in her father:

My dad was still very very sad about my mom. . . He would weep and he would be very sad. Even her birthday, it was in February, he was very sad, but he was also very excited and his behaviour changed a lot too. He went out dancing and he did all these crazy things he had never done before, bought new clothes. I hadn't seen him wear new clothes forever. He had a baby blue shirt with boats that were upside down that he wore for years, and suddenly he was wearing these flashy clothes and taking her out to eat and taking her away on trips which none of us had ever experienced. So there was a behaviour change there. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

The changes Victor noted in his father were also quite significant:

I see my dad as a lot more social than he was right. I know he's a very different person than he was before. . . I know for a fact if my mom was still alive he wouldn't have tried marijuana, right. But not because my mom was bossy at all or pushy. It's just that they weren't those...you know what I mean...they were different kind of people...very educated people right and my mom was always like that...kind of...not proper...but aaah just aah she had a university degree and was educated and stuff like

that. My dad kind of went the other way after you know what I mean.
(Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Respondents confided that their mothers' deaths brought many changes to their fathers and to their relationships with their fathers. It is interesting to note that the only two respondents who did not speak of significant changes in their father's behaviours and personality after their mother's death were Craig and Andy. Craig and Andy's parents had been divorced for many years before their mothers died¹.

Growing Apart From Siblings

How does the death of a mother affect sibling relationships? Instinctively, one would think that nobody could better understand the pain a young person experiences when his or her mother dies than his or her brother or sister. After all, motherless siblings share a profound loss. Does this shared grief bring them closer? In half of the cases, interviewees told me that it did, and in the other half they told me that it did not. Here, I will describe some of the ways interviewees felt that they grew apart from their siblings after their mother's death² and their explanations for this drift. For example, Craig explained that his sister was not there for him the way he needed her to be as they grew older:

At first my sister and I were really close but when I got older she had lots of friends so she mostly saw her friends all the time so she sort of ignored me after and I sort of. . . I was a bit upset. . . I was by myself more after, and that's basically it I guess. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

¹ This is reminiscent of a point made in the previous chapter. Andy and Craig were also the only two respondents who did not mention their fathers as someone who they could not talk to about their mother's death.

² The circumstances under which respondents grew closer to their siblings will be described in another section of this chapter.

Likewise, Victor also felt that he and his sister drifted apart in the years after their mother's death. He told me that, "me and my sister went our own ways instead of together" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). He continued to explain:

Right there I think was a real crucial point in the relationship. Me and my sister really broke away from each other. It wasn't...that's on an emotional level...like we were very civil to each other you know what I mean well normal brother and sister squabbling but it wasn't like we hated each other at all right we were just kind of living together right. She did her thing, I did my thing. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Anna also told me the reason why her and her older sister were not always close after her mother's death:

For a few years after I got married I wasn't that close with her. . . You know when there is a resentment among...whether that was one of the reasons. . . I left home and got married she thought I had got married, she hadn't got married. . . she had always said because she couldn't leave us alone, the two little sisters, and go and get married and that was the time the guys wanted to marry her. . . When she was nineteen and twenty she felt responsible for us and she didn't feel that she was free to have a life of her own. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Anna also had a difficult relationship with her other sister, for very different reasons, years after their mother's death:

My younger sister used to get me in trouble. . . She used to say that I had done such and such a thing or I was at such and such a place when I wasn't supposed to be and she used to get me in trouble. . . I think in high school and business college she was still doing those things to me. . . I remember. . . my [other] sister saying one of the reasons she did those things. . . [was that] my father favoured me because I was the most like my mother and that my younger sister was jealous of this. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Growing Apart From Extended Family

Respondents also spoke of growing apart from extended family for a variety of reasons related to their mother's death. Craig, for instance, felt that he had less binding him to his mother's side of the family after she died. He explained:

I used to see my mom's brothers more when she was alive I think. They were like I guess it was like good, I liked seeing my uncles but I guess after she died I don't see them that much anymore cause they were sort of different than my father was. They were more easy going than he was. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Not only did his relatives have little in common with his father, but his mother also wasn't around to keep him feeling connected to these family members. He went on to say:

Like I said, I'm less close with my family than I used to be, well especially with her side of the family because she's not there as like a you know...cause it was her family, with her family there's less of a reason to see them because I'm kind of one step away from them without her. . . Yah, I guess cause you know people want to see their sister so then they see their nephews and that all the time, but it's like without her I'm not really that connected to them anymore really. Aaaah same with my grandparents I noticed a bit too, so its kind of a step away from them kind of so because aaaah yah I'm basically just their daughter's or sister's son so to them I'm not their sister so I'm like nobody really, sort of. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie described an experience quite similar to Craig's. She also felt that she and her sisters were not as connected to her maternal side of the family since her mother's death:

Yah we do still have connections with my mom's side of the family but there's this. . . they don't associate with my dad and my stepmom very much. But, they keep with us. . . they like try to keep ties with us but it's different. Like we're not. . . we're kind of like an after thought to them. You know what I mean? It's almost like oh well we have to because they're Marge's kids you know...keep in touch and everything. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie, and her immediate family, drifted apart from her mother's sisters for other reasons as well:

And another thing. . . my aunts said you know they went to my father and said, "You can't raise three girls on your own" and they wanted to take us away from my dad so that's another thing that caused tension you know. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Her mother's side of the family also underwent a variety of serious problems after the death which resulted in them being emotionally unavailable to Stephanie. This was another reason why her relationship with them grew more distant:

It's almost like my mom's side of the family just kind of fell apart. . . When my mom died I think it was four years later her youngest brother died of an overdose and he was a twin...and the two of them were really really bad into drugs and then five years after that his twin brother shot himself. He was involved in drugs. And it just almost seemed like...when my mom died things unraveled. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Andy also felt that he grew apart from his extended family in the years since his mother's death. He told me that, "it was kind of sad at times cause it seems like the only time our family comes together is when something serious happens" (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). Craig similarly noticed that the only time his extended family came together was during the time immediately following his mother's death:

Then there was a funeral and all that stuff and then my dad was there. He came and I was surprised that he was upset...and I was surprised that he was upset because they were divorced or whatever and well he never talked to my grandparents and then he was there at the same time so I guess I had my family there all at once and now they don't see each other anymore either, huh. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Like Craig, Andy also saw that his extended family only came together during hard times. However, in spite of this realization he was touched by the effort made during these difficult times:

There's four reserves they all kind of come together, so it's kind of like one reserve. There's workers that take care of the grave. They dug the grave and stuff. The other reserve, there's a family that does all the cooking for all four communities. So everybody came together and stuff but the thing that was amazing about that is that there was such a sense of community. . . If all four reserves are in conflict when somebody dies, everybody comes together and helps out. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Family Members Come Together

While interviewees spoke more about the family drifting apart after their mother's death, some of them did also talk a great deal about the way this experience brought them and certain family members closer together. As Stephanie noted, "going through something like this can either tear a family apart or it can bring it closer. It really brought my family closer" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). She also told me that although she grew more distant with her mother's side of the family, it "made my sisters and I closer to my dad" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). She said that "as far as my sisters and I are concerned we've grown a lot closer" but that she couldn't be sure "if that's because of [her mother's death] or [for some other reason]" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). Andy also felt that his immediate family became much closer after his mother died:

I think the only huge change was just between my dad, my brother, and myself cause we came together. It just brought us closer. . . I think the communication between us now is phenomenal and I've yet to see other fathers and sons on the same level. . . The weird thing with people is they don't really appreciate the time they have and I think that is what I've come to do is to appreciate the time I have with my dad and my brother. Between the three of us, the three of us put together, just I don't know...we kick ass at whatever we do. If there's something...if I'm having a problem...if something's going on [out here] that I'm struggling with they'll help me out, and if something's happening over there I'll help either one of them out. But yah, I think I've yet to see the dynamics the three of us have between any other father and son. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Even though Julie lamented that her family members were torn apart from one another as a result of the tragedy they experienced, she also believes that her personal relationships with family members have generally grown stronger because of their loss:

In some ways my brother and I are closer. . . there's a little bit more empathy and I think my brother sees me more as a person than his little

sister because of it, and I'm a little bit closer to my dad. . . I think I became closer to everybody in a weird way, but part of that was because I took on the communicating role and everybody else sort of went their own way. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Julie was the one to grow closer to family members for another reason as well. She had to pick up where her mother left off in many caretaking responsibilities. For example, she became the one to care for her grandmother:

Yes, I would say my grandma and I became closer in a different way. We were [always] very close because I would play with her when I was younger. I was fourteen when my mom died so I was entering into a growing up stage and I did. . . I think I really took over the caretaking for my grandma and I made a vow to myself. . . that I would continue. . . after [my mom] died I made a promise that I would do it and so I did, and so I think we became closer. We had to become more intimate in just basic care like my grandma's personal care needs became a bit more intense and I had to see her in uncomfortable situations. I had to see her when she was sick or when she couldn't get to the bathroom on time and those types of things and she had to let me in, and I knew she didn't want to but she had no choice and it made our bond closer but also a little uncomfortable. So we became closer. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

When Home Changes Too

In addition to grieving the death of one's mother, and experiencing drastic changes in family dynamics, other significant losses are also likely to occur as a result of this tragedy. Changes to one's home is another very common transition which respondents had to undergo. In fact, the changing nature of familial relationships which so often occurs after a mother dies is likely to alter the composition of the home. For example, Victor's sister moved out of their family home when she was around eighteen years old. He told me that she did not get along with their father after their mother died and that because of this "she broke away from the whole family" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie's home also changed when her brother moved out. She believes

that he turned to drugs to cope. This behaviour led to difficulties between him and his father which ultimately resulted in his father “kicking him out” of their family home.

The literature explains that with parental loss there is a significant potential for the child to undergo a move to a new residence (Rosen, 1986:6) or to experience changes in the family home (Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:126). Such changes can be quite emotional as a young person often grows to be quite attached to his or her home (Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:126) and to his or her loved ones who live there. A change in home also often means leaving behind more important memories of one’s mother. Julie told me how sad she felt when these memories were taken from her:

So it was like seven months later they were married. So it was different and she changed everything, she changed the house, she remodeled it which for me was a big loss of my mom cause my mom was in all the memories of the carpet, the wallpaper, cause that was all I had left, and she ripped all of it. She ripped every single piece of the old house. It was gone...and it needed to be gone³ but still there was a lot of memories trapped up in there (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999).

Craig lost his home in a very different way after his mother’s death. He recounted his experience of being sent away to boarding school:

Yah, well I went to live with my dad and he didn’t let me get away with everything, and I couldn’t do what I wanted anymore. He was like strict and he sent me to a private boarding school after the first year and I was there for four years away from my family and my home. . . It was like I was sent to the army for four years. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

When Roles Change

In addition to changes in people, relationships, and home, a motherless child also experiences a change in familial roles after the death. The death of a mother leads to an imbalance in “the interlocking family role relationships” . Each family attempts to cope

with this imbalance by attempting to replace the absent member or rearranging familial roles (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991 as cited in Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:128). When a parent dies, the surviving parent may attempt to fill the roles of mother and father. However, in many cases a child may also take on many of the roles and responsibilities of the deceased parent.

The literature and interviewees' words indicate that after a mother's death, roles seem to shift for young women much more than they do for young men. This seems to be particularly true in the case of oldest females, who are most likely to take on the responsibility of caring for the other children and managing the household (Worden, 1996:63). Girls are more likely to want to care for others while neglecting their own emotional needs (Attig in Adams & Deveau, 1995:54). Sanders explains in her chapter, "Grief of children and parents" of the book, Children Mourning, Mourning Children, that girls often become excessive caregivers as a way of covering up and not dealing with their feelings of sadness (Sanders in Doka, 1995:71). In Solomon and Hersch's article, "Death in the family: Implications for family development", case studies illustrate that it is more typical for female children to take on the maternal role in the family following a mother's death (Solomon & Hersch, 1979:45).

In certain ways, this can be a beneficial process. It can give the young woman something else to concentrate on and help her cope with the pain. While some theorists believe that such "restoration-oriented"⁴ forms of coping can be viewed as adaptive under certain circumstances (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:213), others feel that they are more often

³ When Julie said "it needed to be gone" she was referring to the fact that the house needed to be remodeled. She was not indicating that she felt it was time to move on.

⁴Restoration-oriented coping mechanisms include taking on a variety of new roles and responsibilities, and seeking out new activities to keep busy (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

than not potentially maladaptive coping mechanisms. For example, Baker and Sedney warn that although this can be gratifying for the child at first, as he or she may feel important and appreciated in this new role, eventually it will interfere with the young person's own needs to develop as an individual, to build healthy relationships with friends, and to separate from the family of origin (Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:128-129). The literature warns that although "children may want to help with certain responsibilities if they are physically and emotionally able, [it] is unfair and inappropriate for them to be treated like adults" (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:121). Freeman notes similar problems. When a young woman takes on adult caretaking responsibilities, emotional boundary violations are likely to occur. When a child is expected to behave in ways that are beyond her developmental level, she may have difficulty separating her emotional needs from those of other family members later in life (Freeman, 1996:1). Furthermore, taking over such tasks will also be "an ongoing reminder of the loss" (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:121) for a child.

There were significant gender differences in this area among interviewees. Male children did not talk about any significant role changes after their mothers' deaths. For example Craig told me that "No. I didn't do anything differently" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999) and Andy said, "I guess no, I don't think really any of my roles changed. . . there wasn't a whole lot of change on my part" (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor was the only male respondent who spoke of changes in his role. He spoke of new financial obligations, but did not mention taking on other more stereotypical "mother roles":

When one less person is in the family there's definitely more responsibility. I helped my dad a lot financially like...you know...I wasn't

the best around the house meaning that like I wouldn't do the dishes all the time or as much as I should have. But, I would always work ever since I was a young age and I was always. . . I would always put in money or work for my dad for free. . . I would always put in rent money since I was . . . since my mom passed away right. I had no problems putting in money and stuff like that or paying for myself everywhere I was. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Motherless daughters on the other hand were likely to take on new roles even when such responsibilities were not in their best interest, appropriate for their developmental level, or easy for them. Julie, became the family communicator and mediator when her mother was no longer around to carry out that necessary role because she felt she had little choice:

There was no way to communicate, and I think my mom was the communicator, so that role was lost, and now I'm the communicator. . . As I became older I took on the communicating role and that was also a decision cause I was not a communicator. I never spoke up. I never talked about my feelings or anything like that to my family and then as things, as situations, got worse I had to start talking. So yah, I think that is how my role has changed. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Julie also became her father's confidante. He did not talk to her about her feelings but he relied on her to express his loss and sadness. She admitted that, "my dad would reminisce with me but he didn't really encourage me to reminisce with him". She continued by sharing that "[my dad] turned to me and would talk to me for hours and talk about my mom and say how much he missed her" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie confided that in many ways she became the parent of the family after her mother's passing:

My dad was devastated. He was absolutely non functional at that point so I was instantly having to take on the mother role. . . and I would do the cleaning. He was just totally incapable of cooking or planning for his children at all. So, I took on some of the running of the household...not very well though...I will give everybody credit for that, I didn't do the greatest job (she laughs) [but] I think I took over some of the survival,

essential roles of maintaining the house because my dad was really quite a basket case and my brother was just not willing to take on any of those roles, and I also became the caretaker of my grandma. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie also became a nurturer when it came to caring for her father after her mother's death:

My sisters and I almost took on [nurturing and caring] for my dad cause my dad was really sick too. He's on disability and stuff now and he has back problems and he has a lot of problems. He has bad nerves he's had a couple of breakdowns and it all has happened since my mom died. So we've all taken on this with my dad. We've gone to him and kind of turned the tables a little bit. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

There were significant differences in this area relating to gender, however birth order also played an important role. Older sisters seemed to be the most likely to take on "motherly" roles in the family after the death. For example, Stephanie told me that although she joined her sisters in nurturing and caring for her father after their mom died, it was her oldest sister who became the mother figure in the home:

My oldest sister. . . she became the motherly figure and she still is right now. I mean there's things I'll tell my middle sister but I won't tell her because...or I'll tell her later (she laughs) because she acts like my mom. But for me...because I was younger but also I mean I was always labeled the baby you know. I don't know. It didn't really [change my role] because I was younger. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

She went on to tell me that she noted role changes in her middle sister as well in the years since their mother's death:

Even my middle sister as well. She took on that protective kind of...like when my dad and my stepmom had problems and everything she was the one who was standing up and actually fighting with my stepmom...but took on that kind of responsible 'I have to take charge' kind of role but no...I was always the youngest so I was always the one that was protected and kind of set aside from all of that. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Anna's older sister also took on many of the "mother" roles. Her words illustrate the potential danger involved when young people take on adult roles:

We had a housekeeper that looked after my younger sister and the house and all that and she certainly was not a nice person. . . and it got to the point that my [older] sister decided she would quit school and I guess she was just about finished, my sister was eighteen years old. My sister was ten years older than me so she decided she would leave school and [mother us]. . . To this day she still resents having given up her life for us. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

It seems that female children, particularly the eldest daughters, were far more likely to have taken on a variety of new roles after their mother's death than were male children⁵. It is also interesting to note that in many cases daughters spoke of caring for their fathers in addition to other new duties. It seems that in certain ways these children were more resilient to the trauma of the death than were their surviving parents.

PARTNERSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

A mother's death does not only change the nature of relationships in the family or origin. It also alters one's romantic relationships. One of the primary roles a mother plays in a child's life is to validate his or her basic sense of worth. When a mother dies a child will leave the family "feeling shaky" and as David Freeman explains in his book Multigenerational Family Therapy, when a child leaves his or her family of origin feeling insecure "it will be very difficult for him or her to share himself or herself and risk feeling intimate" (Freeman, 1992:50). Freeman continues to explain that individuals with "shaky selves" are cautious in relationships and preoccupied with being judged and accepted (Freeman, 1992:50). This can cause

obvious problems in one's romantic relationships. Furthermore, in their study "The effects of parental loss on the formation of intimate relationships" Hepworth, Ryder, and Dreyer found that people who lose a parent to death early in life tend to avoid intimate relationships more than others (Hepworth, Ryder, & Dreyer, 1984:79).

Hepworth, Ryder, and Dreyer also found that individuals who experienced the death of a parent early in life move into romantic relationships either more quickly or more slowly than those who have not experienced this loss. These findings do not move in a single direction. It can therefore be argued that mother loss may not actually be connected to these trends. However, it is possible that these findings are accurate and that intervening variables, personality for example, explain this polarization. In fact, interviewees words support these findings. For example, Victor told me that he missed his mother's touch and gentleness and married at an early age to fill these voids:

I really miss and crave it to this day...female touch and affection, not on a sexual basis, just strictly affection as a person right. And...I think that is or must have been why I married a little earlier. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Craig shared his sense that his early loss may have resulted in him feeling uncomfortable in relationships and therefore subconsciously working to avoid or end them. As part of this he spoke of fearing further loss. However, he admits that his behaviour in a recent relationship could be attributed to a variety of other factors as well:

I get uncomfortable getting too close to somebody, it makes me uneasy and I don't like it too much. . . I just had a girlfriend and she dumped me. I don't know I think maybe she wanted to be closer and I felt uncomfortable so I

⁵ More in depth research in this area might examine whether similar patterns arise in households where duties were sex-segregated before the mother's death as they do in homes where there was a more equal division of labour.

started acting like a bit of a jerk sometimes and maybe I just didn't like her, I think she wanted me to spend too much money and I didn't have any...so I started to get upset with her cause of that. Maybe it was just cause of that I don't really know. I did feel a bit uncomfortable when she started to get too close I think. . . I just get uncomfortable and I want to push them away or something so I don't know. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

In addition, in his study "Some possible early family determinants of marriage and divorce", John Birtchnell found that "the incidence of early mother death in divorced men was unduly high" (Birtchnell, 1974:125). While some findings in this area seem discouraging it is also important to note that the literature indicates that if a supportive, consistent, and emotionally attentive caregiver exists in the child's life, the motherless individual's later attachments are generally much more successful (Palombo, 1981:18; Jacobson & Ryder, 1969 as cited by Edelman, 1994:164).

FRIENDSHIPS

According to respondents, friendships were also affected by their early loss of mother. Once again opposing effects occurred from what may be regarded as a single phenomenon - mother death. Victor sought out more intimate friendships and Craig avoided them. Yet, both of these men linked their desire for and comfort with close relationships to the loss of their mother. As previously mentioned, there may be one or several intervening variable(s), such as personality or cultural background, which would help to explain how a similar occurrence has differing effects for different people. On the other hand, perhaps mother death actually has very little to do with either of these trends. Experiencing the death of one's mother early in life may simply become a rich source of explanation for a wide range of themes. Motherless children

learn, through their participation in the social world, to use their loss as an explanation for many things about themselves. While motherless individuals may make such connections regularly in day to day life, interviewing respondents about the experience of mother loss may have further magnified the likelihood that they would make such connections.

Victor told me about the strong connection which exists between the death of his mother and the strong friendships he has. He also told me that he seeks out female friends to fill his need for motherly affection. He said:

I don't have the motherly touch and affection which was a big part of my life and I think that is one reason too that I do have quite a lot of female friends...really good, close, intimate friends and I think that's part of the reason...is that somehow I seek out a lot of that you know aaah...femininity. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

For Craig, the opposite occurred. Instead of developing close friendships with females, he felt his mother's death hindered his friendships with the opposite sex:

I found it hard to relate to other women, well I was always a little shy but . . . I'm especially shy with women and I think if I had a mother I wouldn't be because I would have to talk to her all the time so I wouldn't be like that and aaaah yah I'm just, I'm not used to talking with women so much and maybe it would have helped me to see how they are more. If I had my mother around more because she kind of died before I was...I was pretty much a kid then so through the teenage years and all that I didn't have a mother there...so maybe it made me less comfortable talking to women maybe. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Craig did not only have this trouble with women but with all friends. He said, "I want to have lots of friends and things, but then I push them away" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). He continued to explain why he might do this:

I often feel uncomfortable talking to people much like when people get I don't know when they get too close I don't like it too much I push...I make

something happen so they go away sort of cause I feel uncomfortable. I don't like it that much, like if someone wants to be closer friends or something or get closer I get kind of...it makes me feel kind of uncomfortable, so maybe that affected it, maybe if there was a mother she talks to you more. She talks to you more so you feel less embarrassed about things or something. . . My dad doesn't really talk that much, he never said...he sort of kept his distance so I never really had anybody that I was that close to. So maybe if I would have had my mother things would have been different. Maybe, but even now when my dad wants to be closer to me I feel uncomfortable, so I don't know. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

FEAR OF DEATH AND OF ABANDONMENT

There are many reasons why a bereaved young person may find it difficult to become close to others. Fear of being abandoned again is one of these reasons. A child whose parent has died may understand the death as abandonment and may fear that the remaining parent and other loved ones may die or leave as well (Rosen, 1986:2; Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:138). The death of a parent is likely to affect an individual's sense of personal vulnerability (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:139) particularly with regards to feeling as though a similar loss could occur at any time. For many people, a mother is a symbol of stability and security. After a child loses his or her mother, he or she may become very in tune with the fact that anybody can die or leave. After the death of a mother, many children become concerned about the well-being of their remaining loved ones, fearing that they too will die. This fear can be manifested in a variety of ways throughout the life span of a motherless individual (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:138).

Those who have experienced early losses tend to think about and to be reminded of death more often than those who have not undergone such losses (Taylor, 1983:80).

Individuals whose parents died when they were young are more sensitive to the issue of death and more threatened by it. They are easily reminded of it when others are not (Taylor, 1983:80). Motherless individuals are also believed to be affected by their early loss when they become parents. "They [are] burdened with the anxiety that they [will] die and their children [will] repeat the patterns they endured" (Zall, 1994:220). In his study, Zall also determined that this was not a concern for a comparison group. When asked what their greatest parenting worry was 31 percent of the women who had been bereaved in childhood identified their own death while none of the non-bereaved women listed this as their greatest concern (Zall, 1994:226). It is common for those who have lost something as significant as a parent early in life to fear that others who they are close to will also die (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:168). Respondents' words show that these fears are very real. For example Julie said, "I am still plagued with some fears of death and dying...that somebody else close to me will die which isn't exactly healthy" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). She continued to explain:

Like I think I have a little bit of a psychotic thing that's kind of freaky I think because of my mom's death. I think my husband is going to die which I hope he's not. . . I think it's a bit of a remnant of my mom's early death in thinking that he'll be taken before I'm finished with him if that makes sense. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie also spoke of the fear she has of being abandoned:

I think I've gotten this...and I don't know if it has to do with my mom but I've always had this fear of being abandoned and this feeling that people are going to leave me. . .you don't want them to leave...like you're scared they're going to leave you. I don't know if that has something to do with losing my mom so early that you're scared...like things just seem so on the edge...like you could lose it at any minute kind of thing and I think it probably has something to do with that. . .I'm strong but I'm also the type that doesn't want to be alone you know. . . I'm just always looking for

somebody...always wanting to have somebody in my life and just...yah. I don't know if it is related but I think it is...I think it totally is. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Fear of abandonment or death of loved ones and of self is well documented in the bereavement literature. It was also a very common theme discussed by respondents. Yet interestingly, fears are very often learned behaviours. Personally speaking, I don't think I learned to fear death only because of my mom's accident. I also learned to fear death as a reaction to my adult family members who began worrying about me obsessively after my mom died and from watching my brother agonize over his belief that our father would die early as well.

The connection between the death of one's mother and one's own fear of death may not be simply causal. Rather, the way one speaks of this connection could also be related to the messages one has learned through his or her participation in the social world. For example, one respondent struggled as he realized mid-way through an answer that his response may have more to do with a discourse he had learned than about other 'real' sources of his anxieties. Craig stated:

Yah, plus I'm not good at making friends either. I used to be better when my mom was alive. I'd make friends better then, now I don't make friends as well. I do but there's something different, maybe because I think they're going to get killed too, so I don't want to get too close really, I don't know. Or maybe I'm afraid I'm going to get killed I don't know I just feel like everything is pretty aaaaah...I don't know maybe you shouldn't use that last one maybe it's something of what I heard and not so much true. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

FEELINGS OF NEEDINESS

For some motherless individuals, fear of death and of abandonment seems to lead to a feeling of neediness in relationships. No interview question asked directly about

this personality trait yet three of the six respondents described a feeling of needing to be with people as often as possible. Interviewees made the link between an incessant desire to be in the company of others and their early loss. Craig explained, "I just like to be with lots of people to make up for it or something" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). Stephanie also related her longing to be close to others with her mother's death:

Like relationship wise...boyfriends...I've always kind of...I think in some senses I've smothered people because you don't want them to leave. . . and I think I've always been like that in relationships. I've always clung to things (she laughs) and smothered people...some people can put up with it but just that longing. . . yah I find that I cling to things. . . I think it probably has something to do with [my mom's death]. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Similarly, Julie made a connection between her need to spend as much time as possible with her husband and the early tragedy she experienced:

I think how it's affected me with my relationship with my husband is that I needed somebody to care, and to listen, and to be there. . . I have this compulsion to spend every moment of my time with him and he'll say "Well, I just kind of want to read my book" and I'll get really uptight about that and I think maybe I'm just kind of weird. . . Now he needs to understand that's something that has always been important to me, having somebody I can talk to and I think part of that is a result of it because I've experienced a tragedy so I know what I need. . . I know that I need support. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

CHERISHING PEOPLE

Relationships are also affected by early mother loss in ways that are generally viewed more positively. For example, interviewees spoke a great deal about how much they appreciate the special people in their lives. A majority of respondents said that they believed their deep appreciation of loved ones came out of learning at a young age how fragile human life is and that anybody can leave at any time. This related to

partners, friends, work associates, and one's children. Anna told me that her early loss made her put extra effort into being there for her children in every way possible:

Yah, I certainly remember that when I was bringing up my kids, the fact that I would think, I didn't have a mother and I'm certainly going to make sure that she and he gets the attention and the love and the affection because I didn't have that. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Zall believes that worry about their own death may give bereaved mothers motivation to be the best they can at parenting. Participants of his study explained that their parent's death resulted in a desire to make their children's lives better than their own. In fact, Zall noted six themes common among mothers who were bereaved early in life. These are: being a good parent, being overprotective, a belief that life is fragile, a belief that death would reoccur, a belief that it is important to prepare their children for separation, and cherishing time spent with their children (Zall, 1994:226).

Appreciating people was something interviewees spoke of in a variety of contexts. Andy said, "the weird thing with people is they don't really appreciate the time they have and I think that [through this experience] what I've come to do is to appreciate the time I have with my dad and my brother" (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie learned a similar lesson. She noted that, "I learned that the important things are to say that you care about somebody because you might lose them" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). She expanded on the connection between her early loss and the way she cherishes the people in her life:

I think work relationships and other people, I don't like just superficial talk I'll want to get to the deeper issues quicker and I get very irritated very quickly if there's no sense of deeper talk or even just I like going to work and asking people how their day was and really listening to their answers and having a few minutes to just chat and making people feel good ummm

which I think has come out of that because I don't have as much of a drive just to work because I had a shock that life can end early. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

SUMMARY

This chapter has explored the changing nature of relationships after the death of one's mother. Interviewees all discussed significant changes in the family system after their mother's death. In some cases family members withdrew and in other cases they came closer together as a result of this experience. According to interviewees, changes in familial roles were also common occurrences after their loss. Female children were particularly likely to become caregivers, nurturers, homemakers, confidantes, communicators, and mediators to other family members in their mother's absence. Partnerships, marriages, and friendships, were also all said to be affected to some degree by this premature loss. Fear of death and of abandonment, a feeling of neediness, and a strong sense of cherishing people are some other common themes relating to relationships described in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

AND HER CHILDREN SHALL RISE

Her presence influenced who I was, and her absence influences who I am. Our lives are shaped as much by those who leave us as they are by those who stay (Edelman, 1994:283).

I've been to the cemetery many times over the last twelve years. Each time I am there I stand by my mother's grave, staring at her headstone, where the words "and her children shall rise and call her blessed" are carved. Through wet and blurry eyes I could not see those words clearly when I was younger. I did not even try to think about their meaning in the first five or six years after she died. But, as time passed my tears seemed to dry up. I couldn't cry anymore when I went to the cemetery, even when I felt I should. I began feeling very calm and at peace there. It became a place where I could take some time to think. Sometimes, as I stood there, thoughts would, for a short while, stop racing through my mind and I would run out of problems to sort through. During those moments, I would look around and see those words. Those words were always there to keep me thinking. I wondered for so many years why my family chose them to sum up everything my mother was in her thirty-eight years of life. I am still not certain, but I think I am beginning to understand. Of all the wonderful things about my mother, perhaps the most incredible was the way she loved my brother and me. Her love for us was so strong that I feel it as much, if not more, today than I did when she was alive. Knowing the strength of her love has allowed my brother and me to rise above our great loss and sorrow, and to grow into adults who would have made her feel very blessed and very proud.

I believe that my mother's love, and the eleven years I spent with her, has much to do with the person I have become. Yet, when I think about the person I am today, I also can't separate that from the years I spent without her. My strengths and my weaknesses (my ability to empathize with others in pain, my sincere desire to help, my incessant search for something to fill an empty space inside me, and my fear of abandonment) were all shaped, to some degree, by losing my mother so early in life. This loss has shaped my life so profoundly that it has truly come to define the person I am.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF MOTHER LOSS

Little question exists as to whether the experience of early parent loss affects an individual in later life. The consensus in the literature is that it clearly does. The literature explains that "parental bereavement may be a significant event in a child's life, one that will result in the individual's behaving in ways that he/she would not if the family were not disrupted in this fashion" (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:127). Nearly all studies note differences in functioning between individuals who lost a parent early in life and those who did not. Differences in functioning were found both early on and years later once the child reached adulthood (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:125). Unfortunately, assumptions about long-term effects of this loss usually postulate negative effects (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:1). Clearly, the loss is a tragic one, and many of the outcomes can be viewed negatively. However, for many motherless people, there are also positive outcomes which have occurred as a result of the strength one gains by experiencing such an intense loss so early in life:

The relationship between parental bereavement and subsequent behaviour is complex, however it is not the simple fact of a death having occurred, but rather the variables associated with the loss of the parent as well as characteristics specific to the child, that will predict the child's subsequent adjustment and development. (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:127)

In her book, Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss, Hope Edelman (1995) explains that mother loss occurs within a life context for each individual, and it is this unique context which will influence the effects, and the way the individual conceptualizes these effects:

Mourning is a highly individual process, its characteristics and intensity determined by the age a [child] was when [his or her] mother died, the cause of loss, the quality of the mother-[child] relationship, and the support system available both at the time of the loss and in subsequent years. (Edelman, 1995:XXI)

In addition, Berlinsky and Biller (1982) write, "loss of a parent occurs within a personal, family, and social context, and differences in variables at each level would be expected to affect the way in which an individual reacts" (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:2). "Many researchers have oversimplified the situation" (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:129) by treating individuals who lost a parent as a homogeneous group (Herzog and Sudia 1973 as cited in Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:7). There are many factors that influence the long-term effects of early mother loss. As Palombo points out, "it is easy to be misled into thinking that, because we focus on an event such as the death of a parent, we are going to be comparing responses to similar events" (Palombo, 1981:16). Palombo lists several factors that play a role in determining the long-term effects of the death of a parent:

1. The cause and type of death - there are violent deaths and peaceful deaths, accidental deaths and deaths from natural causes, sudden deaths and delayed deaths
2. The factors related to the child's age, sex, and developmental level
3. The manner in which the child is informed of the event and whether the event was witnessed or not

4. The nature of the relationship of the child to the parent (and what the relationship was like at the time of the last meeting)
5. Whether the child suffered from prior psychopathology
6. The child's cognitive grasp of what occurred
7. The nature of the support system around the child (Palombo, 1981:16)

A number of other factors also need consideration and may greatly alter the experience and long-term effects of the loss. These are the length of time since the death occurred, the family dynamics, the cultural, ethnic, & religious background of the family, what types of ceremonies (if any) there were to honour the dead (for example was there a viewing of the dead body, a time for prayer, a funeral), the family's attitudes about death, and the personality, coping style, and temperament of the young person (Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:133). While in this thesis I have focussed on the role gender plays in this experience, there are clearly a number of other factors that influence the effects of this loss. The scope of this work does not permit me to explore in detail the various ways these other factors may affect one's loss experience. However consideration of such factors cannot be ignored. I will very briefly describe some of the ways that such factors may influence a bereaved child in the long-term.

The age and developmental level of a child at the time he or she experiences the loss of mother will have a tremendous effect on the short and long-term outcomes. As Edelman writes:

Sometimes I still wonder what losing my mother would have been like if I'd spent just a few more years with her, or if I'd known her for a few less. Would we have been spared the years of antipathy and argument? Would we one day have become friends? Women who lost their mothers in early childhood often look at me with envy, seeing the years they never had; women who were in their midtwenties tell me they never could have survived it at seventeen. Is it better to have a mother and lose her, or to never have had one at all? (Edelman, 1994:31)

Losing a mother at any age is difficult, but there are differences in the effects of losing a mother at birth, at eighteen, or at any other age. The age of a child when his or her mother dies indicates which developmental tasks he or she is likely to be working on, and which emotional and cognitive tools may be available in helping him or her cope with this loss (Edelman, 1994:32) and in carrying on through the next developmental stages without a mother¹.

The literature also indicates that the nature of the support system around the child is a major factor influencing the long-term effects of early mother loss (Palombo, 1981:18; Jacobson & Ryder, 1969 as cited by Edelman, 1994:164) and that the mourning process is clearly aided for children when the adults around them are sensitive to their unique issues (Anderson in Adams & Deveau, 1995:166). Children are “disadvantaged in their grief work”² to begin with because they may not have yet developed the ability to verbally express their emotions and describe their experience with death (Anderson in Adams & Deveau, 1995:166). Children are accustomed to depending on family members for emotional support and nurturing. However, after such a significant loss, other family members are likely to be emotionally absent for some time (Anderson in Adams & Deveau, 1995:166) and so children may not have access to the resources they need to work through their grief. Furthermore, increasingly the primary guardians of motherless children are fathers (Che-Alford, Allan & Butlin, 1994:16 & George & Wilding, 1972). If the socialization process of males does in fact sometimes leave men feeling uncomfortable discussing emotional

¹ For a more detailed outline of developmental stages and related issues refer to “Developmental challenges and needs across the generations” by Freeman (1996).

issues such as death (Staudacher, 1991 & Greene, 1994), then perhaps a significant proportion of motherless children are not adequately discussing feelings surrounding their loss³. The various ways a young person is encouraged to cope with his or her loss may play a large role in determining the long-term effects of mother death.

THE EFFECTS OF EARLY MOTHER DEATH

David Freeman, in his work, "Developmental challenges and needs across the generations" lists four themes which often occur as a result of any traumatic experience in childhood. These are emotional abandonment, emotional boundary violations, lack of proper acknowledgment, and premature fracturing of safe attachment bonds (Freeman, 1996:1). All four of these themes are likely to transpire as a result of early mother loss⁴.

Emotional abandonment occurs when a child experiences premature loss of a primary caretaker as a result of illness, separation, or death. Freeman explains that as a result of such a separation the child may develop a variety of regressive behaviours such as perseveration, clinging, bed wetting, emotional withdrawal and so on. The child may also show signs of learning delays, speech problems, and inappropriate physical and emotional responses to adults and to other children (Freeman, 1996:1).

Lack of proper acknowledgment is also likely to occur as the surviving parent and other family members grieve their own loss and do not have the emotional energy to acknowledge the child's pain. If a child is not given adequate acknowledgment of the

² Chapter three explored talking as a form of grief work.

³ It is important to note that these are generalizations. For many children and adolescents remaining caregivers are not fathers (or males). Furthermore, in many cases other family members may live in the home or play a large role in the children's lives. Also, many fathers (and male guardians) may be particularly skilled at discussing emotional issues with the children they care for.

⁴ As previously mentioned, specific outcomes will depend on a variety of variables, like the specific family dynamics, the age and developmental level of the child, the cause of the death, the coping skills used, and so on (Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:133).

grief he or she is experiencing, or if he or she is given so much acknowledgment, to the point where the remaining caregiver(s) become(s) excessively apprehensive about every future struggle of the child, other effects may occur. The young person may begin to demonstrate lack of motivation, may become self deprecating, may become indifferent to praise, and may come to need excessive reassurance when performing a variety of tasks (Freeman, 1996:1).

Emotional boundary violations and premature fracturing of safe attachment bonds may occur as a byproduct of the death when the remaining caregiver expects a child to behave in ways that are beyond his or her developmental level in order to make up for the lost person in the home. Children and adolescents sometimes become caretakers of adults or younger siblings after the death of their mother. Freeman suggests that when this occurs the child may have difficulty separating out his/her emotional needs from those of other family members, be unable to develop an independent life from his or her family, or may take on extreme roles in the family like the family hero or victim (Freeman, 1996:1). Freeman's work illustrates that the death of a mother can alter an individual's behaviours and personality in the short and long-term.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

While some of the literature explains that grief is something that can be resolved or completed other writing indicates that for many bereaved individuals the pain may last a lifetime, even when healthy adaptation occurs (McClowry, Davies, May, Kulenkamp & Martinson in Doka, 1995:149). A study by McClowry et al. demonstrates that even seven to nine years after the death bereaved family members were still expressing pain and loss (McClowry et. al. in Doka, 1995:151). Baker and Sedney explain that this may

be even more so the case for people who lose a loved one early in life as “identity is more deeply affected by a loss in childhood because self-development is still in process” (Baker & Sedney in Corr & Corr, 1996:112). Clearly, some adults still suffer emotionally from their childhood bereavement experiences (Hurd, 1999:34).

Most studies examining the long-term effects of early mother death have focused on the relationship between this loss and pathology, depression, suicidality, and psychosis (Zall, 1994:220). Many other studies exist linking parental bereavement to long-term effects in areas of personality variables, emotional disturbance, relationships and marriage, and in social adjustment and life choices (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:117)⁵. Since this research is inductive I was interested in any type of long-term effects described by respondents. However, while my questions were open ended they focused on social issues as opposed to psychological ones. For example, questions about relationships and life goals were asked rather than questions about self-esteem, mental health, and identity. Nevertheless, respondents linked the early loss of their mothers to a wide range of long-term effects.

Maturing Faster

Interviewees spoke of maturing rapidly in a variety of ways. For example, as previously discussed, a motherless daughter is likely to begin caring for others at an early age. Many motherless children attempt to protect and assist their family members in any way possible even when such actions are not entirely appropriate for the young person's

⁵ The long-term effects for a child who was physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abused by his or her mother are thought to be quite unique. Refer to Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss by Edelman (1994) for a discussion of abuse issues as they relate to mother loss.

developmental level (Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:141). Hatter explains why this phenomenon sometimes occurs and suggests a potential outcome:

In part, in these ways [motherless children] may be seeking to guard themselves and their families from further harm by working extra hard at being “good”. Children who adopt this course may be attempting to gain some measure of control over their disrupted lives by bargaining away their childhood. Often, these superachieving children are held up as models of behaviour to their peers or siblings. Their unmet grief needs seldom come to the attention of their caregivers. (Hatter in Corr & Corr, 1996:141)

It has been suggested in the literature that young people who have lost a parent to death grow up faster in many other ways as well (Worden, 1996:71). An example of this early maturity is demonstrated by the insightful perspectives on life which interviewees told me they were able to achieve at young ages:

I think when it happened it gave me a clear sense of this is life and this is death. There was a sense of there is more to this life. Where as my friends were getting into “how’s my hair look?” and you know “what do you think of my clothes?” and “do you think that guy is looking at me?”, I was like “who cares, my mom’s dead”. Huh. And I had that perspective that like these are the important things. . . those types of things I carried, and I think are still with me. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

For Julie, death of a mother raised fundamental issues about life and existence so that she could put superficial daily routines and problems into perspective. Similarly, Andy explained that the death of his mother provided him with a mature perspective on life and thus with an ability to accept and to cope well with problems that come his way.

Death has put things into perspective. I’m able to accept things. I’m able to deal with things and I don’t know a lot of twenty-three year olds who can do that. I look at people I’ve gone to school with and a lot of them just seem so lost...there’s just really no purpose for a lot of them...and it takes time. People go through what they need to go through and it has lead me to where I am today. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Several respondents also talked about the ways in which they think their loss may have contributed to a mature attitude about “doing what needs to be done” (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor told me that he developed this attitude because he had little choice:

I always had to do what had to be done and you just do it. As a kid as a whatever you are... you just do it and you work and that's what you do. It's no bullshit about it. Some people whine and they get all “Whew, whew, whew” you know. I don't. I don't know if it does or not...but it might stem a little from that because I had to do a lot of things for myself and so you mature quite quickly and you have to do it and there's nobody around you to help you or baby you or whatever. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Interviewees believe they matured rapidly in other ways as well. For instance, Andy explained that, “we had to be more responsible in the decisions we made” (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor also felt his loss resulted in him becoming more responsible at a young age. He told me that he was able to mature faster as a result of the increased independence he received when his mother was no longer alive:

I think definitely I got a lot more independence. I had to answer a lot less to...before if I went out late my mom would be on me a little bit, like they both would be, but my dad had to work and support three kids and you know work a lot so he couldn't keep track of me as much right so I got more independence. And you know with independence if you want to support yourself you've got a little more responsibility. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Respondents talked about the ways their early loss of mother resulted in them growing up faster. As has been illustrated “growing up faster” can mean a variety of different things. According to Julie, being mature meant caring about “the important things” in life as opposed to being overly concerned about superficial problems relating to appearances, peer pressure, and so on. Andy felt growing up related to being better

able to accept and deal with a variety of life's problems. For Victor, it meant more financial and emotional independence and responsibilities.

Arrested Development

When a mother dies, a child often has to mature rapidly in many ways. A motherless child must take on a variety of new duties for himself or herself and often for the entire family. In many cases, a motherless child becomes more independent and responsible. Perhaps, he or she even develops a more mature perspective on life. Respondents spoke a great deal about the ways that the death of their mother resulted in them growing up faster. Yet, at the same time, they spoke about their development being "stuck" in a variety of ways. They believed they acted child-like at times, and that they avoided doing certain "grown up" things as a way to maintain a relationship with their dead mother.

The literature similarly indicates that as a way to preserve a relationship with the dead mother, the child may maintain many features of the developmental stage he or she had reached at the time of the death. Even as the motherless child reaches adulthood, he or she may retain some characteristics of an earlier developmental phase (Edelman, 1994:42; Fleming, 1963; Fleming, 1972; Solomon & Hersch, 1979). Solomon and Hersch, authors of "Death in the family: Implications for family development", believe that this results from their attempts to protect themselves from the pain of grief (Solomon & Hersch, 1979:43). These writers also point out that arrested development may be an indication "not only of that individual's incomplete mourning, but also of the incompleteness of the mourning process for the whole

family” (Solomon & Hersch, 1979:44). This phenomenon is particularly likely to occur for those who were ages six to twelve at the time of their loss (Edelman, 1994:42). Interviewees admitted that in certain ways their development may have been arrested after the death of their mother. Craig suspected that this happened to him, although he also said he could not be certain if this halt in his development was caused by his early loss:

I never developed yah I was sort of stuck at age twelve after she died for a number of years after. Probably like oh quite a while probably. Aaah, I think I’m a lot behind probably five or six years I’d say, not in intellectual development but I just mean with social skills. Like I’m twenty-five and I’m probably about the level of an eighteen or nineteen year old now. So, I think I’m catching up but I mean I still feel there are certain things I can’t do very well. . . or maybe it has nothing to with a mother. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Other respondents experienced similar feelings. For example, Julie revealed that for many years she felt paralyzed in many areas of her development as a result of not having her mother in her life:

I found I think I was about twenty-two when I realized I wasn’t doing certain things and I was making excuses. . . there were some things I was a little paralyzed in and it took a conscious awareness that I’m not cooking for example because I feel like I can’t or that my mom will never teach me and then I had to overcome it. . . I went through my little paralysis of not getting anything done and having to learn skills that I figured my mom should have taught me. (Julie, Personal Interview)

How can experiencing early mother death cause individuals to grow up faster and to be stuck at earlier developmental stages at the same time? Perhaps different children experience the loss of their mother differently. Once again, intervening variables like personality may play a role. Mother death may cause certain individuals to grow up faster and others to become stuck. However, can these opposing phenomenon occur

simultaneously in the same individual? According to Julie's words, they can. She spoke of her mature perspective on life developing as a result of her mother's death. She also spoke of taking on a variety of adult roles at a young age. At the same time, she told me that her mother's death caused her to become paralyzed or stuck in certain areas, cooking for example.

One way to make sense of this contradiction is to see respondents as using learned discourses to describe their experiences. Respondents may have simply reported what they had heard, read, or learned in the past. On the other hand, perhaps both of these long-term effects can occur simultaneously in the same person. Growing up faster and being stuck may refer to different areas of functioning. However, in attempting to uncover what these different criteria might be I have been unsuccessful. It seems to me that there is an overlap in the areas that respondents identified as those where they were paralyzed and those where they were mature. Nevertheless, I still believe that it is possible for these opposite phenomena to occur in the same person albeit located in, or expressed in different areas of functioning or dimensions of personality.

Life Goals and Accomplishments

Experiencing the death of one's mother at an early age seems to influence one's rate of developmental growth. It may also determine the rate at which a variety of life goals are accomplished. For example, Victor told me that being motherless "made [him] achieve [his] goals a little earlier" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Writers explain that in many cases, an individual's early exposure to death results in him or her appreciating the importance of every day, and thus accomplishing more with his or her

time (Eisenstadt, Haynal, Rentchnick & de Senarclens, 1989:218). How is early mother loss thought to affect an individual's interests and ambitions regarding work and goals more generally? The existing literature on this topic suggests that children who lose parents generally respond in one of two ways:

They develop a sense of fatalism, expecting and even encouraging future unfortunate events to occur, or they pick themselves up, brush themselves off, and find the determination and motivation to continue. (Edelman, 1994:260)

The literature indicates that many motherless children become extremely ambitious and often pursue creative fields as their loss can act “as a trigger” and can “inspire latent talent to emerge” (Edelman, 1994:261). On the other hand, studies also indicate high rates of mother loss among juvenile delinquents and prisoners (Eisenstadt, Haynal, Rentchnick & de Senarclens, 1989:218).

The literature aside, common sense reminds us that these cannot possibly be the only ways motherless children will respond to their early loss. Furthermore, since these findings do not move in a single direction, it can be argued that mother loss may not be connected to these factors at all. If individuals who lost their mothers early in life consist of over-achievers, delinquents, and everything in between, how can we say that these forms of behaviour are connected to this experience? Moreover, these two extreme forms of social adjustment can also be found in the population at large. Nevertheless, much of the literature makes such connections between early childhood trauma and later adjustment (Freeman, 1992; Freeman, 1996; Edelman, 1995; Eisenstadt, Haynal, Rentchnick & de Senarclens, 1989). Michael Quinn Patton, in his book Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods, explains that many outcomes such

as this one are difficult to measure in terms of strength and intensity (Patton, 1990:420). For this reason, existing studies linking early mother loss with life goals or a variety of other social adjustment factors should be interpreted cautiously. Victor's words help to prove this point. He shared his sense that the types of things he has done with his life would have been the same if his mother were still alive. He said, "I would have done them anyway. Yah, I would have got into the same things. I mean I have a love for nature...I didn't get that when my mom died right?" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999).

Other respondents felt that there was a strong connection between experiencing the death of their mother and their life goals and accomplishments. Craig, for example, felt that his early loss did have a great deal to do with his goals and drive to be successful. He stated, "I'm ambitious and just want more than most people do I guess, and I'm not easily satisfied" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). He continued:

[I'm] a lot more ambitious probably. A lot more ambitious because I think if it wouldn't have happened I would have been more satisfied just to be leading a regular life. . . I think I became a lot more ambitious because I think I wanted to make up for it by aaah sort of I wanted to make some famous films or be a comedian or something. . . [I wanted to] make up for I don't know maybe I figure cause something bad happened to me so that I deserve more now sort of. . . I think I deserve more cause of what happened. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Andy also feels that his mother's death made him more ambitious and armed him with more drive to achieve his goals:

I think my mother's dying influenced a lot of my goals and things, just being able to map out what I want and when I want to do it, it's yah...I think it's influenced quite a bit. I think it made me want to work harder for it. It has sort of given me more ambition to do the things I want to do. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

In addition to making one more ambitious, a mother's death can also, as Andy said, help you "map out" what you want to do with your life. For example Stephanie knew that she wanted to be so many of the things her mother was. She shared her feeling that, "[I want] to be more like my mother and have a family and be you know...this supermom kind of thing" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). At the same time, a mother's death can make a child realize that he or she would like to be different from the deceased in a variety of ways. This was the case for Julie:

I see I push myself in some areas that I'm not very good at. I'm not very organized and I see some of my mom's weaknesses. We lived in a very messy house, things weren't all that organized. My mom wasn't perfect. She was an alcoholic actually, which... just a pseudo one, we didn't even know until I was thirteen cause she told us. I just thought every mother drank all day, but she was never a fall down drunk, but she did keep things in a bit of a disarray so I'll get a little bit anal about it and I'll be like "No, I don't want a house like that" and I'll think back to my childhood house and I get panicked. So, I don't know how much that's a life decision, but I'll do that. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

In a variety of ways, being a motherless child affects the things one does, or doesn't do, in life. Anna also felt that her life decisions were probably altered a great deal due to her mother's absence. She told me, "I'm sure that it affected [my life choices] because I believe that a mother is there to help you [and] guide you along" (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999). Craig told me about the various ways premature mother loss influenced the things he wants out of life:

I guess I'd try to find all these fun and exciting things to make up for it. . . wanting to do famous things and having like, getting more stuff like having fun and exciting times to make up for it, not necessarily having lots of money that's not really it, but maybe more fame or excitement or something, a more fun exciting life. I always want to have more fun because I feel like I have to make up for everything. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Craig continued to explain that his goals are “kind of out of the ordinary, the types of things most people don’t do. Aaaah I guess you know trying to get something that’s really hard to get because I think it’s owed to me” (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999).

While Craig felt that “more was owed to him” because of his early loss, other motherless children felt the opposite, that they in a sense owed more to others. This was particularly the case for women respondents. Each female respondent’s life goals and achievements involved helping others in some way. Female respondents did not speak of becoming more ambitious as a result of their mother’s death, as two of the three males did. Rather, they spoke of making life choices where they could be nurturers, carers, and communicators. Such differences can of course be linked to gender socialization more generally, however, female respondents also made strong connections between these choices and their early loss. Julie, for example, believes she became a social worker because of the familiarity she gained with social work roles in her every day life after her mother’s death.

Number one, I’m a social worker (she laughs). I guess I can’t really separate that from the loss. I think becoming a social worker came out of being a social worker for my family you know, being a communicator and a mediator and all those social workee roles. That I see as a direct link. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Female respondents also spoke of choosing a career that would provide them with the opportunity to give others what they did not have. Stephanie’s words demonstrate this:

I think it’s affected. . . what I’m doing now, being a social worker and wanting to help people and having that nurturing kind of caring thing happening that I think that I kind of always felt like I didn’t have so I kind of put that out to other people and I don’t know...maybe I’m overanalyzing but I just feel like that’s something I may not have done had I had a mother

figure all my life you know. I always felt like that had something to do with it. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

My talks with interviewees illustrate that there may possibly be some connection between gender, career choices, and the death of a mother. This may prove to be an interesting area for further investigation. Nevertheless, one interviewee reminded me that an individual's personality could have much more to do with career choice, or a decision to give back to the community, than experiencing the death of a mother:

I'm not sure whether I volunteer a lot and want to help other people because of my early loss or if that is just my personality. If I look at my sisters I'm very very different than my sisters. They lost their mother too and they're not doing those things. I think maybe that is personality. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Still, working, volunteering, and attending classes in the social service field, I have met many individuals who lost their mothers early in life. It seems to me that there may be a connection between early mother loss and going into a field where one helps and cares for others. Daniel Goleman points out in his book, Emotional Intelligence, that many individuals who suffered various types of emotional trauma in childhood are gifted at sensing what others around them are feeling (Goleman, 1995:102). He also stresses the strong link which exists between empathy and caring (Goleman, 1995:104).

You Become a More Emotional Person

Losing a mother when you are still a child affects an individual in numerous ways. As has been illustrated, it can affect one's relationships, one's development, and one's life goals. However, perhaps the most significant place a mother's death touches a person is in the emotional realm. . .at the core of one's being. Interviewees expressed

that their loss changed them at their core and in many cases made them a much more emotional person:

I know that I became a really emotional person, really really emotional. . . I see I'm a very emotional person and I don't know if I would be as emotional if I hadn't been through what I've been through. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Andy viewed this new emotional side to him as a gift:

I lost my mother when I was sixteen and I think it just gave me a little bit more to work with as far as the emotional aspect of life. [Her death] gave me the gift of being emotional. . . by my mother dying when I was sixteen it brought a lot of things, emotions and stuff together. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

In some cases, respondents told me that the experience of losing their mother early in life resulted in them having to deal with intense feelings from a young age.

Anger

For some individuals, experiencing intense feelings of anger seems to be a natural response to this traumatic loss. Anger "is understandable when one considers the amount of helplessness [death generates]. . . Anger is a valuable means of giving expression to the powerlessness that is felt" (Sanders in Doka, 1995:80). While Berlinsky and Biller point out that most empirical research on the topic of anger shows that bereaved children are less aggressive than non-bereaved children in childhood (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982:132), other writers have noted that parent loss is often responded to through rage and anger (Palombo, 1981:10; Black in Worden, 1996:62; Elizur & Kaffman, 1982 in Worden, 1996:62).

In this chapter anger will be explored as a long-term effect of early mother death. In Chapter Three short-term anger was explored as a coping mechanism. It was noted that anger of this form was expressed in covert ways, if it was expressed at all. A female respondent, Julie, was the only interviewee who expressed feeling this form of anger. She reported feeling angry at times but she did not come across as having ever been an angry person. Two of the three male interviewees on the other hand, talked about anger or rage as a feeling that continued to play a role in their lives years and decades after their initial loss. They told me that they felt angry at their core. They became angry people. Craig for example, admitted that “ever since then I was really mad at everybody”. Since his mother died he has felt very angry and has had difficulty controlling his temper:

I was just pretty much really mad. I didn't do anything really serious but I was just mad at people all the time. . . I still have a shorter temper now than I used to. Sometimes when something happens I lose my temper and start kicking something or just getting really mad. . . I guess I have a bit of a temper and I'll just start. . . if I'm in a traffic jam or something I'll get really mad and I'll just want to. . . I don't know. I think it is mostly because I never got enough attention so I was mad about that. . . so maybe a mother kind of fills in some of the gaps or something. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

He continued to tell me about a variety of other situations when he has lost his temper.

The following is a further example:

One time in grade ten. . .when I went to the private school they were saying anti-Semitic remarks so I turned around and punched the guy pretty hard a couple of times like five or six times. I just lost my temper. I find that I'm easily short tempered. Like in my head I'll get mad at people really quickly if they say something mean about me or something. I just...I guess I have a bit of a temper. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Craig spoke about losing his temper in many situations and feeling angry much of the time in the years since his mother's death:

Like after she died. . . I started doing things that were more I guess more violent things sometimes but I never really hit people too much. But I still . . . like I have a shorter temper than I used to. Sometimes when something happens I lose my temper and start kicking something or just getting really mad. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Frustrating situations do provoke anger. Human beings become angry sometimes. Yet, Craig spoke of carrying his anger with him much of the time.

The two respondents who told me they began feeling a deep and enduring sense of anger at the core of their being also reported demonstrating this anger in overt ways. In addition to losing his temper, Craig also admitted to using physical violence to express his anger at times. He told me about the ways he dealt with the overwhelming anger he so often felt after his mother's death. He explained, "I didn't like them very much. I was just mad. Like after she died it was when I was in grade seven, I threw over a couple of desks and things. I started doing things that were more violent" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor, also believed that he expressed the anger which had built up inside him in overt and harmful ways. He never used physical aggression to express this anger but rather social aggression:

I think I aaah right after my mom died I became very aggressive...very very angry...very aggressive. Not at anybody really, I just became aggressive. Not aggressive in I like wanted to fight people at all...right...but I became socially aggressive. . . I know that in grade eight and nine I was very socially aggressive and because I'm very quick minded it wasn't a good combination at all. Like I could really pick people apart. . . I was never aggressive with people as in fighting. I actually never got into a fight. But, in words...very aggressive. Nobody would ever pick a fight with me because I would be very hard...very

aggressive. . . I know it's a direct correlation to my mom dying. I became very aggressive. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Victor told me that he feels his social aggressiveness was "a very negative attitude" and that "it didn't help at all" (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Fortunately, Victor also found less harmful ways to deal with his anger for example he listened to heavy rock music. He also emphasized that he believed skateboarding and other athletic outlets were effective means of expressing his anger:

I took a lot of my frustration or anger or aggressiveness out in skateboarding. Like skateboarding really you know it's an aggressive sport and really you can ride hard and get rid of a lot of energy and negative energy that you have in you and I did skateboarding. That really helped out a lot. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

These two male respondents seemed to have been aware of their anger throughout the years and expressed it in a variety of overt ways. They did not hesitate to talk about or admit to their angry feelings.

Sadness and Loneliness

Other respondents said that they never felt angry, but that they were overcome with a variety of other emotions. Anna describes the feelings she has experienced throughout her life:

I don't have anger, a sadness, a lot of sadness and pain and emptiness. As soon as I started talking with you...I'm very psychic and sensitive, it was just as if something...as if there were a crippled part of me (she points to her arm). (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie also told me about the great sadness she feels at times. She confided that sometimes when she reminisces about her mother she cries. She said, "I was writing about my mom and I was just talking about the little things that I hold on to, the

memories, the little things that I do have is what I hold on to. I wrote that. . . and I totally broke down” (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999).

In Zall’s study, 86 percent of women who were parentally bereaved as young people described themselves as sad occasionally or frequently compared to 50 percent of the non-bereaved women (Zall, 1994:223). The bereaved women reported a lingering sadness about their life (Zall, 1994:227). Feelings of loneliness have been noted in the literature as a common outcome among individuals who suffered the death of a parent in their early years. If children are encouraged to stifle and deny feelings of grief, sadness, anger, or curiosity surrounding the death, the result may be loneliness in later years⁶. Feelings of loneliness and of emptiness can be problematic in the sense that lonely people often feel worthless, incompetent, and unlovable (Murphy, 1986:221). The literature indicates that there seems to be quite a consistent link between loneliness and low self-esteem (Murphy, 1986:221). Loneliness may be a much less likely feeling in later years if young people are provided with ample opportunity to participate in “grief work” (Murphy, 1986:220)⁷. Murphy describes loneliness as “a state in which a person is aware of not relating to others while experiencing a need for others - a sense of being incomplete” (Murphy, 1986:220).

Craig’s words support this definition of loneliness. He explained:

In one way I want to be with lots of people, but in another way as soon as they get too close I push them away. I want to have lots of friends and things but then I don’t get along. . . I end up by myself. I never really had anybody. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

⁶ This theme will be addressed in Chapter six.

⁷ This is of course assuming that grief work is a useful coping strategy for all people, which it may not be. This issue is explored in chapter six.

It has been postulated that loneliness is not experienced as a sense of loss but rather as a sense of incompleteness (Leiderman, 1969 in Murphy, 1986:220). The final section of this chapter will describe the various ways respondents have felt a sense of emptiness or incompleteness since the time of their mother's death.

An Emptiness Inside

McClowry, Davies, May, Kulemkamp, and Martinson found that rather than describing resolution, after seven to nine years since their loss, family members described the presence of an "empty space" in their lives (McClowry et. al., in Doka, 1995:151). Perhaps there was no theme as unanimous among respondents as this one. When a mother dies, "there's always something missing" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). "[You feel] very isolated. . . [You seem] to be more alone", said Anna (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999). She continued to share how alone she has felt living life without a mother:

Yes, you always feel like there's something missing, that there's part of you missing, that you're not a whole person and you look at other kids, you look at your friend, and you always feel like something is...I don't know how to explain that, but there is...you just don't feel like the same person, or you look at your friend, there's something that's missing, you're not the same as everybody else...at least that is the way I was affected. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

The emptiness and loneliness experienced by motherless children may also lead them to feeling as though they don't quite fit in. Anna continued to explain that she felt very different than the other kids growing up and throughout her life:

I felt different than the other kids. . . I just know that, funny enough something I haven't talked about for a very long time, it almost feels like something has been cut off...you've been crippled here (she points to her

arm)...like something has been cut off here (she points to her arm again)...something is missing. When I started telling you about this that's the way I felt. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Andy also confided, "there's times where I feel like I don't fit in because people my age, like twenty-three, often don't have the same kind of perspective. Death has put things into perspective for me" (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999).

In the Early Years

One's reasons for missing a mother clearly change throughout the years. A young person feels a very different type of gap or emptiness in the early years after the loss than he or she does decades later. Respondents thought back to the time near their mothers' deaths and told me what it was they missed about her in those years. For the most part, as children and as teenagers they missed the physical and instrumental things mothers tend to do for their children. For instance Julie explained, "I missed her then because she couldn't drive me around. I was so selfish then (she laughs). You know just being a kid, those practicalities" (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Stephanie felt similarly, "Yah. I think as a kid you just miss having your mom like you know...for like little things like I was saying...someone to kiss your boobies and all that stuff" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor's words help to sum up what it was that interviewees missed about their mothers when they were younger:

When I was younger I missed her more for having a person to take care of you as a mother would you know...instead of having to do everything yourself as a kid you know. Like nobody to baby you at all. This was just like rough world now right. I really missed that. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

How the Loss Changes Through the Years

Interviewees all agreed that the reasons for missing a mother change a great deal as you grow up. They all told me that once they no longer needed her to carry out roles like driving them around, or putting Band-Aids on their cuts, they began missing her for more emotional reasons. For example, respondents told me that they began to miss having an adult relationship with their mothers. Stephanie explained, “and [I miss] having that adult relationship with a mom that you didn’t get” (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). Many motherless children feel that they never got the chance to know their mother, to get her advice, and to tell her about what they are doing in life (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:167). As Stephanie put it, “when you get older you want that input in your life. You want to know those things about your mom and what she went through and how...and what she did to get through things...” (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). These are the types of things you learn through having long and sentimental discussions with a mother.

Every respondent talked a great deal about missing these types of conversations with their mothers. Andy described how much one can miss conversations with a mother when he or she gets older:

Yah, ummm I think for the most part I just miss the conversations. When I was younger my mother would always ask a lot of questions. She would always talk to me, and I didn’t like it. I hated it cause it was just “leave me alone, I don’t want to talk to you” but you know it’s just being a youth. Being an adolescent you just kinda you don’t want to talk to your parents because it’s just not a cool thing to do or whatever, but now yah, that’s one of the things I probably miss the most because from where I am now, you know you can understand the conversation, that’s one of the things...I just miss talking to her. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Like Andy, Victor did not identify any specific thing which he missed talking to his mother about. He also, “just missed talking to her”. He divulged, “essentially now I miss, I miss like just having...just having conversations about. . .you know things that you’re curious about. . . I miss her for the normal day to day conversations” (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999). Craig missed talking to his mother about what he was doing in life and for advice. He told me, “Ummm, I guess sometimes I miss it a bit now because I guess there’s things I do that I’d like my mother to see or something and talk about them but I can’t anymore and I can’t get advice anymore it’s kind of gone” (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie missed talking to her mother for similar reasons. She explained, “There was that sense of who am I and I’m not in high school anymore and where am I going, what do I want in this life time and nobody to talk to about it with” (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999). Anna also missed talking things over with her mother throughout the years. She expressed, “Oh, you would love to sit down and talk these things over. . . very often I would love to sit down with my mother and be able to talk some things over you know just talk. . . and I’ll never get that” (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999). Stephanie will miss conversations with her mother about having a family and raising children:

I mean when you’re a kid I just don’t think...I mean you understand the scope of it I think but it just feels like it’s not...it doesn’t impact you as much until you know that you’re going to have your own family and you know you’re not going to. . .be able to sit and talk about what it was like to raise kids or you know just silly little things. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Interviewees missed their mothers for a variety of other reasons throughout adulthood as well. For example, as part of missing conversations with their mothers several of them mentioned that they missed being able to have a friendship with her:

As I hit my early twenties I missed her as a friend cause I knew that was what should have happened and that process never happened and my friends were going through it and it was an ugly stage for some of them. . . but I could see how it was turning out for the best. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

When I asked interviewees how their experience of being motherless changed through the years, they agreed that “as you get older it becomes a little bit more significant” (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999) and that “it becomes more real. You begin to realize that it is forever” (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999). While Julie admitted that she was not sure if she would have come to the same conclusions without having done background reading in the area, she shared an interesting insight about the way the experience of being motherless changes throughout the years. She told me:

Yes, partly I read a book so I cheated . . . I think my experience of losing her as a child was...losing her as a child and not really understanding what that was and you lose her again as the years go by and so I felt like I lost her again in my early twenties very much because there was that sense of who am I. . . and [I was missing] that mirror. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Julie raised an especially critical point. One does not only lose a mother once. One is not typically able to resolve his or her feelings of grief and move on. It seems that it is very natural to regrieve a mother's death with each new stage of development and with each new stage of life. As Hope Edelman explains:

Here's what I've learned about grief. . .It's not linear. It's not predictable. It's anything but smooth and self-contained. Someone did us all a grave injustice by first implying that mourning has a distinct beginning, middle,

and end. That's the stuff of short fiction. It's not real life. Grief goes in cycles, like the seasons, like the moon. . . Mourning works like a series of cycles: one ends and a new one begins, slightly different than its predecessor, but with the same fundamental course. (Edelman, 1994:5)

This is why a motherless child can feel as though he or she has mastered feelings of grief one day, and then find him or herself mourning the loss all over again soon after. Stephanie explained that special events and rights of passages are especially likely to rekindle feelings of sadness and loss. She said, "there's these big things in our life that happen and you're not going to have that. . . I mean you want your mother there at your wedding" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). She continued, "I think now as I get older it really...I mean I didn't notice it when I graduated from high school and all that kind of stuff and I probably won't when I graduate from university but big things like weddings and babies" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). Julie further illustrated this point:

It changed again after I got married and just not having that friendship with my mom, and asking her advice and I figure it will change again when I have children and just knowing that I don't have the extra support system. Anticipating when I have children, if we have children, we won't have grandma to send as a babysitter, where I had my grandma, well I still do and that was such a close relationship and knowing that my children won't have that, that's a loss in itself.(Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Anna also described regrieving her loss decades after her mother's death when her husband died. She explained:

I mean just think, it could have been possible that my mother was alive when my husband died. I was...again I was alone. So you see, you think that if you have a mother that the pain...of all that you've lost in life would be less because you would have a mother to share the pain with. That's the way I feel. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

While the experience of being motherless clearly alters throughout the years, some things about it never change. As Anna suggests, "I think it is still that feeling of...I wonder what it must be like to have a mother. . . you always wonder what it must be like to have a mother that you can go to, to talk, for comfort, for love, for affection" (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999).

Missing the Mother-Daughter Relationship

All motherless children reported missing and longing for their mothers, but there seem to be significant gender differences in the ways this loss is experienced. Carol Gilligan explains that such differences may be related to the unique nature of the mother-daughter relationship. She writes "girls, in identifying themselves as female, experience themselves as like their mothers. . . and boys, in defining themselves as masculine, separate their mothers from themselves" (Gilligan, 1993:8). It seems that there would therefore be critical differences for girls and boys who lose their mothers early in life. When a mother dies, the relationship males and females lose is different and therefore the effects of the loss are distinct. Respondents' words illustrate that the loss of the mother-daughter relationship may be an exceptionally meaningful one. As Andy suggested, "If there was a girl, if it was coming from a girl's perspective, because there's such a huge bond between a mother and a daughter, the loss would be a lot more difficult" (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). Stephanie further explained, "I think that gender wise, I think a girl looks for that kind of relationship with somebody like their mom" (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999). Victor also told me how he believes the unique relationship that a daughter loses when her mother dies affects females differently:

I think generally I had an easier time coping with it than my sister did. I think that...I think I don't know right...I think that especially in the teenage years I think a mom plays a pretty big role in a girl's life, much bigger than a mother would play in the role of me as a teenager, as a boy. And aaaah, and yah I think sometimes too that being a male you know and still having my dad you know...I think it was different in the way that it was a little bit easier. I think I could cope easier because I still had my dad and I think it was...I know it was a lot harder for my sister to bond with my dad than it was for her to bond with my mom. My mom was obviously much easier for her to bond with. And my dad is pretty much the easiest going guy there is around so I'm just guessing from that experience that yah a mom is super important in a woman's development. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Stephanie continued to explain the significant loss that a female child experiences when her mother dies:

I think that there's something with mothers and daughters that sons and mothers don't really get. There's a common thing. I can't explain it. I don't know...but and because I haven't...I didn't have that time with her...that I don't really know it that well but I think that there's always been something missing in that sense...that I didn't have. . . I think I've always been looking for that kind of relationship that I would have had with my mother that maybe a guy, a boy wouldn't be looking for. They probably look for that through their dad, you know what I mean? (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

For my respondents gender match between the child and the deceased parent seemed to play an important role in determining the long-term effects of the loss. Furthermore, the literature indicates that a close relationship with a same-sex parent, especially in the early adolescent years, is thought to be of particular importance (Worden, 1996:63) in the short and long-term. How much, and in what ways, does losing a mother affect a female's identity?

The Female Identity is Affected

Gender identity can be affected quite significantly when a female loses her mother early in life. Females may become self-conscious about their feminine identity, and their

perceived lack of knowledge about so many of the things our society deems as feminine. They may feel as though they missed learning some of the secrets to being a woman because their mother died before it was time for her to teach them those things. They may even feel as though they are always searching for clues. As Edelman explains, “without a mother or mother-figure to guide her, a daughter also has to piece together a female self-image on her own” (Edelman, 1994:XXV). “[A motherless daughter is] looking for clues that will tell her how to be a girl and trying to create a feminine identity through observation and mimicry after her natural window to adult female experience has been closed” (Edelman, 1994:178). Through the words of a friend, Julie realized how much not having this window, or mirror, affected her throughout the years:

I had a friend explain it to me, not explain it to me but sort of reflect on it years later and she said, “I think what you’re missing is you’re missing that mirror that you have when you have a mother because a mother either nit picks apart your behaviour and says you shouldn’t do this and you should do that or you see it mirrored just in your mom and you watch her and you observe her” and in my teenage years I didn’t have that so that’s what she observed and I saw that very much. I didn’t have that person to compare to, to learn from and so as I grew up I didn’t feel like I learned some very basic things that my other friends just took for granted because they just knew...things like how to cook and how to clean the house (she laughs) and other things that their mothers taught them and words of advice and as they got into that friendship with their mothers that was different cause it’s always different to be a friend to your dad because there is that gender difference. Yah, yah, so very very much that role model was missing. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

The literature indicates that, “issues of identity and gender identification may be complicated by the sex of the deceased parent” (Anderson Miller in Adams & Deveau, 1995:101). “When the same-sex parent is no longer available as a guide and the sex role model is missing, identity problems increase” (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:169).

Sons Need Mothers Too

The literature emphasizes that losing a mother has significant effects on a daughter, however, little attention is given to the son, and the important role model that he too misses. While only one respondent mentioned this, I believe it is a critical point to note. Craig emphatically insisted:

But they think that for some reason. . . that if it's a guy they only need a male role model, but if they don't have a female role model they don't bother because they figure well why do guys need that because they'd be gay or something, like the less female influence the better. That's kind of the way they think. Like if a guy lost a father they'd send him to Big Brothers or something but if they lost a mother they don't find them a female role model because they figure they don't really need it. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

There are many reasons that a son may miss having a female role model in his life. Craig, for example, feels that he missed out on learning important communication skills as a result of his mother's death. He believes that if she had not died so early he would not have so much difficulty talking about his feelings. He also told me that he thinks his mother would have taught him valuable lessons in building meaningful relationships, especially with women.

SUMMARY

This chapter explored the long-term effects that early mother loss may have on identity. The literature and respondents' words indicate that there is a tendency for motherless children to mature faster in some cases and to experience arrested development in others. Life goals and accomplishments, as they relate to early mother loss, were also described in this chapter. All of the motherless daughters interviewed linked their participation in caring activities in their employment or volunteer work to

their early loss. This was not the case for male respondents. Finally, respondents talked about the ways in which this experience changes a person on an emotional level, often leaving them with strong feelings of anger, sadness, and a sense of incompleteness throughout their lives. This sense of incompleteness changes throughout the years and seems to be influenced to some degree by the gender of the child.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The emphasis of traditional social work on the individual. . . has made it easy for workers to ignore questions of overall social change (Ben Carniol, 1992:114).

INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Obviously the social problem of early mother death cannot be eliminated. However, exploring interventions may help lead to positive change for those affected by this loss. This chapter will consider structural changes such as the transformation of our “death denying” culture (DeSpelder & Strickland, 1982:19) through education and the work that helps people to recognize that there are diverse attitudes regarding what constitutes appropriate grieving. Since change cannot occur at the societal level without first occurring in individuals and families, a variety of interventions at the micro and mezzo levels are also suggested. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that researching new areas relating to this social problem is another very important contribution for change. This chapter will conclude with some suggestions for further study which have arisen out of this work.

Interventions suggested in this chapter may be useful for a diverse audience such as motherless individuals, their caregivers, teachers and many professionals working with the motherless population. However, recommendations are more specifically aimed at

social workers and the various ways they can assist bereaved individuals and families through direct intervention and through advocating for necessary social change.

Changing Societal Attitudes

We, as a society, need to change our attitudes about death if we are to assist bereaved young people, especially young men. Keeping in mind a previous discussion about the diversity among Canadians and the way they understand death, there still exists a general tendency to deny death and to avoid talking about it in our society. As long as death, and particularly mother death, is viewed as a taboo subject, young people who do want and need to talk about their loss in an open and honest manner, cannot. If Canadians are not comfortable talking about death, they may not be able to discover what assistance a child needs. It is natural in our social climate for people to fear death, but since it occurs and is inevitable we must learn to talk about related fears and feelings. Death impacts everyone in one form or another and at one time or another. How do we become more comfortable talking about death? If change is ever going to occur in this area we need to stop viewing early mother death as only a private trouble and begin viewing it as a public issue as well.

While the home is an important place to begin changing attitudes about death, they cannot be changed there alone. Even in homes where talking is encouraged, young people go out into the world where they are silenced. The responsibility for changing attitudes, and for assisting bereaved children, is both a private and a public responsibility. Craig believes that the state should take some responsibility for assisting in this area. He said, "I don't know maybe it's more of. . . something the government people should do to make sure everybody's O.K. I don't know" (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999).

While it seems unlikely that the state will become involved in an area which is generally viewed as a private matter, changes in societal attitudes about death must begin somewhere. Probably, the best way to begin changing attitudes about death is to begin talking about it when it comes up naturally, when we need to. It follows that social workers, school counselors, and teachers can begin promoting this talk by engaging openly in discussion about death in their professional and personal lives when appropriate. Once people start talking more openly about death, societal attitudes may begin to change. There is clearly a need for increased training to these professionals so that they can assist others.

Death Education

There should be death education for professional helpers, it is just a matter of what type and to what degree (Stillion, 1985:144). As Stillion writes, "one way of viewing death education is as a preventive mental health measure" (Stillion, 1985:147). Death education could occur in a variety of venues, not only in the private home, but in universities, in colleges, in schools, in the media, in religious settings, and so on. But, currently it is very easy for most people, even those trained to work in a helping capacity with others, to avoid the topic altogether. For example, no one is required to take courses in death and dying at university or college, even those going into the human service fields (Stillion, 1985:146). Although workshops on death-related topics are becoming increasingly common in the work force, these provide only a beginning step (Stillion, 1985:147) as they are generally too short and intense to create changes in attitudes and thinking. Such changes would take much effort over a significant period of time (Stillion, 1985:147). When death-related education does enter the classroom

interdisciplinary teaching would be very beneficial (Corr in Wass & Corr, 1984:51). It is important for people to understand death and to learn about grief interventions from a variety of perspectives. However, death education should not be limited to classrooms. It should take place in day-to-day life when opportunities arise (Corr in Wass & Corr, 1984:52):

Education is not confined to the limited time frames of the classroom; and events in life that impinge on the community, the home, the school, or the individual child can have power and potential far exceeding traditional forms of pedagogy. (Corr in Wass & Corr, 1984:52)

Corr emphasizes that all adults, particularly professionals working with children, should take advantage of “teachable moments”. For example, when a child finds a small dead animal with whom he or she has no great attachment, an adult could take the time to engage the child in a conversation about death rather than avoiding the subject matter. Corr also suggests engaging the child in conversations about death during “nurturing moments”, when someone close to the child dies (Corr in Wass & Corr, 1984:53).

How do gender differences fit into death education? Stillion explains that while gender differences in relation to bereavement are very real and that death educators and counselors need to be aware of gender differences (Stillion, 1985:144), “they are not necessarily bases on which to build separate death education. . . programs” (Stillion, 1985:142). Still, she suggests that when socialization pressures lead to denial, dependency, or stoicism it is necessary to be aware of and address sex differences (Stillion, 1985:142).

Separate death education programs are probably not necessary. However, existing information regarding gender differences should play a role in determining the goal of death education. A significant finding in this study and in the existing literature is

that in many cases males and females grieve differently. For example, girls and women seem to find more outlets to express their feelings of loss and pain. Boys and men are more likely to fall into the category of “silent sufferers”¹. It is widely thought that such distinctions are the result of differing socialization processes among male and female children. However, some individuals also believe that these distinctions are the result of biological or innate differences between the genders. In exploring interventions it is helpful and perhaps even necessary to understand the root causes of any gender differences that do in fact exist. After all, viewing gender as constructed rather than ‘natural’ allows for social change (Field, Hockey & Small, 1997:7) in a very different way.

In considering socialization as the root cause of gender, we first need to be sure that our current assumptions are accurate. Do people with expressive grieving styles really cope better in the long run? The existing literature seems to point to the fact that they do (Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:105; Dietrich, 1979 in Berlinksy & Biller, 1982:124; Kransler, Shaffer, Wasserman, & Davies, 1989:518). However, are these individuals coping better because they do grief work or because their ways of grieving are understood? It is important to consider that findings which indicate that bereaved males suffer more than females in the long run may not necessarily be related to their difficulties expressing emotional pain. These differences could be related to the fact that their ‘natural’ grieving styles are not acknowledged or encouraged by the important people in their lives and by society at large.

¹ This is of course only the general tendency. Anna, one of the interviewees in this study, could clearly be defined as a “silent sufferer”.

Nevertheless, if we abide by the assumption that grief work is helpful, and if socialization has caused the genders to grieve differently, then we would want to somehow promote the expression of feelings, particularly with males. Stillion argues this point:

In addition to feeling that they have to be strong for others, many males may actually fear that if they let go emotionally they may not be able to regain control; that they may be overwhelmed by grief and unable to handle it. While some females may also share this fear, it generally is not as powerful a threat to a female's total identity as it is to that of a male, who may have internalized independence and competence as the core of his identity. To be overwhelmed by emotion may be to feel "unmanned" and therefore less than competent. Males may need more reassurance that they will receive support and that, although painful, expression of emotion is healthy. (Stillion, 1985:152)

Men and boys are exposed to fierce socialization to deny their feelings of grief. If we abide by the assumption that grief work is necessary, and that socialization hinders this important work for males, then we ought to consider changing societal beliefs and fears about death and grieving. Teaching all people, especially males, that grieving and talking about death are acceptable and healthy means of coping with and adapting to loss would be major components of such a task. Yet, even if the common male response to grief is not through expressive work, but through instrumental work, it must be recognized that the transformation of deeply rooted gender differences will not be easily achieved. While education will continue to play an important role in social conditioning, it in itself is not sufficient for social transformation.

On the other hand, if it is nature that contributes to different grieving styles, should we be tampering with biology and molding people into something they are not? I don't think we should. I think we should respect and find strategies that suit people's 'natural' differences. In this case, in changing societal attitudes we would want to create

a shift in what is thought of as appropriate grieving for people, particularly for males. In this sense, death education would mean encouraging and teaching individuals to use and appreciate methods of coping that are comfortable and 'natural' for them. It would also mean teaching those who prefer more traditionally expressive ways of coping to understand and accept a variety of alternative grieving styles in others. In fact, even if differences in this area are caused mainly by socialization they still exist and therefore need to be acknowledged in some way.

From the above, it should be clear that whether we understand gender differences as socially constructed or innate, it is senseless and harmful to push grief work on individuals whose characteristics do not find this type of coping strategy comfortable or useful. To suggest that grief work may not be necessary for some people is a controversial notion, but a worthwhile consideration. Grief work may not be as integral as has previously been believed, or it may be critical for some individuals but not for others. While five out of six respondents stressed the importance of talking as a form of grief work, Andy pointed out that it is important for individuals "to deal with it in whatever way [they] need to deal with it" (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999). For some individuals, this may mean having the space to grieve alone, without sharing their emotions. For others, this may mean denial and avoidance for a period of time. Andy further explained:

When I look at it now, just learning to respect people's boundaries and their privacy, in the way they need to deal with something, just in that respect I learned a lot cause like when she passed away they gave me time to learn to deal with it. Now when I look at it I know that some people need their own space. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Perhaps grief work is a more 'natural' method of coping for many females and for fewer males (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:203). If some individuals' 'natural' ways of grieving are different than others, we need to be sensitive to this as workers, as friends, and as family members. We must perhaps take a whole new line of thinking and encourage individuals to grieve in ways that are most comfortable for them. We should not push people to talk about their feelings or to cry because this may not be the most effective method for them to work through their grief. As Victor explained:

Well you know generally I think young people don't really understand what is going on. It's kind of like a whirl wind so I think pushing them to talk about their emotions or pushing them you know to get it out and oh "you should cry" and telling them what they should and shouldn't do is a really bad thing. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

We must let the bereaved know that their 'natural' grieving styles, whatever those may be, are accepted and appreciated². We must let them know that they are being heard even if they are not expressing themselves in words. We must learn about less acknowledged coping styles so that we can understand some of what is going on for a grieving person even when there are no tears to be seen. We must realize that not seeing any overt signs does not signal that an individual is not grieving, or that he or she is not grieving adequately or properly.

A "Dual Process Model of Coping"

Stroebe and Schut in their "dual process model of coping" suggest that typical interventions encouraging grief work "do not take adequate account of preferred masculine ways of going about grieving, which are typically less confrontive with respect

² We must accept and encourage different styles of grieving much like we have begun accepting different learning styles. Vansoest and Kruzich (1994) explore various learning styles in their article, "The influence of learning styles on student and field instructor perceptions of field placement".

to the emotion of grief, and less overtly expressive of distress and depression than those found among females” (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:203). They go on to explain that female grief has been much more studied, which is “a reversal of the usual trend in psychological research to generalize from a largely male sample” (Carverhill & Chartier, 1996 in Stroebe & Schut, 1999:204). This raises the important question of whether the “grief work hypothesis” so often described in the literature and encouraged by clinicians is in fact useful for the male population. Stroebe and Schut propose that perhaps this is a “female model of grieving” (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:204). Stroebe and Schut suggest that a “dual process model of coping” may be more conducive to the ‘natural’ types of grieving experienced by both genders. This coping model suggests ‘oscillation’ between loss-oriented grief work and restoration-oriented coping mechanisms, such as keeping oneself busy with a variety of new tasks. The important points here are that both forms of coping are necessary and that they work together. As Stroebe and Schut explain, a back and forth process among these two forms of coping are needed for “optimal adjustment over time” (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:216). But, perhaps some individuals may have more inclination to stay on one or the other side of the continuum. Those who are comfortable with or who emphasize the importance of grief work interventions might believe that restoration-oriented coping strategies are maladaptive. However, these strategies can be very useful and ‘natural’ ways of coping.

Understanding “a dual process model of coping” and different grieving styles is important for workers and for family members, especially where gender is concerned. For example, if a sister can begin to understand her brother as grieving differently than she, rather than thinking he is not grieving at all, then she will know he needs her support.

She can be there for him. She may also feel closer to him in realizing he shares her grief. In this way, both of them will be helped (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:219). It is beneficial for both genders to learn about such a model which honours difference.

My research supports the use of a “dual process model of coping”. While respondents found that loss-oriented coping strategies such as talking about their loss were helpful, they also realized that such coping mechanisms were not always possible. For example, sometimes they had nobody to talk to, and other times they seemed to need respite from dealing with their grief in overt ways. During these times, they instinctively turned to restoration-oriented coping mechanisms like denial/avoidance, keeping busy, and putting much emphasis and effort into their new roles within the family.

Changing Roles

Another important gender difference noted in the existing literature and in the interviews conducted for this research relates to changing roles after a mother's death. It seems that females, particularly eldest daughters, tend to take on a variety of ‘motherly’ roles after the death. Taking on such roles can have some benefits for the daughter and therefore it would not be advisable for social workers and others working with or caring for the maternally bereaved to discourage young women from undertaking these new responsibilities. In some families her assistance is truly necessary. However, even when her assistance in these areas is not necessary, these new roles may also allow the daughter to identify with her dead mother, to take some control over the family's situation, to keep busy, and to feel proud of her accomplishments and the way she is helping out (Baker & Sedney, 1996: 128-129). In fact, because there are benefits to carrying out some of the mother's previous roles, it may be advisable to encourage male

siblings to also assist in these duties. This point seems particularly relevant since Stroebe and Schut suggest that males are thought to have more of an inclination toward restoration-oriented coping styles, and that keeping busy and taking on new roles play a major part in this type of coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Male children should be encouraged as much as female children to assist in various ways in the home. At the same time however, young people of either sex should not be treated like adults. While much of the work they take on in their new role may be necessary, family members must be sure to acknowledge and appreciate the work that is being done and they also must assure the young person that they are not expected to do everything alone. Family members should work as a team and a young person should not have to feel overwhelmed with adult responsibilities (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:121). Appropriate limits to such responsibilities should be discussed openly to ensure that the young person does not become overwhelmed or burdened by these new roles and that he or she does not lose out on being a child or teenager.

If other options are available to make up for the lost role in the home, they should be considered so that young people do not have to bear an inappropriate level of responsibility. Extended family members can sometimes provide a great deal of support and assistance in this area. An old custom which still takes place in South Africa is a useful example of how extended family can help. This custom involves a relative moving into the home when a parent has died. This person becomes a surrogate parent, provides emotional support, and helps with household tasks. The length of stay varies with individual families but averages about a year.

In modern day Canadian society it seems unlikely that such a custom would occur on a large scale. Western countries tend to be low context. Values of individualism are generally learned more than those of obligation and interdependence (Herberg, 1993:28). In addition, there are few rules or well defined guidelines relating to social life. When a death occurs in the family, or in the community, people do not know what to do. There are no explicit guidelines, customs, or rituals for offering support. Canadian society is diverse and we hear of numerous ways to offer support. We often do not know what our role is or what type of assistance to offer the bereaved. Furthermore, in our society there would be the problem of wage labour, in which the relative would have to move or lose employment to change residences. Another reason why this custom would not be widely practised in Canadian society is due to the nuclearized family. We tend to limit our primary sense of responsibility and obligation to the immediate family, that is one's spouse and one's children.

While this custom is not likely to be practised widely in Canada it does provide a useful insight as it recognizes the emotional and practical needs of a bereaved family (Weizman & Kamm, 1985:122). Such forms of assistance recognize that new familial roles need to be established over a more extended time period and thus with more ease. Furthermore, the presence of another adult in the home demonstrates the need to ensure that the bereaved child is given the opportunity re-establish close relationships with another person.

Female Role Modelling

In the previous chapter it was noted that motherless daughters missed having a female role model, or a mirror. Julie explained that she would have appreciated spending more time with a role model:

I remember going up to camp every year and I would seek out this woman who I really felt a connection to and just sitting in her little office and asking her questions and things like that, and I just loved the time that I spent with her, and it was just once, it was just an hour. So I think I would have enjoyed spending a little bit more time with a female role model. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Julie continued to explain that she particularly missed having a female role model who she could talk to and who would draw her out:

I think it would have been neat if I had some person to draw me out. . . if there had been another person who was a bit older who could have helped draw me out, I think if they were female too, when I envision it, I always envision it to be a female. (Julie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Furthermore, Craig emphasized that having a female role model to be there after a mother's death is important for boys as well as girls:

They should think about Big Sisters [for boys] or something, (he laughs). It seems kind of silly but maybe they should have something like that because they have Big Brothers for boys [and Big Sisters for girls] don't they? But for some reason, if it's a guy they think he only needs a male role model. . . if a guy lost a father they'd go to Big Brothers or something but if they lose a mother they don't because they figure they don't really need it. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

Perhaps such a program should be created. Women could volunteer to be role models for bereaved young people who desired such an intervention. Or, perhaps in some cases there could be a greater emphasis on this happening naturally within the extended family. Perhaps grandmothers, aunts, older cousins and others could be encouraged to intervene. However, it is important to keep in mind that many of these family members may be

grieving the loss themselves and therefore will not be able to offer consistent support to the bereaved young person. Social workers could help to facilitate volunteers or extended family intervention and support as appropriate.

Family Involvement

There is consensus in the literature that immediate and extended family is extremely important in determining how the bereaved individual copes with his or her loss. "A useful metaphor in bereavement work is of a family sharing an unwelcome and difficult journey into unknown territory with each person needing the support of the other. Most people feel that a shared journey is safer than traveling alone" (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:136). At the same time, it is critical to recognize that each family member is experiencing his or her own pain. It is not fair or feasible to expect any particular family member to act as a consistent source of support to other bereaved loved ones. Social workers must be careful to only recommend or encourage family members to play an active role in the grief work of bereaved young people in cases where they feel certain that this is appropriate. Social workers must attempt to reassure family members that they will best help grieving children by taking care of their own emotional needs first. By assisting family members in finding other appropriate sources of support for the bereaved young people they love, social workers may relieve some of their stress, anxiety, and guilt.

While most of the literature emphasizes the importance of family throughout the healing process, it does not often relate such findings to interventions. "Classic psychoanalytic methods of child treatment, for example, explicitly exclude parents and family from the treatment process. Even less traditional child-focused therapy usually

considers family more as a helpful adjunct than as an integral part of the process” (Rosen in Corr & Corr, 1996:224). While there are many cases where this is not possible or not healthy for the child or the adult (for example when the family member must take care of his or her own grief needs, or when a family member is abusive to the bereaved young person), in other cases the family can be a central part of a young child’s healing process. What this means for intervention would vary from family to family. The personality of the child, the family dynamics, the family’s beliefs about death, and so on would all need to be considered. Perhaps, social workers could play a larger role in helping a family determine a suitable and appropriate plan of care. The following are some suggestions described in the literature that may assist in promoting family involvement in the healing process when appropriate.

In working with families it can be very helpful for social workers to make a genogram³. This activity provides insight into family composition and significant family events including other death and loss experiences (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:121). Furthermore, in working with a family to create this tool, valuable insights about how the family members coped with other losses and thus how they may be coping with this one could be learned. Creating a genogram may also provide social workers with information concerning unresolved grief from past losses. Such losses are important to know about as they could contribute to making this one even more traumatic and stressful (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:123). Through this process a worker can also gain insight into the family dynamics, particularly with regard to how family members communicate with one another (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:126).

³ “A family genogram is a graphic representation of one’s family tree. It provides a picture of the parties involved and a chronology of significant events or themes” (Cournoyer, 1996:13).

Social workers can also encourage families to create memory books (with pictures, special events, and anecdotes) together, or they can assist children to create their own (Pope, 1991:56). This activity assists children in remembering the deceased and in keeping their memory alive (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Hanson, 1993 in Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:124). Research confirms that a child may need assistance in maintaining memories of their loved one (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Hanson, 1993 in Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:137). Working on a memory book also serves as a vehicle to spending time with the child and letting him or her know that he or she is cared for (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:129).

Be There for the Young Person

Perhaps the most important thing adult family members can do is to let the child know that he or she is cared for and is not alone. A child needs stability. He or she needs to know that the surviving parent or other adults will be there for him or her (Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:110) or that they will find the child additional sources of support when they cannot fulfill all of the child's needs:

Young children require constant, consistent, accurate, truthful, loving support and attention. They need to know they are loved, lovable, and safe. They need to know they will continue to be loved, cared for, and safe, and will remain members of the family, enjoying its protection. (Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:113)

The young person needs to be listened to carefully to feel cared for. Listening carefully will also provide much information to adults regarding a child's needs. Adults should not assume they know what the young person is or is not feeling. Females may more readily admit fears and concerns than males (Stillion, 1985:149). While a male child may not speak of his fears openly, this does not mean he does not have any. "Providing comfort

and support means being available when children want to talk about concerns and feelings that have arisen for them” (Metzgar & Zick in Corr & Corr, 1996:256) and also being there when a child does not talk. As Anna pointed out:

I think it is very important that you spend time and maybe reassure them that you’re not going to go too. Especially at the start, to discuss with the child because maybe the child, depending on the child’s temperament may not want to discuss it and you have to give the child time and you have to discuss it at his or her own time when he or she is ready. But you always have to be there in case they need you and listen. You have to listen to that child because I’m sure that the child will find his or her own way to grieve the pain and the loss and find the help that he or she is looking for. He or she may not know what that is at the time, so somebody has to be there with the child for comfort. (Anna, Personal Interview, 1999)

Social workers can play a large role in supporting and listening to the child. The role of the social worker may be particularly important when adult family members are working through their own grief and do not feel as though they can adequately be there for the child in these ways.

Keep Talking

Anna emphasized the importance of listening to the child carefully and being there in case he or she should decide to talk about the death or problems arising from the death. While I believe it is critical for society to begin appreciating restoration-orientated coping strategies in addition to loss-oriented ones, it is important to keep in mind that a majority of respondents did emphasize their need to talk. Talking still does seem to be incredibly important, particularly to females, but also to males. A majority of respondents stressed the importance of children being drawn out and encouraged to talk about their feelings. Stephanie’s words illustrate how important the sharing of feelings is for some bereaved young people:

I think talking was the most important thing for me, just having somebody to talk to and venting and crying and you know getting angry and that was the thing that really got me through a lot of it was having somebody to talk to and not avoiding everything. You know a lot people will just, they don't want to set things off and they don't want to ask anything and they just want to pretend, make happy happy (she laughs). But you have to and I think the thing that was important to me was that I could be emotional or whatever I had to, to be able to get through it and just having that kind of support and knowing it's O.K. to cry. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

Once again, social workers can play an instrumental role in the healing process by encouraging bereaved children to talk about their grief and feelings of loss.

Interventions and Education for the Surviving Parent

In a majority of cases, the surviving parent will play a significant role in the bereaved child's life and will have a tremendous impact on the ways he or she grieves and thus copes in the short and long-term. The literature and interviewees' talk stress the critical effect that the surviving parent has on the bereaved young person. For example, Copeland and Forsyth believe that the young person's future well-being stems from the ability to express grief to a supportive adult as a child (Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:111). If adults cannot be there or do not know how to be there for grieving children, the young person is likely to suffer the consequences. For this reason, it seems that programs that target children indirectly by supporting and teaching the surviving parent a variety of skills would be beneficial. Copeland & Forsyth recommend a curriculum for parents or guardians regarding the needs of bereaved children that would include education pertaining to "the importance of supporting. . . the expression of feelings and review of memories of the dead parent at each stage of development" (Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:113). I believe that this curriculum should also educate the surviving parent about

the diverse ways children demonstrate and cope with the pain they are feeling. A parent's increased knowledge of his children's grieving styles and special needs will increase the likelihood that they will receive the assistance and support they require (Siegal, Mesagno, & Christ, 1990 in Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:106). Children will also be benefited if fathers are able to find outlets for coping with their own grief. In this way, they may be more emotionally available to meet their children's needs. Social workers can play a large role in creating and implementing such curriculums. They can also play a significant role in fulfilling a child's need to express his or her feelings by being there during times when the surviving parent and other loved ones cannot.

Young people often try to protect their surviving parent from the knowledge of their distress or from their need to talk in an effort to not upset them further (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:130). As was seen in Chapter Three, a majority of respondents did not talk to their fathers about their loss. They knew he was experiencing his own grief and they wanted to protect him from further pain. In some cases talking about these needs can lead to a closer relationship between father and child. If the father is able, short time periods can be allocated to talking about the loss and extended periods can be put aside for doing a variety of unrelated activities together (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:130). In this way, even if little talking is being done, a child will still feel supported, nurtured, and loved. However, as previously mentioned another adult may be more emotionally accessible and thus helpful for the child when it comes to discussing feelings of loss. A relative, a family friend, a social worker, or a counselor may be able to fill this need.

What About Counseling?

Counseling can be a useful intervention for a surviving parent and other loved ones, but is it useful and appropriate for children? It has been suggested by some writers and clinicians that children don't usually need professional help. These individuals explain that if children have loving and caring family, friends, and community they are likely to heal without counseling (Herh in Doka, 1995:94). It is widely believed that "most bereaved children rely on their own family and personal resources to deal with their loss and do not require professional help" (Harrington, 1996:822). Furthermore, bereavement counseling, however well intentioned may be harmful to some children. Any form of forced mourning may be problematic. Richard Harrington, a professor of child psychiatry, explains in his article "Childhood bereavement" that "until we know more about the efficacy of preventive interventions for bereaved children, psychological treatments should be reserved for those children and families who are clearly having problems" (Harrington, 1996:822). On the other hand, children who have received bereavement counseling said that they did not find it harmful and that they feel better off having had it (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:135). When a bereaved family is under stress, counseling can make a valuable contribution (Gordon in Smith & Pennells, 1995:137). It seems that generally there are mixed feelings about the advantages, need for, and potential repercussions of bereavement counseling for children. Yet, in certain situations it is more strongly encouraged for example where a violent death occurred or where significant behavioural or emotional problems are noted in the young person (Herh in Doka, 1995:94). Craig's words emphasize this point:

Plus I don't know, I never saw a psychiatrist or anything at the time. It probably would have been a good idea, so I went years later. . . They

should do it with every kid when something like that happens, well not every kid if they're doing well, but I wasn't doing so good and somebody should have seen that and got me some help. (Craig, Personal Interview, 1999)

In spite of ambivalence in the existing literature regarding the need for counseling of bereaved children, the majority of my respondents indicated that they would have benefited from this type of intervention. My findings suggest that access to well-trained counselors would greatly benefit bereaved individuals in the long-term by providing a much needed emotional outlet. Children experiencing sorrow, loss, and grief need to know that there is a safe person to share these feelings with, if and when they are ready to do so. Social workers should advocate for the increased availability of high-quality counseling services so that all bereaved children may be offered this form of assistance.

The literature and my findings suggest that males are less likely to express their feelings of grief. Generally speaking men and boys are exposed to fierce socialization to deny their feelings of pain and sorrow. It is therefore critical for social workers and other therapists to be aware of these oppressive forces and to be patient in assisting males to express their pain. Young men deserve the same opportunities to talk about their feelings as young women receive. In fact, they may require more attention in order to reverse some of the effects of their previous socialization. While I do not believe any person should be pushed to grieve in a way that he or she is either not ready for or is not comfortable with, well-trained and sensitive counselors would be able to sense a client's level of readiness to discuss certain issues. Such counselors would proceed in an empowering and respectful manner.

Being Attuned to and Respecting Individual Differences

It seems that some bereaved children do not require professional help, and others do. There are many differences among bereaved children. Children of the same gender, age, cultural and religious backgrounds, socio-economic status, and so on will be very different in the way they cope and grieve their loss. Even children within the same family have very different personalities (Hersh in Doka, 1995:92). It is critical to be patient and accepting of differences:

Everybody has their own experiences and everyone has their own path that they have to follow. The thing with kind of trying to provide advice, of saying what you should provide is that it's kind of hard, cause if somebody passes away there's going to be differences. What I've gone through is different from what you've gone through or anybody else for that matter so there's nothing you can really guarantee saying this is what's going to work. (Andy, Personal Interview, 1999)

Victor further emphasized acknowledging the special needs of each child:

I think to understand what's going on with them, each individual kid, like figure out what's going on with this kid, you know like how does he feel. Like me, you could obviously tell that I was aggressive right. And you know like aaah I found it myself, but you could know if the person is having trouble finding it, you could suggest or encourage or even enroll them in something, give them some lessons. I don't know, skateboarding, basketball, snowboarding lessons, somewhere where they...racquetball, where they can hit, you know they can get the frustration out. They're not going to understand what they're doing but if you understand it on a higher level then you're helping them right. Because generally they're not going to understand it until they're adults right, even if they start working or chipping away at it. (Victor, Personal Interview, 1999)

Adults are often able to recognize children's needs before the young people are able to verbalize their feelings. Assisting the child to find appropriate outlets can be a great comfort and support (Metzgar & Zick in Corr & Corr, 1996:256). Such interventions would likely include some combination of loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping mechanisms. Some restoration-oriented coping strategies could have

very little to do with grieving in the traditional sense of the word. Yet, as a new popularity for art, drama, and music therapy illustrate, they could make all the difference.

As Stephanie pointed out:

I mean for kids that are into sports or are into arts and crafts or whatever, just giving them some kind of outlet to do that and just anything to ease it. I don't know I mean I was too young, I probably finger painted (she laughs) when I was that age but you know what I mean just to have those things to rely on . . . I guess you know. (Stephanie, Personal Interview, 1999)

There are a variety of helpful interventions which were described by respondents as making an incredible difference for them throughout their motherless journey. It is critical that we, as a society, begin to appreciate forms of coping that have been ignored or viewed as maladaptive for some time. As Stroebe and Schut point out, balance may be important. Denial alone may be harmful, but when used in tandem with other coping mechanisms it may actually be very adaptive. We learned from respondents about a variety of coping mechanisms that can be encouraged. These include cultural, religious and spiritual identification, sports, the arts, music, turning to role models, talking, denial, friends, humour, and many others. For some bereaved young people these may all be helpful coping strategies, and for others none of these may feel right. Perhaps, what is most important is that grieving young people find ways of coping that are comfortable, 'natural', and useful for them.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

About Gender Differences

Many ideas for further research have come out of findings from this study. Any of these areas would prove interesting for more in-depth work. While findings relating to

gender were sparse, the differences that were found are important and could be further explored. Perhaps, part of the reason little was found in this area was because I asked only one open ended question relating directly to gender. This study was exploratory and this question was asked in a very general way, in order to identify if and how gender affected respondents' experiences with early mother death. Now that some preliminary information has been found, a more focused study could be conducted to further investigate any of these areas in more detail. For example, male and female grieving styles could be studied in greater depth. How different are these grieving styles and what are the causes of such differences? Are males more likely to feel as though their grief is/was not understood? Differences in the roles that are taken on after a mother's death by male and female children could also be examined in more detail, as could career choices. The ways in which such differences affect males and females differently and the benefits and consequences to such new roles and occupations in the long-term could also be addressed. Another area relating to gender that could be explored is the missing relationship with the mother, and how this affects daughters and sons in the short and long term. How does missing an important female role model affect male and female children differently? A final suggestion for further research relating to gender is an exploration of the ways in which the absence of one's mother affects the male and female identity differently.

Other Areas for Future Study

Another related area for further investigation is the examination of sibling relationships and how this influences the experience of mother loss. As respondents spoke of their siblings, there seemed to be many assumptions being made. It would be

interesting to talk with siblings about their own experiences and their perceptions of their brothers' and sisters' experiences. Comparing and contrasting siblings' experiences and the ways they have understood one another's journeys could prove insightful. It would also be useful to learn if siblings receive different levels of support in suffering the loss of the same mother, what the reasons for such differences are, what role gender plays in such differences, and how this influences the bereaved child in the long run.

This study pointed to some poignant cross-cultural differences which could also be explored in greater depth. For example, many of Andy's coping strategies and the way he understands his loss related to his First Nations culture. Victor also indicated that his Latino background related closely to the things he missed about his mother. Generational distinctions in experiencing this loss might also be interesting to examine. There are perhaps many differences and similarities among individuals who experienced this loss in different eras. Social class may be another area for further work. All respondents interviewed for this research could be described as middle class in terms of certain indicators of socio-economic status. The findings may have been significantly different had these individuals belonged to other class backgrounds.

The literature and findings indicate how a variety of life circumstances affect the experience of early mother death. For example, family dynamics, interaction between the grieving parent and the child (Copeland & Forsyth, 1997:113), changes in the surviving parent, a variety of secondary losses related to the death, and role models all play a significant role in the long-term effects of early mother death. Exploring the effects of these types of life circumstances may also prove to be useful areas for further investigation (Hurd, 1999:35).

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APPENDIX A

**CARLETON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK**

LETTER OF CONSENT

I, _____, agree to participate in the study being conducted by Caroline Goldberg of the Carleton University School of Social Work, as part of her MSW thesis. I am aware that this study will examine my experiences of having lost my mother early in life.

I understand that participation in this study will involve one interview of approximately 1-2 hours. The interview will be audio-taped, and these tapes will either be returned to me, or erased. I will also be asked to complete a short self-administered questionnaire prior to the interview.

While there are no anticipated risks involved in this study, participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time.

I understand that the results of the study may be published as a MSW thesis, and deposited in the Carleton University library.

I am aware that provisions for debriefing have been made in the case that I should require such services as a result of participation in this study. The Distress Centre of Ottawa & Region will be providing this service. Lastly, I understand that my name and any identifying details will be kept confidential.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

Carleton University
School of Social Work
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada K1S 5B6

Thesis Supervisor:
Gerald A.J. de Montigny, MSW, MA, Ph.D.

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire asks for some background information regarding your experience with early mother loss. Your answers to these questions will assist in identifying how a variety of variables may relate to the topic at hand. It should take you approximately five minutes to complete this questionnaire. Thank you for your time and assistance.

1. How old were you when your mother died?

2. How many years has it been since your mother's death?

☐ 7 - 14 years	☐ 25 - 29 years
☐ 15 - 19 years	☐ 30 - 34 years
☐ 20- 24 years	☐ More than 35 years

3. Are you. . . ?

☐ Married	☐ Divorced or separated
☐ Living with a partner	☐ Widowed
☐ Single	☐ Other _____

4. What is your ethnic origin/cultural background?

5. What are/is your spiritual beliefs/religious affiliation(s)?

6. What was your mother's occupation before her death?

7. What is/was your father's current or most recent occupation?

8. What is/was your current or most recent occupation?

9. What was the highest level of education attained by your mother?

☐ Elementary School	☐ Some Post Secondary
☐ Some High School	☐ Post Secondary Graduate
☐ High School Graduate	☐ Other _____

10. What is the highest level of education attained by your father?

☐ Elementary School	☐ Some Post Secondary
☐ Some High School	☐ Post Secondary Graduate
☐ High School Graduate	☐ Other _____

11. What is your highest level of education?

☐ Elementary School	☐ Some Post Secondary
☐ Some High School	☐ Post Secondary Graduate
☐ High School Graduate	☐ Other _____

12. Who was your primary caregiver before your mother's death?

13. Who was your primary caregiver after your mother's death?

14. Are you . . . ?

☐ Female

☐ Male

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the relationship between you and your mother like near the time of her death?

PROBES

Did you and your mother get along?

Did you and your mother have a close relationship?

What type of things did you and your mother do together?

2. Do you think being female/male has in any way affected, your experience with early mother loss?

PROBE

If yes, how do you think your gender relates to this loss?

3. Could you tell me the story of your mother's death?

PROBES

What was the cause of her death?

What were the circumstances leading up to her death?

4. Could you tell me about your family at the time of your mother's death?

PROBES:

Who was your primary caregiver?

Who lived in your household?

Did you have siblings, how old were they?

Were your parents divorced or separated?

Did your family members/parents get along?

What were the "family dynamics" like?

5. Did the family dynamics change after your mother's death?

PROBES

If yes, in what ways did things change?

(Some examples might be more or less fighting between family members; you, or other family members feeling isolated; you and other family members becoming closer; someone moving out of the home)

6. Did your role in the family change after your mother's death?

PROBES

If yes, in what ways?

Did you take care of others more or less?

Did you have more or less responsibilities?

If no, why do you think no change occurred?

Did you have another "mother figure" in the family?

7. Did you do to anything in particular to help you get through the time after your mother's death?

PROBES

If yes, what kinds of things did you do?

(Some examples would be keeping a journal, going to counseling, using creative outlets like painting, singing, dancing, spending a lot of time with friends and/or family. . . did you do any of these things or anything else?)

8. Were you encouraged to talk about or to be silent about your loss?

PROBES

By whom?

What was the effect of this?

9. Did you have (a) significant role model(s) in your life after your mother's death?

PROBE

If yes, can you tell me about him/her/them?

10. Has the experience of being motherless changed throughout the years?

PROBES

If yes, in what ways has it changed?

Are you now more or less accepting of your loss?

Do you miss your mother for different reasons now than you did at other times of your life?

11. Has your early loss affected any of your relationships?

PROBES

If yes, which relationships were affected?

In what ways were they affected?

12. Do you believe your early loss has influenced any of your goals, dreams and/or accomplishments?

PROBE

If yes, in what ways?

13. Has your early loss contributed to shaping the person you are today in any other ways?

PROBE

If yes, in what ways?

14. What do you think of when you hear the word "Mother"?

PROBES

Could you define the word "Mother" for me?

How do you imagine a mother?

APPENDIX C

March 9, 1999

Ms. Goldberg
Carleton University School of Social Work
Ottawa, Ontario

Dear Ms. Goldberg,

The Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region operates a distress and crisis line 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We are available as a referral for individuals who wish to talk over issues that might arise as a result of your research interviews. Our service is confidential and anonymous. We can also make other service referrals where appropriate and we do have the capacity to intervene directly in suicidal emergency.

Yours truly,

Mary R. Stern

Mary Stern, Executive Director

a member agency of the United Way