Imaginative Mothering: The Context of Stories

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In this paper I will examine several of what I consider to be the fundamental relationships involved in my role as a mother and explore their influence on the choices I have made in mothering my son, Scott. My discussion is shaped by the fact that various relationships and goals of mothering are not linearly connected nor are they structured by the parameters that seem to separate them one from another. I cannot draw a straight line that depicts my 17 years as a mother, including pregnancy, and the influences on my life in the 24 years preceding my relationship with Scott. I can, however, discuss much of my understanding of the relationships and goals of motherhood by telling about how my role as a mother has unfolded within the context of stories and storytelling.

It is not always easy to remember that the task of mothering[1] is not about an enterprise but about relationships. It is a complex interwoven network of relationships that involve the mother's relationship with herself, her environment, her social connections,[2] and, of course, the child. From this context the mother loves and cares for her child to the best of her abilities.[3] But what "to the best of her abilities" comes to mean within the context of these relationships and in the life of the child is neither straightforward nor easily understood.

Stories and storytelling—imaginative undertakings—can emerge from, foster, and give direction to these relationships. The

importance and value of particular stories are determined by the thought and insight from which they are constructed and with which they are perceived. This is not necessarily a rational process. As Sarah Ruddick describes in *Maternal Thinking*, rational thought can be understood as deriving from activity which involves thought. She makes an inseparable connection between thought and action, recognizing an argument as an enactment of an idea that is validated and sustained by the context from which and in which it evolves, in this case "love." As she explains, an argument that doesn't "draw on love and sustain it in action" is more problematic "than no argument at all" (8). Stories can be understood to be rational because they are a culmination of experience expressed as argument, strategy, and action, but rationality itself is not the sole means for discerning meaning and precipitating action. Imagination, engaged in all good stories, is a powerful directive from which love can grow and action can be sustained.

My life-affirming relationship with myself began as an imaginative process, through stories. My mother enjoyed stories and read to me for hours. The time she spent reading to me not only provided her with a means to escape from our daily life but also provided me with the only safe and nurturing context in which I knew her. The worn books of stories and nursery rhymes that we both knew by memory gave me a context for life. They gave me both the ability to imagine a life beyond my own and the faith that such a life existed—humor, love, playfulness, and beauty were experiences people truly had, were part of who people really were. Within the context of this belief I came to know myself. As a small child I had no other positive ways of thinking about the world and no other image of myself that was capable of sustaining life; I thought of myself through the context of the imaginative realities of which I was a part. I did not think that I lived in the stories; rather, because I knew Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Lamplighter," I knew that children could be lovingly acknowledged by adults, that adults could be cheerful about and enjoy their work, that people had loving families whose members had hopes and dreams that they shared with each other, that children grew up to do things that they

loved, that their lives were different from their parents' and siblings', and that some people had the wonderful experience of "tea time" every single evening. This is the stuff on which hope can build and within which faith endures.

When I discovered stories in my own right, I began with *Harold and the Purple Crayon* by Crockett Johnson. Harold's purple crayon allows him to "draw" on his imagination in order to have an adventure during which he has a picnic, meets and shares with friends, is in and escapes from danger, has a lot of fun, and eventually "draws up" the covers on a safe and secure bed and goes to sleep. He could do all of this by his own wits! Of course, I was two-and-a-half and did not think about the magnitude of Harold's accomplishments. I simply knew that I could go with Harold whenever I could find my book, and I believed at some inexpressible unconscious level that I could do what Harold did. I began to imagine sharing, caring, companionship, travel, growth, safety, and accomplishment. Even though such a life was outside of my direct experience, I firmly believed that it was based in reality and therefore attainable. I didn't reason, I believed. A certainty, a faith, a way of knowing about and being in the world emerged in my imagination and began to formulate how I perceived the world, how I conceived of affect and effect.

This faith was possible because some of what I read about did occur in my own life, because the imaginative expressions of others inspired imaginative ways of noticing my own world. Robert Louis Stevenson's "My Shadow" was an important justification of my faith. As in most of Stevenson's poems for children, a child perceives the world and figures out how it works within a child's thoughtful and experiential world, not through adult filters or reasoning. I too had "a little shadow that" went "in and out with me," and in a world of loneliness and chaos what could "be the use of" her was certainly "more than I" could "see," but there she was...just like the shadow in the poem. And, if that child could have a shadow and wonder about it then we must be in the same world where "proper children," "buttercup[s]," and "india–rubber

balls" existed (I didn't have an india–rubber ball but "super balls" had just come out and I was very sure that they were identical).

Thus, convinced that the world and the way of life that I imagined did exist, I wanted more; I needed to imagine and come to know myself within a context that involved actual people. I began reading biographies as fast as I could find them. Afraid that if I took them home my family would realize that I was plotting my escape, I read early–reader versions of the lives of such heroes as Tom Dooley and Helen Keller in the corner of the library and never discussed them with anyone. I read about nurses and teachers, about adults and children from all over the world and throughout history as they struggled and usually succeeded. I cared about some more than others, lived with some more than others, and wanted to be more like some than others. Through the characters and people in these stories I came to understand what William Faulkner calls "the verities of the human heart:" "courage, honor, pride, compassion, pity" (133). I came to imagine myself living with the verities, struggling with them in the world—being part of a world where people knew what the verities were and embraced life through them. I came to know myself as a person capable of such a life. If, as Faulkner says, human beings have "endured despite...frailty because [we] accept" and believe in these verities, I endured because I could imagine myself living from my heart and I sought the world that I knew from my stories (133).

My desire to find such a world, together with my cultivated imagination, allowed me to recognize possibilities when they presented themselves. I had some lovely teachers along the way who not only read to me and encouraged my reading and imagination but who also became my real-life heroes, personifying my hopes and dreams for myself and the world of others that I hoped to share. Many people encouraged me to be a part of the world of friendship, dreams, and accomplishment. I could take part in tremendous opportunities to learn and play and grow. Over time I experienced the world that I had learned of in stories through various real people, contexts, and experiences.

When my son was born I was still struggling to be myself

and find the world I believed existed. Although I was delighted to have him, I was terrified. I had no stories to provide a context for being the mother I wanted to be. I knew no mothers from whose example I could imagine a desirable context for my son. I could imagine *being* a better mother than I had ever witnessed but I had no idea how to do it. I did not know myself within the context of being a mother and had no stories from which to imagine myself as I sensed I wanted to be. I had to create as I went. Everything was new and I watched and listened.

I had the single image of myself as a nursing mother. Once Scott learned how to nurse (Who would imagine that babies aren't born knowing how to nurse?), I sensed that I could do something for him. I began with some urgency to help him understand the world, a world that I was not at all sure I could provide. On our third day home from the hospital I began to read aloud from A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* whenever Scott nursed because I wanted him to know what it was like to be a child. When he wasn't asleep I told him stories: what we were going to do, who the animals were on the crib guard and what they liked, what Daddy was doing at work. I wanted him to know the world as being full of possibility and joy, and I adamantly wanted his knowledge to be as far as humanly possible from the world in which I grew up.

As Scott grew he embraced the world of stories. He had favorite poems and stories that he wanted me to read, and he soon taught himself to read. Like other children, Scott had a quick and active imagination. Besides constructing stories in his play with toys, he created stories within the context of our lives. In so doing he often sought to affect his environment. During one finals week, for example, I was very busy studying. Scott, then two, found his toy phone, dialed extensively, then said, "Hello Professor Smith, my mom has studied enough. She has to stop now. OK, bye." Scott also began to construct narratives about what compelled him; on the eve of his third Christmas, he drew picture-stories of "The Little Drummer Boy." He told stories about what he would do when he grew up. He knew what animals would live on his farm and, later, what he would wear when he conducted his train. These stories

have since developed into narratives about changing our neighborhood if he wins the lottery, what is and isn't Utopian, and owning a sandwich shop in California where he would construct "aesthetically pleasing sandwiches." (He does not usually construct narratives about the joy of doing dishes. Nor are there stories about mowing the lawn, although John Deere tractors have come into play from time to tim).

For me, the most important part of Scott's storytelling is that it has given me a way to know and understand him and to learn from him. I told him after three weeks of adolescent silence that I needed him to start talking to me again because I was out of material and wanted things to talk with my friends about. Indeed, Scott's perspectives and ideas are engaging and stimulating as well as informative (I will never read *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, *Discover*, and *The Smithsonian* cover to cover every single week as he does), and he gives me a great deal to think and talk about, but my real concern was that without his stories about the world in general, his classes, his friends, his music, the books he was reading, and the things that he was doing, I was losing touch with who he was. When I listen to his stories, with the same attention that I use when I read a book, I learn about his fears, desires, passions, and concerns.

The stories that Scott tells me are not direct narratives about his ethical, moral, intellectual, or even social life. What they tell about are what he's struck by. Like the pictures of "The Little Drummer Boy," his stories focus on what he thinks is important. What's interesting, "cool," "funny," or "stupid" catches his attention and he responds to it. In addition, what he tells me about is both what he wants to share with me and what he wants my impression about. Wanting my impression, however, is not the same as wanting me to take an active role in the story. He wants to know how I respond but wants to make his own conclusions. His stories are part of how he reflects on life as well as how he interacts with it, and I strive to be a "careful reader": consider various interpretations of what I hear; compare the current story with others in order to gain meaning from its context; ask questions as I would consult

an author's biography or autobiography; and respond with honest emotion and spontaneous thought without attempting to rewrite the story. He listens much more carefully to commentary than guidance.

The context provided by storytelling has helped Scott come to grips with violence. He found an early outlet for anger by playing with Ninja Turtle action figures. When his play spilled over into strongly combative reactions to injustice, frustration, and fear, his father and I told him that his Turtles and squirt-guns were being put away until he was fifteen, when we believed that he would be able to make more rational choices about expressing these important feelings. This was a difficult transition for Scott. Many imaginative models for childhood expressions of anger and frustration tend to center around super-heroes who eliminate conflict rather than resolve it. As his repertoire of stories about conflict resolution has become broader, Scott has come to recognize that the feelings that generate conflict can be addressed and expressed in a number of ways. Stories about other children and groups of people, both current and throughout history, who have struggled with alienation, poverty, and extreme hardship, have helped Scott to see the broader context in which anger, fear, and frustration occur and are resolved. He has come to realize, most of the time, that he is not alone in his pain or in his decisions about how to deal with his pain and frustration. The Ninja Turtles remain tucked away in the closet as a part of his history, not his current lifestyle.

Stories that focus on community and social problems have helped Scott and me to examine closely our own social contexts. One evening, at a time when we were having problems with drug dealers in our neighborhood, I asked Scott to take some vitamins to a neighbor. I had put the tablets in a plastic sandwich bag. Scott turned his head to the side, smiled slightly and said, "Come on, Mom, how far down the block do you think I'll get with a bag of pills in my hand?" Having been reminded of the context in which the errand was to be run, I found an appropriate container for the vitamins and Scott delivered them. On another occasion, he told me about the friendly guy who lived down the street. When I pointed

out that he was a dealer, Scott said, "All right, but he's a nice guy" and agreed to keep his distance. We often remind each other that problems, conflicts, and wrong-doing inform the context of our lives but are neither all that is to be noticed nor the structure on which to build.

With each new story a new world opens and Scott has learned to expect and embrace this diversity. Part of my quest for family and an open, loving, community led us to a group home with mentally retarded adults where we lived for the first three years of Scott's life. The people with whom we lived weren't "different" or "slow" or "strange"; they were our family, a part of who we were. When our family extended to the family from Germany who moved in across the street, Scott found ways to communicate with the little girl who spoke only German. They found ways to construct stories in their play that required no common verbal communication. Scott embraced her approach to play, holiday traditions, and the language in which she asked for apple juice. When he entered public school he did not consciously or actively acknowledge the racial segregation that occurred on the playground and in the classroom. He does not set out to "tolerate" others or to seek "diversity"; he deals with situations by focusing on the individuals who are of interest to him. His openness to a variety of stories and contexts, and the merging and integration of these contexts, rarely slows him down.

Now that Scott is sixteen, the years have long passed when he will sit and read aloud with me so that we can imagine different contexts together in the way we did when he was a child. My fantasies of reading *The Odyssey* with him are not likely to become reality. Scott needs to go exploring on his own—he doesn't need to know my concerns at the beginning of every battle or my grief at each loss. When he reads Thoreau's *Walden* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* we talk briefly about a favorite idea or a troubling passage. He often gives me books or magazine articles to read and sometimes we talk about what is compelling about them. For the most part, he says that he just wanted me to read them and the material comes up later within the context of another story or situation.

In my relationship with Scott, I have learned to use television as I do stories. I was very troubled by Scott's interest in television and still am. I have, however, come to understand that he uses it as a source of stories and information, and he sorts through and evaluates the information that he gets from television as he would any other source. Because of his attitude about television, Scott and I can watch it together, as we would read a book. Watching television together has become another way for me to get to know and share with him. We discuss what we watch and he is anxious for me to see things that are of interest to him. Even when we do not have in-depth discussions I am aware of his perceptions, as I am when I notice the posture and facial expressions of someone with whom I converse. Our shared viewing also offers a context for discussing issues in our lives, comparing life to what we have watched and discussed.

Communicating within the context of stories has given Scott and me a context from which to relate to each other in other ways. He often wants me to hear a song and this leads to time talking about music, musicians, and social issues. He has come to know what I like and don't, what interests me and doesn't, and what concerns me. He's already pretty clear about where my sense of joy lies. As a result, he brings things to my attention that he thinks we have in common and he finds ways to interact with me around things that he doesn't want to deal with directly. For example, he tells me stories about his friends, i.e. "my friend is having her tooth pulled," that let me know the level of the friendship and the concerns that they share without telling me so much that he feels that he has betrayed his privacy.

A fine and sometimes troubling line lies between privacy and sharing and at times I feel I just don't have all the information that I want to have about Scott and his life. And some things I know about, don't like, and want to change. But he knows that life, like stories, has a context and that when the context is altered the outcome is changed. He knows that people need to find a way to get along and he knows enough about stories to know that conflict resolution is neither simple nor impossibly difficult. He knows the

power of language and that language can be very effective in reaching people. He is also very sensitive to the misuse of people, language, and resources. His approach to life is oriented around context rather than around ends alone. He will probably never tell me directly "Mom, you don't have to worry, I won't use drugs and I won't go out drinking with my friends." He expects me to know the context in which he operates and at the same time expects me to remain clear about the issues and the parameters within which I expect him to live. He expects me to listen to his stories with honesty and openness and to live within the integrity of the stories that I love. He makes mistakes, some larger than others. He doesn't question as often as he challenges, but he loves to do both. As long as I remember *his* context we interact meaningfully and effectively.

Within the context of our lives, not all struggles can or should be addressed soley through imagination and stories. Scott has been lonely and felt on the outside of many situations. Stories have not helped him bridge the gap between his desires and those of his friends. Nor have stories made it possible for him to reconcile the loss and fear that he has experienced since his teacher died during history class two years ago. People in stories usually triumph and sometimes fail. They often have extraordinary ways of resolving the issues of their lives, even if this only involves the author's careful planning. Characters rarely struggle as hard, or as long, as we do. The hours of hard work that are necessary to achieve a goal do not make for interesting reading and it is not possible to imagine the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that dedication and determination can provide. Personal growth and intimacy are things that we can learn to recognize, appreciate, and enrich through our experiences with stories but we have to be willing to struggle and grow within our own lives if we are to attain the stature of those who we admire in stories. The growth necessary to realize the difference between stories and life is not easily accomplished and Scott will be struggling with these issues for some time. The gap between our dreams and our current situation is never easily bridged and, unlike coming to the end of a story, if we're lucky it is never permanently closed.

Even though stories themselves cannot bridge the gap, imagination plays a crucial role in finding the context. For example, teenagers aren't small children, but making the shift from parenting a child to raising a young adult is terribly difficult because teenagers aren't adults either. Scott just hasn't had as many experiences as I have had and the life he lives now is much more complicated than it was when he was a child. There are so many ways to interact with a teenager, and at times even the least appropriate ways seem reasonable. Fear and concern have almost motivated me to search his room, hover over a cut finger, or demand a dress code. Sometimes I am tempted to give up because I can't lead him and forget that I am sharing a journey with him. At times I demand conformity because I lack the self-knowledge to know what I am afraid of or hurt by and cannot tolerate his individuality and separateness. But all of these ways of mothering have to do with my relationship with myself. When I am in the terrible position of not having a context for myself, then I cannot imagine a separate context for my child. When I forget that he is separate from me, I cannot possibly imagine him growing, taking risks, and developing as an individual human being. It is also impossible in this emptiness to create a context in which to share in a loving, caring, supportive relationship. Only when weaving stories of mutual benefit can I share rather than impose a context[4].

Imaginative mothering is not a method for parenting but a way of life. It may be considered irrational and "soft." "The maternal 'love' that threads its way through maternal stories is not pure, positive affection but a mix of many feelings," and the mother's relationship to herself and her environment greatly affects her relationship with her child (Ruddick 34). If a mother's imagination cannot reach beyond despair, pain, and disappointment, the context that she offers her child is wrought with suffering. So, simply to talk of imaginative mothering is not to talk of loving, hopeful, and affirming relationships or people. When Sara Ruddick talks of "maternal thinking" and a "politics of peace" I find her imagination fully operative and positively engaged. In her concern for ferreting out violence within the "light of imagined peace" she is speaking of

an imaginative context in which a particular perspective about mothering occurs (110). From such a context of hope, imaginative and life-affirming lives can grow and develop.

Imagination has been a crucial part of my relationships as a mother but is not the only important element. As Vivian Gussin Paley states in *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, "a satisfying balance has been achieved between fact and fiction....Story is never enough, nor is talk" (110). I have consciously sought out and developed relationships with people who are imaginative, caring, compassionate, honorable, and brave. These are the people that I want Scott to know. I have also worked to live and struggle with the "verities" on a daily basis. At times I'm pretty far from the mark. Nevertheless, the people whom Scott knows and the opportunities he has had for education, summer camp, and employment are part of the context in which his own story emerges and develops. They demonstrate and enliven the possibilities for his life and growth. He has grown up in a world where his "little shadow" that "goes in and out with" him is not the only connection that he can draw between the possibility of stories and what he experiences.

NOTES

[1] I take mothering to be the term used for the primary care giver. I mean this term to stand for a position in the life of a child, regardless of gender or the birthing process. See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*.

[2] Ruddick refers to this in "Maternal Thinking," Maternal Thinking, beginning on p. 21.

[3] I take Ruddick's proposition that to "mother" is to have a primary concern for love and care.

[4] This is not to say that Scott and I are always able to find a context that seems to be immediately beneficial for both of us. As a mother it is my job to see a larger context than Scott can and make decisions that I believe are beneficial for him even when he feels that a context is being imposed which does not consider his desires and needs. Such decisions, especially as he grows older, demand this important context of relationships in order to be made with the greatest care and integrity.

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