

ON LOVING AND HATING MY MENTALLY RETARDED MOTHER * *

BY

Carol Rambo Ronai, Ph.D.

University of Memphis

*I am grateful for the assistance of Rabecca Cross, Tiffany Parish Akin, and Jack Ronai in the preparation of this manuscript. I am also grateful to six anonymous reviewers and the editor of this journal for providing the thought provoking and supportive comments that strengthened this piece. Please direct all correspondence to Carol Rambo Ronai at the Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, 38152; 901-678-2611 (phone); 901-678-2525 (fax); or E-Mail at CRRONAI@CC.MEMPHIS.EDU.

**I refer to Suzanne as a mother or parent with mental retardation within passages where I have taken on the role of "the scholar." Within other contexts I use language such as "mentally retarded mother" to portray language which typically occurs within those settings.

ABSTRACT

This article explores why I love and hate my mother. It is a retrospective and ongoing participant observation of the phenomenon of being the daughter of a mother with mental retardation. In it, I make use of a layered account, an experimental, postmodern, ethnographic reporting format which enables the researcher to use as many resources as possible including social theory, lived experience, and emotions. By using my own experience, I explore, through first person narrative, the complex issues and emotions involved. My conclusion is that the situation is fraught with ambivalence because my present interactions with my mother are cast in the light of a past where my mother simultaneously neglected and protected me.

I am never sure how to speak of this to others. When I am asked, "Is your mother still alive?" or "What does your mother do for a living?" or "Where does your mother live?" I am filled with dread. As I contemplate the inevitable, resignation cancels out the dread and I know I will enact this script once again. I could choose to evade or lie in an attempt to spare the inquirer embarrassment. This approach usually backfires, forcing me into a situation where I must "fess up" inside the context of having told a lie I got caught in, thus exacerbating the individual's discomfort. It is better to tell the truth up front: My mother is mentally retarded.

Predictably, the person asking is shocked, as well as anyone else in the vicinity. Perhaps they are wide eyed and speechless, or stuttering, or mumbling an ill crafted apology such as "I'm sorry, you seem so normal." It is my job to bail them out or else suffer alienating that person forever. "It's not your fault," I say, "how could you have known?" There is no proscription, no formula for their side of the interaction. What is the appropriate response to a revelation so . . . What is the nature of this revelation? Should I be embarrassed about it? Ashamed? Should it remain private? Should I say "none of your business" and stay silent at all costs? Come to think of it, the script on my side of the conversation is pretty sketchy as well.

Why is it that the person is made so uncomfortable? Why is it that afterwards the interaction is so irretrievably derailed for both of us? I suspect the answer is fairly simple-- no one talks

publicly about the experience of having a mentally retarded parent, thus there exists no common repository of knowledge for dealing with the situation as it arises within any social context. Where are the media accounts-- made for T.V. movies, talk shows, news shows, documentaries? I am aware of one episode of 48 hours, which aired in 1994, which dealt with the topic of parents with mental retardation. Given that researchers on mental retardation have estimated that 1-3 percent of the United States population is mentally retarded, and that some of these people bear children, it surprises me I do not hear more about the issue.

Social science researchers are doing somewhat better than the mainstream. While I have encountered a small but solid body of ethnographic, qualitative, and interpretive literature which exists in the field of mental retardation (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; 1976; Carmody, 1991; Edgerton, 1967; Edgerton & Gaston, 1991; Goode, 1994; 1992; Groce, 1992; Langness & Levine, 1986; and Sobsey, 1994) there is little empirical research on mentally retarded parenting (Tymchuk 1992). Some authors have focused on the question, "Can parents with mental retardation be effective parents?" (for some examples of various approaches and arguments see Robinson 1978; Stoneman 1989; Tymchuk 1992, 1991). Other researchers have focused on support and treatment programs for parents with mental retardation (see Feldman, Towns, et. al, 1986; Heighway & Kidd-Webster 1988; Peterson, Robinson, & Littman 1983; and Whitman, Graves, & Accardo 1989).

These areas of study have been very productive, but none of

them have made the experience of the child of a parent with mental retardation their primary focus. Is not the cumulative experience of the child an implicit concern for researchers? How else do we start to answer, in a meaningful way, questions such as "Can people with mental retardation parent?" and "How can we help?" without knowledge from the child's perspective?

This article makes my experiences with a parent with mental retardation its central focus. I believe these materials, specifically addressed to a community that deals with the topic of mental retardation on a regular basis, could open the door to more work which focuses on 1) generating more dialogue about parents with mental retardation and 2) describing the specific experiences of children of parents with mental retardation. Consider this first person narrative account of my relationship with my mother a case study of having a parent with mental retardation.

* * *

My mother, Suzanne, is the annoying lady on the bus, train or airplane who sits next to you and talks the whole trip. She loiters at the nearby mall, buying little, or at the office of her apartment complex, tagging around after staff, making friends with the tenants, and running errands for them to the pharmacy, grocery, or laundry, to earn money. My mother makes "scenes" which include foot stomping, yelling, fist pounding, and pouting. She has deliberately locked family members out of their houses or cars to punish them for not paying her enough attention. At her worst, she once hit her mother, tearing the skin off the entire surface of her

forearm. To my knowledge, these anti-social displays have not typically occurred with strangers, only family members and friends. With strangers, she has been known to break out in what she believes to be seductive dance or sing at the top of her lungs, even when no one else was dancing or singing.

Suzanne, in her twenties, was an attractive woman who tanned easily in the tropical sun with shoulder length brown/blonde hair, green eyes, a generously rounded figure, and a handsome face. Now she is sixty-two years old, 5-3", 200 pounds, with a short, utilitarian haircut that only gets washed the Saturday before church. Her teeth, embedded in receding gums, are caked with mounds of yellow/orange plaque and rotting spots. Residing in the same mouth, striking a stark contrast with her real teeth, is a sparkling clean, perfectly formed partial which stands in place of her upper front teeth. The result is an overbite that often rests on her bottom lip. Lately she wears a raggedy straw hat decorated with 10 to 12 brooches, stick pins, and pendants she has accumulated from friends and acquaintances. She looks kookie (this is the only word for it) in an offbeat, dowager kind of way. Oddly, when she smiles, she is cute.

Despite her current appearance, my mother is the kind of person with mental retardation who passes (Edgerton, 1967) as an average aging woman until you talk to her for a few minutes. In that conversation she will tell you about her day, the latest children's book she read, or the show she saw last night (every minute of it, if you are willing to stay around long enough to

listen). My mother is not, however, necessarily interested in your day, what you are reading, or the show you saw. "There is something off about her," is the typical response after a first encounter. Upon getting to know her, most people conclude that she is mentally retarded.

My mother's intelligence quotient score has been estimated by several psychologists in social service capacities to range from sixty-five to eighty. Reading out loud, she stumbles over the text and makes up phrases, or even entire paragraphs, when she cannot identify the words. Although she has no math ability, she possesses a wide repertoire of television and movie trivia because she watches a great deal of television, in particular children's shows and championship wrestling. She also colors in coloring books, paints by numbers, assembles simple crafts, and attends church.

Giving the appearance of living a full life, my mother stays alone in an apartment paid for by a trust fund set up by my grandmother. She has a black velvet painting of Elvis Presley hanging in her bedroom which she no longer sleeps in because it is filled with "things" people have given her over the years which she wants to keep but has no use for, including two shopping carts from local businesses which went under. Her living room, decorated with stuffed animals and unicorns, sports a day bed on which she watches television, eats, reads, sleeps and does her crafts.

* * *

The following is simultaneously a retrospective and an on-

going participant observation of the phenomenon of being the daughter of a mother with mental retardation. Through the use of sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991), I would like to construct, for the reader, an account whereby readers live their own experience of the phenomenon by reading my text and interpreting it through the filter of their own stocks of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1969). Through sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991), ethnographers can make use of any at hand situations they are involved with as a topic of research (Riemer, 1977). Sociological introspection makes the interior world, or subjectivity of the researcher in question, the object of study. Fantasies, dreams, emotions and accounts of lived experience, (subjects normally ignored or hidden in the world of social research) are highlighted not only for abstract analysis, but also for the reader who is invited to evaluate the text based on an unusual criteria for the social sciences: "Did reading this text make you feel something?"

This approach reflects a new trend in sociology known as "emotional sociology" (Ellis, 1991; 1992) and "artful sociology" (Ellis and Bochner, 1996). Each of these represent a shift away from didactic scientific prose in the social sciences in favor of prose inclusive of the thoughts and emotions of the researcher in question. Instead of insisting that the social sciences emulate the physical sciences, both emotional and artful sociology merge social science with the humanities to tear down the various boundaries which separate traditional academic disciplines from one

another.

Towards this end, I use a "layered account" format (Ronai, 1997a; 1997b; 1995; 1992) as a means by which to convey the experience of being the daughter of a mother with mental retardation. In interactionist terms (Blumer 1969), many voices contribute to the construction of my "self." I am an assistant professor, a mother, a wife, a friend, the daughter of a woman with mental retardation, and the daughter of the diagnosed sexual psychopath who raped her. These voices can be thought of as emergent identities whose boundaries are unclear. Each voice contributes to the dialectic that comprises my "self;" yet each voice shapes the others, bending, merging, blurring, and separating again as I move through social space.

The layered account is a postmodern ethnographic reporting format which enables the researcher in question to draw on as many resources as possible in the writing process including social theory and lived experience. I move forward, backward and sideways writing through time, space, and various attitudes. I can, in one layer, take on the role of the researcher; in the next, the role of the daughter, mother, victim, or something less nameable. I have the ability to weave the text for the reader by making use of the layers. In this way, I can make use of the scientific voice without relying upon it as my sole authority. I de-center it to become one voice among many contributing to the production of this text, thus eschewing the construction of new grand narratives on the mental retardation construct (Danforth, 1996).

I do not claim to be able to manufacture a perfect one to one correspondence to an obdurate reality of having a mother with mental retardation which exists "out there." Nor do I believe that my individual experience can be generalized to all children with parents with mental retardation. I do believe that the structure of this ethnography will, as it unfolds in the reader's lived experience, emulate the structure of consciousness and thus serve as an interpretive resource for the reader. The reader experiences the woven vignettes together, within contexts that were meaningful to the author. Through the use of a layered account format, I am attempting to bring social constructionist theory such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, post-structuralism and postmodern, into the realm of practice-- here specifically, my writing practices. If I believe consciousness is processual, non-linear, dialectical, and n-dimensional, and if I desire to produce in my reader a lived experience, it behooves me to attempt to practice social constructionist theory in my writing style by (re)presenting the structure of human consciousness. Let these three asterisks I use throughout my text denote a shift to a different temporal, spatial, and/or attitudinal realm. Notice, too, how these boundaries become fuzzy.

* * *

My mother loved me. I know that emphatically, down in the deepest recesses of my being. I don't always give her love the respect it deserves-- she is retarded-- a priori for me, it devalues most of what she gave me. But who does that reflect on?

Her "self" for being retarded or my "self" for interpreting her retardation as something that devalues her gifts? Somewhere in her love for me was my salvation. We were co-conspirators together against my father, my grandmother, and the world. Often her love came across in odd ways.

* * *

My mother was awesome!! One day at school, it was third grade, Pat Suez was caught stealing candy from my friend's cubby hole. When Pat tried to walk home with us we yelled, "Thief," "Pig," told her to go away, and we even threw pebbles at her. Pat, hands on her hips, said, "Carol, your mom likes me, you're going to get in trouble for making fun of me." I laughed. She did not know my mom! The other girls looked worried. "Just wait, you'll see!" I said. I never doubted my mother's loyalty for a second. "You just go and tell her, piggy," I jeered gleefully, leading the pack making fun of her. "And tell her what a fat, pig, thief you are too."

Everyone joined in laughing except Pat, who sped up to meet my mom at the corner before us. My mom passed her as she whined, walked up to me and asked, "What's this all about?" I answered, snootily, as only a little girl can, "We don't like her any more." Instantly my mother turned on Pat, thumbed her nose and blew her a raspberry. My friends howled with laughter.

Pat stood staring and then ran across the street. She yelled, "I'm telling my mother you did that, Mrs. Rambo!" My mother turned around, bent over, her rear facing Pat, and raised her skirt. Some

of the girls laughed so hard they cried, others rolled on the ground. It was way too funny-- someone's mom, an adult, treating a kid like that. Pat started to cry and Mom mooned her again. It was like having a pet do tricks for your friends. "See, my mom is always on my side. Don't forget it!" I said, concentrating on playing it cool, concealing my mirth and triumph as I walked with my mother into the house.

* * *

My mother stood nearby in the kitchen archway, looking uncertain, as he walked into the house and grabbed my small arm. His finger-tips dug in, rolling over bone, practically pulling my arm out of my shoulder socket. "No," I said, planting my feet firmly, pulling away, "I don't want to." "You know you like it," he said, pulling me toward the bed. "I don't like it today," I said, flinging all my weight in the opposite direction in an effort to break his hold. I had to give this my all. If I put up enough resistance, he might give up, and regard the whole matter as not worth the effort.

It wasn't working. My feet were dragging across the multicolored shag rug of the efficiency apartment, burning with the friction. "No," I screamed, flinging my bottom to the floor as he continued to drag me. My kick at his shin flew out into space, missing its target entirely as he stepped back. He laughed affectionately, as if reacting to something "cute" I might have done.

Upon seeing the violence I was willing to employ, my mother

intervened by pulling on my other arm. "It's her bed time, Frank, let her be," my mother stated. "Since when?" he asked, dubious of my mother's motives, forgetting to pull me for a second. "It has always been 8:00, 'cause she has to get up to go to school in the morning," my mother replied, yanking my other arm to pull me away from him. He thought for a moment, then pulled my left arm and said, "That can't be right, it's too long to sleep." They pulled on me like this, back and forth, hurting me, for several rounds.

Each time my mother pulled I leaned in her direction, hoping to break his grasp. Ultimately his "logic" won out. "I'm her father and I'm setting a new bed time, 8:30." I flashed a desperate look to my mother as she let go. "There's nothing I can do," she said, as she turned her back and left for the bathroom. "NO!" I screamed, vibrating from the effort to keep the word airborne. "No, no, no," I whimpered as he dragged me to the bed, raking my panties down my legs, scratching long red welts with his nails. "No," escaped from my lips, now barely a whispered sigh as he parted my legs and descended, face first between them. "You always like this once we get started," he said. "Not today," I replied, watching my mother watch from the bathroom doorway.

For several weeks I had been trying to convince my mother to change my bed time from 8:00 to 8:30 because I felt 8:00 was too early for a second grader. That he could, just like that, at his convenience, change my bed time just so he could do this to me was unbearable.

And now she just passively stood there, watching. Watching as

he performed oral sex on me. Watching as he penetrated me with his fingers while I screamed. Watching as the pain took over and I panicked and kicked him in the head for all I was worth. Watching as he held me down with one hand and beat me across my head and body with his fist to gain my compliance. Watching as I submitted to the probing of his fingers, screaming louder than it really hurt, in order to dissuade him from his goal, getting me ready for intercourse. She was watching. Powerless. Whipped. Worthless.

Finished, as he left our apartment, he turned to me and said, "By the way, your bed time is 8:00 except on nights when we do this." My mother waited until he was out the door and said, "No, your bed time is 8:30 from now on." She knew I had earned that bed time and then some.

* * *

According to Stimpson and Best (1991) most people with disabilities will encounter some form of violence or abuse during their lifetimes. Elmer and Gregg (1967) were the first to demonstrate a relationship between mental retardation and abuse. People with disabilities, physical or mental, are targets for abuse because they have fewer resources to defend themselves. Carmody (1991) found that 90% of alleged crimes against people with disabilities involved sexual offenses (for an exhaustive literature review on the topic see Sobsey, 1994).

I tell myself my conception was a rape, but rape is a gloss of a very complex situation. I often wonder, was my mother physically assaulted or verbally coerced when I was conceived? Can a retarded

person give consent if she does not understand sexuality and human relationships? According to police officials and the Veteran's Administration, my father was a diagnosed sexual psychopath who had a record of multiple offenses across the United States. So what chance did my mother stand against Frank? On the flip side she had, and still has, a tendency to "throw herself" at men. How am I supposed to codify their relationship?

I found her diary once. Inside it her aunt had drawn beautiful pictures of bears and described picnics and birthday parties Suzanne had attended with them. On a page towards the end, my mother had written in her own scraggly handwriting: "I mary Frank today. I be his booful brid. I be so hapy." Reading these words was physically revolting to me. Marrying Frank was a way for her to live out some kind of fantasy story in her mind. How could the world let them marry? His family knew what a monster he was; he had molested one of his sister's children. What the hell was everybody in Dysfunction land thinking? Does her definition of the situation apply? His? What should my definition be? I don't understand why I care. It is like a hangnail I can't leave alone--the more I mess with it the rattier and more painful it becomes.

* * *

When I was 8 years old, my father left us with Grandmother (my mother's mother) in Florida. Three weeks later he was arrested for indecent exposure and sexual assault. When news of his arrest appeared in the newspaper, Grandmother's friends called to offer their "condolences." Although Grandmother was not wealthy, she

came from a well-to-do family and had pretensions of being a socialite. My father's arrest was a profound humiliation for her. In her anger, Grandmother informed me, "Don't expect much from me. I have to take care of you, but I don't have to like it. I told your mother to have an abortion, but she wouldn't."

I was devastated by her comments. I thought going to live with Grandmother was going to be salvation from Frank and that my mom and I were finally going to live a "normal" life. Instead, we moved from a situation of physical and sexual abuse to one of verbal and emotional abuse.

From then on, Grandmother informed us on a daily basis what an enormous favor she was doing by taking us in, describing as she did a life of bridge, cocktail parties, and social events she could not take part in. It was clear we owed her a debt we could never repay. We brought the roaches with us (according to Grandmother) and we had destroyed her life.

* * *

None of this is cause to be angry at my mother. This was Grandmother's interpretation of my existence, not my mother's. So why is it that when I am with my mother I am just barely able to keep my anger in check and unable to restrain myself from correcting her speech and behavior? I believe I resent having to take care of Suzanne when she did such a poor job of taking care of me. She not only let my father beat me and sexually abuse me, sometimes even delivering me to him for that purpose, but she sexually abused me herself.

* * *

I knew what I was doing. I whispered it into her ear, "I like your's better than I like his." She stopped licking my vagina and yelled to my father, "Do you hear that, she likes mine better than yours." She made a face as if to say nanny-nanny boo-boo and stuck out her tongue at him. He walked over, annoyed, and did it himself. When I did not orgasm, he became angry. "Whose is better?" he growled. "Hers," I responded, careful not to expose the defiance I felt. "Why?" he asked. "Because she does it nicer, it doesn't hurt," I responded.

I knew I was getting to him. This was the one thing he needed from me. To deny that he was best at this was to undermine his dominance over me and my mother. Several days later he had her try it again, with the same result. Later, my father concluded I was lying, that it was impossible for hers to be better.

* * *

According to Finkelhor and Hotaling (1984), 81% of incest occurs with the male alone, 11% with the female alone, and 9% with both. Where both were involved:

the abuse occurs on the initiative and at the direction of the male . . . when a female is a participant in such a situation, it is usually only in the sense of being an observer or being directed by the male to participate (1984, p.27).

Similarly, Tymchuk (1992, p.167) notes of mentally retarded mothers:

Where purposeful abuse does occur, often it is a result of another person associated with the mother rather than the mother herself, including a husband or partner (either male or female) who is emotionally disturbed.

Reading this, I tell myself, "Remember she is retarded, didn't know better, was abused by my father also, and is as much a victim as I am." I see the words. I understand that others may think I should get over it, but I can't let her off the hook. I know she knew better.

* * *

In the third grade I was exposed to an anti-drug and crime program called "Junior Deputies," sponsored by the Sheriff's department. While participating, I ran across the term "sexual molestation" in a pamphlet. I showed it to adults who defined the term for me. Then I took it to my mother and asked her the meaning of the word. She looked up at me, her eyes huge, as if caught in the glare of oncoming traffic and said, "Something parents should never do to their children." I said, "Oh, you mean like you and Frank did to me?" She turned away from me and said, "Yes."

* * *

One night I was eating dinner at the table with my grandmother and mother. Grandmother said to me, "I know why I hate your father Frank-- he's a no good, rotten toothed, grinnin' bastard. I don't understand your hating him too. Just because I say it doesn't mean you have to say it. You would think he'd molested you or something. It's not normal for a girl to act that way about her father..." My face became red, hot, and painful as if all of the extra blood in my body had flooded my head. I threw up a small amount of food onto my plate and bolted from the room, crying. I had never told anyone and here she had said it right out loud, so

callous, so offhand. I couldn't stay in the room with her or my mother because my humiliation was too intense. I ran to my bedroom and flung myself face first into the cool, comforting, bed covers.

From my bedroom I heard screaming. "Suzanne, did he do that to her? Did he?" My mother said, "I don't know," repeatedly crying and screaming back at her. My grandmother came to my bedroom door, pounded on it and yelled "Carol Anne, get out here this instant. Why are you crying? Did he touch you? Get out here now."

I calmed down as much as I could and made a decision. I was finally going to tell. I could tell my mom was going to be in trouble which was one reason I had never said anything before, but this was my chance to end it. By telling, I knew that Grandmother would make sure my mother would stop seeing Frank. Frank and my mother were going to be furious. But Grandmother was mad and she just might do something that would make it stop (he had molested me in her home since his prison sentence).

I emerged from the bedroom and confessed. Grandmother was livid, castigating my mother, and me to a much lesser extent, for letting it go on. "It's nasty, unnatural, don't you have the sense God gave a goat to know that's wrong?" There was one thing I was sure of: my grandmother held my mother responsible for what happened.

Later that evening, after Grandmother had calmed down, she called me into the living room, asked me to sit down and tell her

exactly what my father had done. Again, I was humiliated. "I don't want to say it," I said. "What part of his body did he use?" she asked. "His mouth," I replied. She looked annoyed. "What do you mean his mouth?"

I couldn't live through this. I should never have told. She didn't even know what I meant. What he had done to me was so aberrant she had never even heard of people doing this. More annoyed she urged, "Come on and tell me, what did he do?" "He put his fingers inside me." Had she ever heard of that? Grandmother's face scrunched up as she winced and asked, "Anything else?" I was teetering on hysteria, "His mouth, I told you, his mouth, you know, you know, come on you know what I mean." She saw my sincerity. She was puzzled but dead quiet.

The suspended moment died away when she asked, "And your mother, where was she?" I had not thought this through, I should have thought up a story. But if I made up something now and it came out wrong she may not believe the part about Frank. So I betrayed my mother and told the truth, "She was there." "What do you mean she was there?" Grandmother, the inquisitor, asked. "She knew, that's all I'm going to say," I answered, not willing to incriminate her more. Grandmother called my mother in who had been listening. My mother looked at me with a pouty anger and rolled her eyes in disgust just before she hung her head in front of Grandmother. Grandmother told me I could go and afterwards, she yelled and screamed at my mother until it was time to go to bed. I am not certain, but I believe from that conversation my grandmother

got my mother to admit that she had been in the room when it was going on, but not to participating in it. That much we had succeeded in keeping a secret.

The next day grandmother spent half the morning on the phone with her lawyer. She called me to the phone and asked me to repeat what I had told her the night before. Afterwards, she told me to get ready to go downtown to see her lawyer. I was very impressed. I went to my room and got out my very best white dress with lace and shined my black mary-janes. I wanted that lawyer to know I was serious. Something important was happening. When I appeared dressed up with my hair done, my grandmother, wearing shorts, asked, "Why are you dressed that way?" I said, "We're going to see a lawyer." She did not comment.

When we got to his office, Grandmother had me stay in the waiting area until I was called in. When I walked in, the lawyer laughed at how I was dressed. I was crushed. I thought I would look business like and serious if I looked nice. I also resented his tone, how lightly he was taking all of this. I seemed to be the only person in the room who felt the gravity of the moment. He asked me to repeat what I had said on the phone. I sat upright, folded my hands in my lap and repeated it. My grandmother again expressed annoyance and confusion. He explained to her that I was describing something called "oral sex." She was shocked, disgusted, and commented, "That white she's wearing is a joke, at her age she knows more about sex than I do." The lawyer laughed again. I was stunned. I sat there petrified, mortified,

paralyzed-- I did not know what to think, do, or feel. I was disgusting, aberrant, other, beyond his or my grandmother's comprehension. I did not breathe for a long time and I got light headed in the seat.

They both yelled at me "Did you hear, do you understand?" I apparently had missed some dialogue. Grandmother was getting a restraining order against my father and he was never going to bother us again or he would be breaking the law and arrested. I sat up straight and asked the lawyer questions about how close Frank was allowed to come to us. After he answered my questions I was asked to return to the waiting room.

Later, at home, my mother said under her breath, "You shouldn't have said that, now we can't see Frank anymore." Later still, I saw my father with her at the park. "You spoiled brat, you told. I don't understand why, after all this time, you told." He ran after me to hurt me, but at ten years of age, I discovered I was finally fast enough to out run him. He gave up, sat down on a park bench and said, "I could catch you if I wanted but you're not worth the trouble." I knew he was lying. If all else failed, I could outrun him. And her. I never had to test it because he was arrested shortly after that meeting, again, for exposing himself to a child in the park.

* * *

I resent the imperative to pretend that all is normal with my family, an imperative that is enforced by silence, secrecy, and "you don't talk about this to anyone" rhetoric. Our pretense is

designed to make events flow smoothly, but it doesn't work. Everyone is plastic and fake around my mother, including me. Why? Because no one has told her to her face that she is retarded. We say we don't want to upset her. I don't think we are ready to deal with her reaction to the truth. Something inside me longs to tell her so that she will finally be able to explain to herself the events in her life, yet I don't know if she would be able to understand this information.

* * *

My Grandmother has been dead a week. My aunt, uncle, and two cousins are with my mother and me at the Clock restaurant eating a lousy meal which my mother is consuming gustily. My mother is chattering away incessantly about television. The tension at our table is so thick I can't get comfortable physically or mentally.

Since grandmother died, Suzanne has been a thorn in our side, through no fault of her own. What are we going to do with her while we make the arrangements? How are we going to keep her entertained and at the same time take care of the business of setting her up in her new apartment? Who is going to have to be with her next? We have to tip-toe around her, say things in a nice way, and the whole time pretend that everything is normal.

My husband, the facilitator, attempts to ease some of the tension, "If I wanted to know who had acted in a movie I would go to Suzanne before anyone else to find out." My uncle, attempting to contribute to my husband's effort, says, "Yes, the idiot savant thing is an interesting phenomenon." I glare at him to silence

him, then look over to see my mom's reaction. She is attending to the conversation but I don't think she gets it. "See?" he says, trying to be helpful, "Not to worry, it went right over her head, she doesn't understand a reference like that." Suzanne joins in, "Idiot savants play the piano real well. I saw a special about them on television." "That's one way the word is used Susie, that's true," my uncle says. I glare at my him now, trying to enforce the silence.

My husband, seeing my agitation, deflects, "What movies has Arnold Schwarzenegger been in?" My mother perks up and starts her list with a supercilious, William F. Buckley accent, taking on the role of the expert, "Let's see: Hercules, Commando, Predator, Terminator, Conan the ball-bearing..." Images of Arnold in his barbarian outfit with enormous testicles bumping between his legs as he raises his sword, fill my mind. Next, the tamer version-- Arnold coming forth, yea verily, carrying huge silver ball-bearings in his hands, offering them to the world for inspection. Her pretentious manner coupled with the verbal slip is over the top. Its killing, me I want to laugh so much.

My uncle's grin stretches ear to ear in a rictus, but he won't laugh; he picks up his drink instead, snorting into it, rattling the ice cubes. My cousins, both pre-teens, hold their faces straight until they can duck their heads under the table where they start cackling, hitting each other to be quiet. My aunt is glaring at everyone, steamed at their conduct, yet I know she wants to laugh too. When my mother is at the peak of one of these

performances, it is typical for her to slur her speech or worse. I have known of this affect for 22 years; my aunt for 38 years. A small loss of face is usually easy to ignore, but this is too much to ask us to repress.

Finally my mother looks around and poutily says, "Whaaught?" We all lose it. Tears streaming down our faces, hitting each other, snickering, snorting, cackling, gasping; the release feels so deliciously evil and good at the same time. There are no two ways about this, we are laughing at her.

The display is loud and our antics are drawing an inordinate amount of negative attention to our table. Finally, my mother starts to laugh a great belly laugh that shakes her, the table, and her food. This is too damn funny because we all know that she has no idea why we are laughing, and yet now it is okay, we are laughing with Suzanne, not at her anymore. We no longer need to feel guilty. As my mirth dies off, I explain, "You said ball-bearing instead of barbarian." "Oh," she said, seeming pleased that what she had said was the source of our laughter, "I guess that was kind of cute, huh?" "I think it would make a great movie premise, Susie" my uncle ventured. My aunt kicked him under the table as we all laughed again, within acceptable parameters.

* * *

Because of Suzanne, and because of how the family as a unit has chosen to deal with the problem, I have compartmentalized a whole segment of my life into a lie. It is not fair to blame my mother, but part of me cries out to her, "How dare you passively

sit back while everyone takes care of you?" and "Why don't you demand to know what is going on around you?" and "Why does there always seem to be something everyone else knows that you don't, as if there is an inside joke circulating that no one will tell you because no one thinks you will get it?"

The government has contributed to the pretense that everything is normal. They won't certify her as too retarded to hold a job, but they will provide her vocational rehabilitation. I worked many hours, on three separate occasions, over an eight year period of time to get her services. Each time she stopped the counseling and training the moment my back was turned. Since social service workers cannot force services on anyone, and since Suzanne has to want the help, no one can do anything about it. And so we go on protecting her from the truth, lying, keeping silent and pretending everything is perfectly normal. In a sense we are complicit agents in her failure. If she did not have us, if she did not have the trust fund, if she could not go on living this fiction, she would be forced to go out and get job training.

When I was five years old, my father went to prison for a year and a half for sexually assaulting someone. During that time my mother obtained federal housing, food stamps, and other Aid to Families with Dependent Children by following the social workers' instructions to the letter. When survival was problematic, Suzanne came through for us. So where is her fighting spirit now? Somewhere in my gut, I just know she is being lazy.

* * *

Klein (1990) notes that children of mentally disturbed parents tend to develop coping strategies that exhibit exaggerated independence, autonomy, and self reliance relative to their developmental stage. When I was ten, Grandmother said she was sick of supporting us and we had to find a way to contribute or she was going to kick us out. My mother and I applied for welfare, which included Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps. When my mother and I met with the social worker, my mother threw a temper tantrum, refused to answer the social worker's questions or fill out any forms, and stormed out of the AFDC office. I panicked, begged the social worker to wait, ran after my mother and begged her to come back. When she returned, I filled out the forms and answered the social worker's questions. Later, when my mother went to the bathroom, the social worker came to me with tears in her eyes, hugged me, and said, "God, this must be awful for you."

I saw myself through her eyes and realized what a spectacle my mother and I must have made, and yet it was okay. I was the kid here; it was not my fault. Someone finally understood how hard this was for me. Self-consciousness and relief swept over me, simultaneously flushing my face and filling my eyes with tears that I fought to control. "Poor baby," she said maternally, motioning to two of the other workers. The concern and sympathy on all of their faces were too much. My body went limp in her arms as the dam burst and tears flowed. I wasn't allowed to do this, I shouldn't have been doing this, but it felt so good. Crying was simply not allowed at home. When it occurred, it was handled much

like masturbation-- you do it in private and hope you don't get caught.

My mother came out of the bathroom, saw me crying, screwed her face up and said, "What's she acting like that for?" I cringed and the other two workers leapt into action and led her away from me, telling her that everything was going to be all right. Our caseworker took me aside and showed me how to answer the questions differently, without lying, so that she could approve us for aid. It was important that these questions get answered the same way every year. I understood that I was going to be responsible for this process from now on.

I went from tears to elation. I had gotten us the welfare. It was only \$1,400 a year, \$120 a month in food stamps, plus medicaid, but that was substantial enough to impress Grandmother. Later, I explained to Grandmother the amount of money we were to expect and how I would have to stand in line each month to pick up the food stamps. She stared at me and said nothing.

From that moment on, I was the designated "deal with government aid" hitter. I ended up applying for social security for Suzanne, which she was not disabled enough to get. I arranged for her to go to vocational rehabilitation, and each year, I applied for welfare with my mother in tow.

As time wore on, my grandmother became increasingly dependant on me. I ran errands to the Social Security office, bought her liquor and cigarettes (by fourteen I already looked the legal drinking and smoking age of eighteen, so no one ever carded me),

purchased certificates of deposit, balanced her checkbook, and made out checks to pay the bills.

* * *

I look at what I wrote above. All of it is true, yet I haven't told you the worst of it. I am disgusted that this creature, Suzanne, is my mother. She is horrifying, vile, potentially defective genetic material, someone I or my child might take after. Half of all I am came from her, and the rest from Frank, the friendly neighborhood sexual psychopath. Most of my childhood training was placed in their hands. How do I explain this to myself? Are they who I am? Like it or not, their identity, their biographies, intersect mine.

I cannot let my thoughts dwell here for very long because none of this makes sense. There is no "right" answer to find. The meta-narratives on child rearing handed to me by psychologists and other child care experts do not match my experience. I am an assistant professor with a Ph.D.; I have a good relationship with my husband; I have a healthy, happy two-year-old. So why is it I often feel like I am missing something? Am I missing something because my mother has mental retardation and my father was a sexual psychopath? Or am I letting the idea that I am supposed to be missing something structure my discourse on my identity and my emotions? Or is it a normal experience, the human condition, that everyone feels like they are missing something? How do I know what to think of my feelings?

In Newsweek, a woman named Betty Graves, program director of

"Parents Learning Together," said that none of the children of parents with mental retardation "is going to reach the potential they might have reached" (Kantrowitz et. al., 1986, p.62). Reading this is a slam in the gut. I suspect many people worry about whether or not they have reached their potential. As I sit here typing this, I doubt my own abilities. I don't speed read, I feel my writing needs work, and I did not graduate from an Ivy League school. Always, I can hunt down deficiencies in my abilities and my biography that instill self doubt.

This, in turn, makes me angry. How dare this woman tell me I am not going to be able to realize my potential. Aren't retarded people and their children everywhere grateful for her existence? I hope her repressive discourse doesn't hinder her from realizing all her potential as program director. If she doesn't expect much from the children of her clients, she will not get much and she will burden them with cumbersome labels and a doubtful self identity. Never mind that her remark in Newsweek has contributed negative discourse to the stocks of knowledge about children of parents with mental retardation.

According to researchers, I do not have a good reason to bring my own genetic status into question: "90 percent of the known causes of retardation have nothing to do with heredity; many cases are the result of problems during pregnancy and childbirth (Kantrowitz et.al. 1986, p.62)." Individuals throughout my life have reassured me of this point.

* * *

I was styling my Barbie doll's hair one Christmas when my uncle asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I answered, "A hairdresser." My uncle took me aside and said, "My worst nightmare for you is that you grow up to be a hairdresser and marry some truck driver. Take a look at your family. All of us except your mother have college degrees. You come from a great gene pool. Even your grandmother had a degree at a time when women didn't get degrees. You can do so much better than being a hairdresser." I will always adore my aunt and uncle. They had a very positive impact on my life. None-the-less, they could not understand that for me, assurance that I was "normal" implicitly called my normality into question.

Often my status was brought into question in more direct ways. I rarely brought friends over to play. If I told a friend about my mother's retardation, I considered it a major disclosure, a juncture in our relationship where either I would be rejected or the relationship would deepen. Sometimes I was rejected, particularly when I was younger, because my mother tried to play with us as if she were a little girl. One girl said, "Your mom thinks she is one of us but she's not. She's weird and so are you."

At other times it was the parents of other children who brought my status into question. Lisa's mother, for instance, liked having me around because she thought I was polite and a good influence on her childrens' manners. Starved for approval, I always washed dishes and said, "May I," "Please," and "Thank you,"

very diligently. When Lisa's mother finally met my mother, I was not allowed to play at Lisa's house again. Debbi's mother, on the other hand, let me play with Debbi, but only when Debbi's father was away. On the one occasion he came home early, I was asked to sneak out the back door.

I told these stories to my aunt and uncle when they visited. They told me, "Anyone who would treat a little girl like that, because of her mother or for any reason, is not worth having as a friend." It made sense, but the sentiments still hurt.

* * *

I was eight years old. My mother had just beat me up for lying, the kind of beating Frank used to dish out. The thing was, I had told the truth. She had forgotten I had called home when I said I had. Grandmother made a phone call that confirmed my story. My mother melodramatically left the room in a huff. She had beaten me up, in part, because she was enjoying playing the "role" of mother. And she was going to be allowed to get away with it too.

Not to be upstaged, I flung myself onto the sofa and whined to Grandmother, "What is wrong with her. I was telling the truth and we all know it." My grandmother answered quietly, "She is mentally retarded. She isn't like other people. You have to make allowances for her." I quieted down and asked, "What's wrong with her?" My grandmother responded, "She has brain damage." She went on to explain that no one knew for sure how she became brain damaged. One possible cause was that Grandmother bled a great deal in the third month of the pregnancy, a time during which the neural

fold is being formed. Another possibility was that my mother was delivered in under 45 minutes (a precipitous birth) and that she may have suffered trauma from the speed of the delivery. Many things locked into place once I understood my mother was retarded. I had only one question. "Am I retarded too?" "No," Grandmother responded.

* * *

Suzanne loved to play dolls. The only problem was that she always insisted on playing dolls her way-- nicey, nicey and prissy. I wanted Barbie to rob banks, get her period, anything but fashion shows and tea parties. I enjoyed playing dolls with my mother most of the time and counted myself lucky that I had a mom who played dolls. By myself, however, I could play anything I wanted. Occasionally it was necessary to leave in the middle of play to let my mother finish by herself and return later to play out a good plane crash.

* * *

In the first grade I had an inner ear infection which caused me to be deaf and out of school for six weeks. Some neighbors came to visit while I was sick and brought me a get well present. They asked my mother to take my temperature, and finally insisted I go to the hospital. My parents did not know a 106 degree fever was dangerous.

During that time my classmates brought me my homework. My mother loved to do the homework, so I let her. When I went back to school, the teacher took me aside, explained that all of the

answers on my homework were wrong, and that she was afraid I had fallen so far behind that I would have difficulty catching up. I suggested that the real problem might be that I was sick while doing my homework. I begged her for another chance to make it up. She let me take home a different set of dittos which I filled out in one day, in secret, and returned them to the teacher the very next day. She acted surprised and relieved that I had shown so much improvement. I, on the other hand, was shocked that my mother had missed so many "easy" problems and I did not know how to account for it.

* * *

My mother used to read to me and it was hilarious. We went to the library every week. She would get romance novels for Grandmother, who read one and a half or two a day, and books on gardening or whatever interested her so that she could copy the words out of them on to notebook paper. Suzanne was very proud of her hand writing, though, the truth be known, it was blocky, sloppy, childlike cursive. She would also get paperbacks of kid's books or comedy books and read them aloud.

One day she was reading aloud from a Maxwell Smart novel, recounting the antics of 99, the Chief, Laramy, and the other characters as they pitted the forces of good against "Chaos" the secret spy organization. I really loved the show, but the books Mom read out loud were even better. We would laugh so hard at the plots that we would both be wallowing on the floor.

After a particularly good laugh session I asked her to read a

passage again for me. She told me she didn't want to. I whined, "That was so funny, come on, read it again." She said we had to stop reading for the day because she was tired. She put the bookmark in the book and left the room. I wanted to laugh like that again so I picked it up to try and find the place she had been reading. A few of the words she had used were written on the page, but the meanings of the passages were entirely different. I checked the pages before, the pages after, and confirmed that she had made up the whole thing.

Being the narrow minded daughter I was, I went to her and demanded to know why the words were different, why she was lying, and why she was making up the story instead of just reading what was there. She would not answer. I told her I never wanted her to read to me again and stormed off. I meant it too. I felt betrayed by her and stupid for laughing at her dumb stories. How many stories had she read to me like this and gotten wrong? How much of my information from her was tainted? Some? All? I was mad, sad, and disillusioned, all at the same time.

* * *

Knowing my mother was retarded explained a great deal to me but it also created new problems, new crises about exactly who she was and who I was. Sure, Grandmother was going to tell me I was okay, but she may have been telling me that just to make me feel better, the same way she kept retardation a secret from my mother. Maybe the whole world knew I was retarded too, kept it a secret from me, and laughed behind my back.

* * *

I have just discovered, through the process of writing this, of seeing it all on paper, that I am ashamed to love my mother.

* * *

When we first went to live with my grandmother, my mother and I shared a bedroom with two twin beds. I went to bed each night before my mother. Every night I stayed awake for three whole hours until she came to bed. I needed my mommy. BAAAD!

* * *

I am humiliated by that neediness. This neediness. Are some things too painful to confess? Should some things stay hidden and off limits to you, the reader? Those are not the agreed upon rules of the game. I draw you near me and whisper urgently in your ear, my breath hot on your cheek: "I still need a mommy and I'll never have one. All I have is her." A knot of revulsion twists in my stomach, I can almost taste the bile, my heart pounding with the threat of it, the vulnerability of it. I am a gaping chasm of dependency and I hate it, HATE IT, HATE IT, HATE . . .

* * *

Can I live inside someone normal for a while? Just a while? So I can see what it is like? How different, aberrant, damaged, screwed up, unreliable, and wrong I am because this woman was my mother? Maybe I would learn everyone feels this way. Or maybe I would learn how not to feel this way any more.

* * *

I am calm, a small smile on my face. I reach forward in a

gesture of intimacy, perhaps to brush the hair from your eyes, or the lint off your shirt. "Everything is going to be all right," I say, holding your hand, "because in her childish retarded way, she loved me. Mamma loved me," [my consciousness breaks out into a Paul Simon song] "and she gets down on her knees and hugs me 'cause she loved me like a rock, she loved me like the rock of ages she loved meeeee." I throw back my head singing, dancing in circles, hoping you are not too worried, but having too good a time to stop and tend to your feelings.

* * *

"Stop that mommy!" I screamed in delight as she tickled me and showered me in kisses. I bounced belly first onto a pillow, rolled over and held it up to shield myself from her tickling. I was laughing so hard I was gasping. This was sheer, undiluted joy. We were always playing, it was so fun, I loved her so much.

* * *

I awoke in the middle of the night with a flashlight shining in my four-year-old face. "Hurry," my mom fretfully whispered as she gathered my bedding from the floor of the abandoned house we lived in. I had wet myself and there was a bowel movement. "We have to clean this mess up before he wakes up," she whispered frantic, trembling.

By the light of the moon we silently gathered the sheets together and took them down by the river to wash them. Frank would beat us if he caught us. We hung the sheets and clothing in a secluded area and made our trek back up the mountain to the house.

Just as my mother had found other bedding for me, laid it out and tucked me in, Frank woke up.

"You didn't have an accident did you?" Frank bellowed, as he geared up for a rage. "I almost had one but I caught it," I responded quickly. He looked from my mother to me and back at my mother. A smirk crossed his face mixed with uncertainty as he grumbled, "Well good," and stumbled back to bed. "I'm glad you thought of that," my mom whispered after he left the room, "or we'd be in for it." I did not say it to her but I felt love and gratitude that she had gotten me up.

* * *

It was February 1972, in New Orleans-- Mardi-gras time. I was in the first grade. Each day, in the morning, after the night time parades were over, my mother and I came to scrounge around in the dirt, looking for doubloons and broken strands of beads we could collect and restring. We took them home and stashed them in a large bowl for cleaning later. I noticed after several days of collecting that our bowl was full so I decided to dump the beads into the bathroom sink and wash them. I put down the stopper, dumped the beads, and ran water over them. Halfway through the washing I noticed the water was too dirty. I tried to lift the stopper up just enough to let the water drain out so that I could replace it with new water. Some of the beads went down the drain. I quickly dropped the stopper and hoped for the best.

I showed my mother the clean beads and she was very pleased. We started to string some necklaces together, discussing which beads

should go in what order as we went. Later she went to use the bathroom sink. "Oh no!" she cried out. "Did you wash the beads in the sink?" she asked. "Yes," I answered. "Frank is going to kill you," she responded.

In horror, I remembered the week before. My mother had poured grease down the bathroom sink and plugged it up. A plumber had to be called. My father was furious. After the plumber left he kicked her on her backside, her shins, had slapped her face, giving her a black eye, and had told her in no uncertain terms she was never, ever, again to put grease down the sink. And now I had done this.

My mother and I cried together, rocking back and forth, wailing. My mother paced and cried, yelled at me for washing the beads in the sink and cried again. When my father came home, I was doomed. There was no way I was going to be able to take one of those beatings. I had a few times in the past but the consequences were devastating. My mother made a decision. She was going to take the beating. She said, "I'll tell him I forgot and poured more grease down the sink." I did not know what to say. I did not want to see her get beat for anything, let alone something I had done, but I was relieved she had made the suggestion and although I am not proud to say it, I did not argue with her. I was stunned and grateful.

Later, when Frank got home, she told him the tale. He was furious, went to look at the sink, how it was draining, and said, "Wait right here," to my mother. He took a coat hanger, untwisted

it and jammed it down the sink. Instantly, the clog broke free. On the end of the hanger was a bead. He smiled at her and me and said, "I know no one put beads down the sink." He laughed, put on his coat, and left the apartment chuckling.

"Boy that was close," I said to my mom. "Yeah," she said, "I wonder if he knew." She may not have been very smart, but her heart was in the right place. SHE WAS WILLING TO TAKE THE BEATING FOR ME.

* * *

People often ask the question "How did you turn out so well given who your parents were?" or they say "You must be particularly strong to have gotten through a childhood like that." I have several responses to questions like these. First and foremost, my mother loved me, and in her own way took responsibility for me. Inside that love, I believe, a seed of faith was planted, a blind unreasonable faith which informed me that while things were rotten now, they would be better in the future. My mother and I often made up fantasies together where we described wonderful places we would live and wonderful things we would do. Additionally, teachers and social workers took time to tell me that I was special and that things were going to be okay for me if I could just hang on. I clung to every good word they shared with me. They fertilized, so to speak, my seed of faith with hope. I love every single one of them to this day.

So the answer is not that I am special or strong; things worked out because the people around me, including my mother,

helped me construct a definition of the situation that enabled me to build a tenable reality. I often find myself angry at people who insist that those who live in impoverished conditions should just "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." If you have never seen someone succeed; if you have never been told that you too could be successful; if no one ever showed you a positive image of yourself that you could internalize and become; how are you supposed to pull success out of the air? Through osmosis? If faith, love, and hope are not in your stocks of knowledge, should we still expect you to "figure it out on your own?" I know in my heart I would have never made it without the support of others.

* * *

Though my mother loved me, I betrayed her by growing up. Year after year we grew further apart until I finally abandoned her to dolls, coloring, and make-believe. She was not growing with me and as time went by, she became an embarrassment and a liability.

* * *

That is a shallow explanation of what happened. I trusted her and she betrayed me! She represented herself to me as my mother, but she was not a normal person, much less a normal mother. The world played a bad joke on me for years until finally Grandmother had to let me in on it. Once I knew about Suzanne, I had to reject her as a mother. To keep on loving her like a mom was to keep on being fooled. I could no longer trust her, the world, nor myself.

As I write, I grieve the loss of my love for my mother. I must face the reality that I am unable to love her again in the

intense, unbridled way I did as a child. But she carried me in her womb and would not abort me when Grandmother begged. And she often conspired to save me from Frank. But she also beat me and delivered me to Frank for sexual abuse. She was strong and weak in the strangest ways. Yet she was my only stability growing up, the only thing that was with me consistently over the years. Don't I owe her something for that?

There is no final answer to this conundrum-- only ambivalence. I live in the margins, waiting for this feeling to settle into something else, to transform, or to transcend. There is no resolution. I cannot label everything and explain it all, wrapped up in a neat, bundled conclusion. I feel ambivalent, one moment protective of my mother, the next furious, and the next profoundly sad. I want to avoid her and control her life for her, all at the same time. Thus my ambivalence is a feeling between moments, between labels, between feelings-- liminal.

Having a mother with mental retardation is problematic on many fronts. Many of our joint experiences have been collusive against my father, my grandmother, and the outside world. Whether I overtly knew about her retardation or not, the project, always, was to pass as a normal mother/daughter couple. Passing meant I wrote notes to school for my absences and had her recopy them in her own handwriting. Passing meant trying not to get into situations where my friends or their parents met her. Passing meant not telling Grandmother the whole truth about what happened with Frank.

Like the participants in Edgerton's (1967) study of mentally

retarded subjects living in non-institutional settings, there is a way in which I was/am one of her benefactors. My benefactor role, as Suzanne's daughter, was not altruistic. My mother-- her life, her identity-- was a story, a narrative which overlapped my own identity. In order to manage my own story or identity, I had to manage her's as well. I was stigmatized because she was my mother. If I could hide her stigma from the outside world, then I could hide mine. At a deeper level, if I could construct her for myself as a normal mother, I could pass with myself as a normal daughter.

I became threatened by her when she violated this tacit contract of normalcy. When she took over my dolls, got my home work wrong, misread the book, slipped up in a speech performance, failed to protect me from my father, she was throwing it in my face, "I am not a normal mother." There were no tacit rules (Garfinkel, 1969), no recipies (Berger & Luckmann 1967), for interpreting or handling her behavior. When she failed to pass in my eyes she became discredited (Goffman, 1963). My mother's conduct interfered with the smooth flow of social interaction and the smooth flow of my identity construction. When her cover was blown, publicly or interpersonally, so was mine, with others and myself.

* * *

This paper has been about loving and hating my mother with mental retardation. I have selected particular "moments" from my biography and the literature to demonstrate both of these aspects of my relationship with Suzanne. The reality is that both of these

emotions merge into a flowing duality which creates a third emotional state-- ambivalence.

This ambivalence has, as this text demonstrated, many dimensions. But are my experiences exclusively about having a mentally retarded parent? Some non-retarded mothers treat their children like Suzanne treated me. Also, my father and grandmother were mentally ill. How much of my experience was due to their influence? Then again, would Grandmother have treated me in the same manner if my mother was not mentally retarded? My father? Would I exist? There is no doubt that my mother's status as a person with mental retardation has been a context from which all the other aspects of my life have emerged. While I am confident that I have constructed an ethnography of the experience of having a mother with mental retardation; ambivalence, never-the-less, seems to be a necessary aspect of and resource for interpreting this paper.

The frames I drew on to make sense of my mother's identity and my own came from the normal places-- family, friends and neighbors-- and some not so normal places like social service agencies and the research literature. It is difficult to separate out and label these various influences. Because of the layered account, I was not forced to. It enabled me to use many of the resources available to me that, had I stuck with a "scientific" mode of inquiry, I would not have been able to share with a reader. I was free to be time loose, a girl, an adult, an academic and more.

In my attempt at artful sociology, emotional sociology, and

sociological introspection, my goal was to help the reader connect my experiences with their own. By discussing lived emotional experience, readers are confronted with the things they have in common with the author and they are less likely to dismiss the situations of others as freakish and not their concern.

By using a layered account format, I create and codify a forum where this and other stories like it can be told. At the heart of the problem is the painful, shame filled, humiliating silence that still pervades the issue of mentally retarded parenting. Without dialogue there are no opportunities to construct the necessary formulas and recipies which enable interaction and problem solving; specifically, no opportunities for understanding on the part of researchers, policy makers, and the public.

By telling this story I break the norm of silence. Instead of engaging in the normal range of behaviors one who is stigmatized engages in, such as keeping the stigma a secret, avoiding those who know, staying with one's own kind or contra-wise, avoiding one's own kind (Goffman, 1963), I out myself, so to speak, and embrace the discredited identity. By transgressing the boundaries of silence I have discovered that really, the identity of having a mother with mental retardation is not as awful as I had supposed. Each time I speak of this to others, and I do speak of it more frequently now, I am more and more certain of just what to say-- I both love and hate my mentally retarded mother.

* * *

"So what do the grandparents think of the grandbaby?" she asks

politely. "They are quite excited about him," I respond, knowing that her inquiry could be polite conversation and nothing more. "Are both sets still alive?" she asks. "Jacks folks are alive, my father is dead," I answer. "I'm so sorry. What does your mother think of him?" The old familiar dread starts to build up. "She has not met him," I respond. "Well why on earth not?" she asks. "Because she lives in another state and Tennessee is a long trip, besides she cannot afford it," I say evasively. "Why don't you go to see her?" she probes further. "Because I have been busy teaching," I say, through a barely restrained, hostile manner. "Well if it were my grandbaby, nothing could keep me from him, why can't she get herself here?" Angrily, I lash out at this pushy busy body, "Because my mother is mentally retarded."

REFERENCES

Berger, P. and T. Luckmann. 1966. The Social Construction of Reality. NY: Doubleday.

Blumer, H. 1969. Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bogdan, R. and S. Taylor. 1994. The Social Meaning of Mental Retardation: Two Life Stories. NY: Teachers College Press.

Bogdan, R. and S. Taylor. 1976. "The Judged, Not the Judges: An Insider's View of Mental Retardation." American Psychologist, 31: 47-52.

Carmody, M. 1991. "Invisible Victims: Sexual Assault of People with an Intellectual Disability," Australia and New Zealand Journal of Developmental Disabilities, 17:229-236.

Danforth, S. 1997. "On What Basis Hope? Modern Progress and Postmodern Possibilities," Mental Retardation, ??:?????

Edgerton, R. B. 1967. The Cloak of Competence: Stigma in the Lives of the Mentally Retarded. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Edgerton, R. B. and M. A. Gaston. 1991. "I've Seen it All!": Lives of Older Persons with Mental Retardation in the Community. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Ellis, C. and A. Bochner. 1997. Ref forthcoming.

Ellis, C. and A. Bochner. 1992. "Telling and Performing Personal Stories: The Constraints of Choice in Abortion." In Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience, edited by Carolyn Ellis and Michael Flaherty, 79-101. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ellis, C. 1991. "Sociological Introspection and Emotional Experience." Symbolic Interaction, 14:23-50.

Elmer, E. and G.S. Gregg. 1967. "Developmental Characteristics of Abused Children." Pediatrics, 40:596-602.

Feldman, M. A., F. Towns, J. Betal, L. Case, A. Rincover, and C. A. Rubino. 1986. "Parent Education Project II: Increasing Stimulating Interactions of Developmentally Handicapped Mothers." Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 19:23-37.

Finkelhor, D., and G.T. Hotaling. 1984. "Sex Abuse in the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect: An

Appraisal." Child Abuse and Neglect, 18:23-33.

Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. Studies in Ethnomethodology. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Goffman, Erving. 1963. Stigma. NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Goode, D. A. 1994. A World Without Words: The Social Construction of Children Born Deaf and Blind. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Goode, D. A. 1992. "Who is Bobby? Ideology and Method in the Discovery of a Down Syndrome Person's Competence." In Interpreting Disability: A Qualitative Reader, edited by Philip M. Ferguson, Dianne L. Ferguson, and Steven J. Taylor. NY: Teachers College Press.

Groce, N. 1992. "The Town Fool: An Oral History of a Mentally Retarded Individual in a Small Town Society." In Interpreting Disability: A Qualitative Reader, edited by Philip M. Ferguson, Dianne L. Ferguson, and Steven J. Taylor. NY: Teachers College Press.

Heighway, S. M., S. Kidd-Webster, and P. Snodgrass. 1988. "Supporting Parents with Mental Retardation." Children Today, November/December, Pp.24-27.

Kantrowitz, B., P. King, and D. Witherspoon. 1986. "Help for Retarded Parents." Newsweek, June 23, P.62

Klein, B. C. 1990. "Survival Dilemmas: Case Study of an Adult Child of a Schizophrenic Parent." Clinical Social Work Journal, Vol 18:43-56.

Langness, L. L. and H. G. Levine. 1986. Culture and Retaration. Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel.

Peterson, S. L., E. A. Robinson, and I. Littman. 1983. "Parent-child Interaction training for Parents with a History of Mental Retardation." Applied Research in Mental Retardation, 4:329-342.

Riemer, Jeffery. 1977. "Varieties of Opportunistic Research." Urban Life 5:467-77.

Robinson, L. H. 1978. "Parental Attitudes of Mentally Retarded Young Mothers." Child Psychiatry and Human Development, 8:131-144.

Ronai, C. R. 1997a. "Discursive Constraint in the Narrated Identities of Childhood Sex Abuse Survivors." In Everyday Sexism in the Third Millenium, edited by Carol Rambo Ronai, Barbara A.

Zsembik, and Joe R. Feagin. NY: Routledge.

Ronai, C. R. 1997b. "My Mother is Mentally Retarded." In Composing Ethnography, edited by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner. Newbury Park, CA: Altimira Press, Sage.

Ronai, C. R. 1995. "Multiple Reflections of Child Sex Abuse: An Argument for a Layered Account." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography.

Ronai, C. R. 1992. "A Night in the Life of a Dancer/Researcher: A Layered Account," In Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience, edited by Carolyn Ellis and Michael Flaherty. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sobsey, D. 1994. Violence and Abuse in the Lives of People with Disabilities: The End of Silent Acceptance? Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Stimpson, L. and M. C. Best. 1991. Courage Above All: Sexual Assault Against Women with Disabilities. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: DisAbled Women's Network Canada.

Stoneman, Z. 1989. "Comparison Groups in Research on Families with Mentally Retarded Members: A Methodological and Conceptual Review." American Journal on Mental Retardation, 94:195-215.

Tymchuk, A. J. 1992. "Predicting adequacy of Patenting by People with Mental Retardation." Child Abuse and Neglect, 16:165-178.

Tymchuk, A. J. 1991. "Self-Concepts of Mothers Who Show Mental Retardation." Psychological Reports, 68: 503-510.

Whitman, B. Y., B. Graves, and P. J. Accardo. 1989. "Training in Patenting Skills for Adults with Mental Retardation." Social Work, September, Pp. 431-434.