


Memory as Insight: Navigating the Complexities of Generational Mother–Daughter Relationships

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Abstract

Our memories very rarely represent factual events, but rather they are tethered to our personal goals and how we see ourselves. Autobiographical memories are a specific type of memory that come at us in an instant with no warning of their arrival or clue as to their purpose. This autoethnographic research offers layered emotional understandings of memories—of what we may have resisted in our moms, what they may have resisted in their moms, and the new meanings of resistances that lead us to see both our mothers and our daughters outside the confines of their singular roles.

Keywords

autoethnography, memory, mother-daughter relationships, multi-voiced, layered understanding

Introduction

We delicately sip on our coffee as we peruse our narratives as mothers. We begin to discuss the ways our relationships with our mothers weave themselves into our relationships with our daughters.

Carly reflects: *I've felt that from the moment my daughter Sofia was born, I was meant to gain all of the answers, none of which came.*

Patricia reflects: *As a motherless daughter, I have always yearned for the guidance of my mother in raising my daughter Makenna.*

Memories are elegant and complex images that enable us to reflect and learn. Involuntary autobiographical memories are “memories of personal events that come to mind with no preceding attempt at retrieval” (Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2009, p. 1137). When we happen upon these memories, we are confronted with glimpses of our past that afford us a broader view and understanding of the present. As we began this project, we realized that these vivid remembrances come back to us spontaneously, as if signaling something we need to know. Some present-day moments with our daughters raise questions or concerns; memory offers a snapshot that may prompt advice, support, or additional fears.

As mothers first and researchers second, we explore how involuntary, autobiographical memories of times with our mothers serve to guide us as we navigate through our own mothering experience. This multi-voiced text is an attempt to represent the seamless ways in which our past (presented

in italics), miraculously intertwines with our present through our memories. The overall piece weaves together our methodological process, narrative episodes of mothering, and theory about memory. We close with a discussion of what we have learned through the process of reflecting and writing this piece.

Carly recalls a moment with her 3-year-old daughter Sofia that ignited a memory of a moment with her own mother. Intertwined in this story is a vivid present-day struggle and a memory that revolves around a fear for the safety of a child.

Sofia teasingly runs along the faded yellow line on the edge of the sidewalk. She glances back at me with wisps of her strawberry blonde hair masking her grin. I can't help but smile back at her, incorporating a good eye-roll to let her know what she is doing is not safe.

“Come here Sofia please,” I hold out my hand palm up demanding her to grab it. I look down at my hand and notice my once calloused fingers have become long and slender, my mothers. How odd I wonder.

A pair of green eyes stare at my hand as if searching the lines of my palm to find the level of trouble she will be in if

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she denies my request. Sofia considers her choices and opts to test me. In a split second, she turns and attempts to run in the opposite direction, and stumbles into the street. She must have forgotten where she stood in line with the sidewalk, because as she spins, her navy blue, buckled shoes find the road just as a red van heads her way. The speed of the vehicle is irrelevant; I knew the potential of this situation the second she turned to run. The sound that escapes my throat is like nothing I ever knew I was capable of making.

I watch as my panicked mother searches for me through each aisle of the grocery store frantically and incoherently screaming my name. The sides of my cheeks rise into a giddy smile as I watch her eyebrows crease and her eyes begin to water as she passes each lane with no sign of me. This game is fun, so I crouch down low behind the barrel of fruit but both eyes fixed on her as I listen to the panicked sounds coming from my mother.

I can hear my mother's voice echoing in mine. The sound comes from deep within my gut, as if my scream will help bend the rules of science and the car will turn into a swimming pool, and Sofia will simply plop into a warm body of water. I wonder if my mother thought that her cries for me also possessed magical properties, perhaps a sonar drawing me back to her when I played my childish games. It's fascinating that silly memories of hide-and-seek in a grocery store have suddenly become connected to deep and painful moments of fear.

Carly's experience with her daughter parallels the memory with her mother in ways that are difficult to grasp in the moment. The similarity is evident; a daughter testing the boundaries that have been set by the mother. However, it leaves questions unanswered: What are these memories, and how or why do they appear with such spontaneity. Are they meant as a guide for how to mother or as a question for how to do things differently?

The Making of Memory

As we began this research, we reflected on the memories of times with our mothers and wondered, why do we remember what we remember? There is a body of literature that suggests that our ability to recall a memory is incumbent upon varying factors within individuals' experiences. One factor may be that we remember "based on the vividness of events in memory" (Friedman, 2004, p. 603). In other words, how vividly we recall a memory will also tell us how accurately we are able to discern when the event took place. A second factor may be that people associate personal events with specific landmarks within their lives that aid in their ability to accurately access memories (Zwartz & Sharman, 2013).

A third factor that affects individuals' capacity for memory recall is based on what stage in their life the event took place. Research suggests that our ability to recall memories of our young and adolescent years is easier because it is during this period that people gain a stronger awareness of their sense of self (Janssen & Murre, 2008). Thus, the varying ways in which memories are recalled, based on the time in which the event took place or the vividness of the memory, suggests that memories are not necessarily tied to an objective reality but rather to a subjective one. Essentially, memory pertains to individuals' identities rather than to the actual event that took place.

The window shines a golden hue into the room, where two of the walls are lined with books and the others are adorned with paintings, notes, and drawings. The magic in this room feels palpable as we sit on opposite sides of the desk and intertwine narrative. Patricia reflects on a present-day moment with her daughter when she and her husband J.C. are concerned about the increasing intimacy between their daughter Makenna and her boyfriend Ryan. Intruding in that moment is an unexpected memory of the concern that Patricia's mother had of the increasing intimacy between Patricia and her boyfriend Paul.

Just last week I failed big time. I came home at dinner time after a peaceful and insightful hour and a half session with my energy healer. It was like my motor had revved down to a slow purr. I sat down to dinner hardly able to speak to Makenna and J.C. with this calm that had settled over me. As it often does, the conversation turns to Ryan.

"So, what are you and Ryan up to this weekend?" I ask Makenna as she picks at the pieces of broccoli and chicken on her plate.

"Oh, I don't know, just hang out," she replies with seemingly little interest in elaborating or continuing this conversation.

This is the point at which worry comes over me.

After a brief "hello" and update with my mom, Paul and I retreat to the basement, alone, away from her watchful eye. We put The Zombies' single on the record player; "It's the Time of the Season" and stretch out on the couch, arms and legs entangled, kissing and pressing against each other passionately. We lose track of time and place until my mom yells down the basement stairs:

"Change the record, PLEASE."

The memory intrudes on the present, reminding me how worried my mom must have been when I was 15 and spending a lot of time at home secluded in the basement, alone with my boyfriend Paul.

This moment with Makenna worries Patricia. Memory of her mother's worry intervenes in a way that escalates Patricia's anxiety about Makenna. What we realize is that

memories do not always soothe us. They can raise new questions or lead us to interrogate our identity as mothers.

Memory Comes to Our Rescue

Memory carries a wide array of purposes for every individual. First, memory serves as a survival mechanism; it helps us to make decisions about our lives, for “there can be no knowing without some capacity for memory” (Prus, 2007, p. 384). The ability for individuals to recall information from a compartment of past experiences is vital to our physical and relational growth. Some research provides a three-step process for memory, which involves encoding, storage, and retrieval, suggesting that our memory lies outside of our awareness until we need to make use of it (Berntsen, 1996; Cherry, 2017). Along with the varying degrees in which the brain accesses memories, there are also stages within the human experience in which we are more or less susceptible to maintain these memories.

A second function of memory is to generate personal meanings that enable people to make sense of the world. Conway and Loveday (2015) found that “memories never fully correspond to our experience, only to parts of it, although they may be coherent with the self” (p. 578). They posit that while all memories may not be factual, they do portray accurate ideas about how people feel about something; that memories are true in the sense that they “support a powerful personal meaning” (p. 580). To suggest that memories are not necessarily accurate places the burden on their overall usefulness; it implies that people can’t rely on their memories to aid them with the present because they are not exact. However, if the memory is congruent with a person’s identity, then the level of accuracy in the details becomes less important.

Finally, while memories aid people with their relationships or sense of self, there is a specific type of memory that people have no control of recalling. Involuntary autobiographical memories can be an intense flash of vivid images that seem to appear with no cue or warning of their arrival. These memories weave seamlessly into our present lives, as Carly continues her story.

I focus all of my energy on her right hand. If I can get to that hand, if I can reach out, if I can stretch enough, if I maneuver in such a way as to not bump her forward, if I take my right foot one step here, if I place my left foot at the edge of the sidewalk, if I can do this in time; and I do. At this point, I don’t care if I’m the one to injure her, the alternative is too dreadful to consider. My fingers feel her miniature hand flail, her mind not quick enough to register that she should grasp mine in return. I yank her with all my strength into my chest and step back. The force in which I grab her knocks me to the ground, she lands on top of me her head resting on my chest. Sweat has formed around her

face and her cheeks have turned a bright red; she is too shocked to cry. I remain on the sidewalk with both hands clasped around her chest tightly; I let the bright sun assault my face and I wait.

The large crate of apricots I hide behind draws my attention away from my mother. I look up and I can’t see her anywhere. A tingle in my neck drops to a punch in my belly. Where did she go? I run where I saw her last. With each quick step my throat tightens, and I call for her softly,

“Mom.” I get no response. The worried faces of other shoppers follow me as I walk each isle, searching. I continue to call for my mom and without her voice to calm me, I begin to unravel. I should have found her by now! Did she leave? Finally, a man in clunky black shoes, black pants, and a white short-sleeve shirt crouches down eye-to-eye and sings,

“Are you Carly?”

“uh-hu,” I stutter between breaths.

“Your mother is at the front of the store.” He reaches for my hand, prompting me to take it. I am escorted to the entrance where she awaits. Her arms are tightly crossed around her chest. My feet get stuck. My hand tries to pull the man back as he pulls me forward. The tingle at the back of the neck returns and I pull my hands into my belly.

Three . . . two . . . one, Sofia screams and breaks me back into the present. She is crying so hard she stutters through her breath. I can feel my heart pounding, and a shiver shoots up my spine as I begin to entertain the “what if” of this scenario. I shut it out, sit up, and swoop her tighter into me, remembering that I too had close calls with death as a young child, and right now she needs my warm embrace rather than my scolding. Based on her incoherent screams, I am fairly confident that staying away from the edge of the sidewalk is something she will always remember.

In this story, Carly realizes that not only do her memories help her take care of her daughter, but this same moment has become a memory for Sofia, one that she can make use of. When Carly looks back at this moment, she remembers that she was just as afraid of her mom as she was of being lost. And so this involuntary memory reminds her of the actions a mother can take to calm and connect with her daughter, rather than enhance the fear she already felt.

The Multiple Meanings of Memory

Autobiographical memories are connected to people’s association with the memory in question and the present (Rubin & Berntsen, 2009). In essence, they are considered “recollections of personally meaningful events that are used to construct one’s self history” (Farrar, Fasig, & Welch-Ross, 1997, p. 389). Due to their random nature, these types of memories create uncertainty as to their purpose. However, as we explored our experiences with these memories, we

understood that although random, they are meaningful representations of trials that involve the self.

In fact, these memories come to us at a faster rate and they often depict a specific event in great detail (Schlagman & Kvavilashvili, 2008). Because the varying perspectives held by people have “literal manifestations in the visual imagery that accompanies autobiographical memory” (Libby & Eibach, 2002, p. 167), this type of recall pertains to some form of personal goal (Johannessen & Berntsen, 2010; Libby & Eibach, 2002). There is a connection between what individuals are working toward in the present that brings them back to their past (Johannessen & Berntsen, 2010). Thus, autobiographical memories are tangible manifestations of our past, directly related to the present with the capacity to aid us with our personal goals.

In the next story, Patricia also feels that the memory of her mother’s support is instructive; however, in this situation for whatever reason, she was incapable of creating that bond with her daughter. Perhaps the difference between what Carly and Patricia were able to accomplish has something to do with the difference in their daughters, ages.

Patricia remembers that for her, being at home with Paul was equivalent to Ryan and Makenna’s “hanging out,” which actually for them means making out, while “watching a movie” or just stretched across her bed with the required open door, listening for footsteps as a signal to pull away from each other.

I hear my mother’s voice in my own when I say, “Why don’t you two go to the beach?” Just like my mom, I am hoping to encourage her to get out of the house and break free from the pattern of making out, which has become the center of their worlds with one another.

I’m peering out of our living room curtain, watching my brother’s friend Greg walk down the driveway with his new girlfriend. Even though I am devoted to Paul, I am curious about Greg and enticed by his dark hair, green eyes, and sweet smile. My mom, sitting at the kitchen counter, sees me swooning and suggests,

“Some day you will marry Greg.”

“Oh, right Mom, he doesn’t even know I exist.”

Then, I remember thinking that my mom was silly, and that she was just saying that because she too thought Greg was a “catch.” But today, over 40 years later, I am wondering, if that was a strategy on her part to put a little distance between Paul and I, perhaps concerned about how serious we were and what we were doing alone. Makenna’s voice brings me back to the present.

“Because the water is cold and I don’t have a wet suit,” she protests with unusual strength.

J.C., usually the witness to these conversations between Makenna and I, chimes in: “We can get you a used wet suit at Play it Again Sam.” I see his eyes meet hers for only a moment.

“No, NO! I look terrible in a wet suit. No!” and she begins to gather up her plate and silverware, signaling the end to this conversation.

I think for a moment and make an honest plea for her to reconsider.

“You know how much Ryan loves the water, the beach, and bodyboarding. Don’t you want to do that with him? Don’t you think it would be good for you to involve yourself in something he likes? If he wasn’t spending time with you each weekend, you know he would be at the beach. You don’t want him to resent you for that do you?”

I can see by her contorted face and her erect posture that I have pushed some button I was unaware of.

“Just shut up. I want to shoot you in the face. Just SHUT UP!” And she turns with plate in hand and stomps out to the kitchen.

In that moment, memories of my mom bleed into my emotional upheaval with my daughter.

“Mom, I am so confused. I love Paul, but I don’t think he loves me as much.” Sitting on the couch, just the two of us home, late on a Saturday evening, my mom reaches her arm around my shoulder and pulls me close and says,

“I’m sure he does. I’ve watched the way he looks at you, talks to you.”

“It doesn’t feel like he still loves me. I know, I know he’s pulling away.”

She strokes my hair and pushes my bangs out of my eyes.

“Sometimes baby girl, people just need a break, not because they don’t love each other, but because they want to make sure of their feelings.”

Patricia’s memories of her mother reveal how at this teen age stage in her life, she and her mother created a bond. These were landmark moments when she was experiencing heartbreak over her first love. While Patricia’s memories reveal the ability of her mother to be Patricia’s confidant, this is clearly not something that is achieved in Patricia’s relationship with Makenna.

Storying Mothering Identities Through Autoethnography

As we share our reflections of mothering, we are inhibited and encouraged by our memories. This is what autoethnography accomplishes; that is, through this method “authors scrutinize, publicize, and reflexively rework their own self-understandings as a way to shape understandings of and in the wider world” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1660). Autoethnography serves as a means of collapsing “the conventional distinction between researchers as agents of signification and a separate category of research subjects as objects of signification” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1671). In other words, as ethnographers, we are limited by the senses we choose to unleash in our writing, we offer one

perspective on the experiences of mothers navigating uncertainty and exploring how our memories are a subconscious attempt to make waters less murky.

By exploring these memories of our subconscious, we were confronted with unsavory moments of our past. The shadow self is a concept indicating where natural tendencies deemed distasteful such as selfishness, greed, or jealousy are pushed into our subconscious, resting safely and avoided (Zweig & Abrams, 1991). Moreover, these tendencies, left unexplored, create a collective shadow, where we only acknowledge the behaviors in others and an exploration into the self is left wanting. Zweig and Abrams (1991) suggest that “our shadow self remains the great burden of self-knowledge, the disruptive element that does not want to be known” (p. xxi). Thus, a relentless exploration into the self is necessary because it is an attempt to understand and reconcile with our past. Fox (2007) argues that ethnography works in this way; where “interventions in the form of narrative inspire the telling of other tales; the stories implicate; they replicate the past but whisper hope for the future” (p. 18). Interestingly, our own research on memory has afforded us a similar perspective as it pertains to our mothering journeys—resilience in a sense to continue to improve our roles as mother.

This study was conducted where “vulnerability and self-disclosure are enabled through conversations” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 183). In the telling and re-telling of these stories, we gained a perspective that we as researchers felt must be shared. We collaborated in an attempt to reflexively revise our own understandings of motherhood and memory to create some collectivity in the outer world (Butz & Besio, 2009). This is no easy task, the idea of recalling a difficult moment, capturing it, pulling it out, analyzing it from various perspectives, and writing it up to make sense of it was intimidating. We found that a multi-voiced account on memory and motherhood afforded us as researchers and hopefully as readers, a broader view of the experience.

As Patricia’s story continues, we see how her interactions with Makenna folds into memories that ignite a deep reflection of her shadow self. Patricia begins to formulate new, unexpected, and complicated insights about the perspective and positionings of her mother, her daughter, and herself. Is it because Patricia asked the wrong questions? Is it because Makenna wasn’t ready to have that connection with her mother over her new found intimacy? Whatever the case, the intertwining of the present and the past created a sense of loss and frustration for Patricia and probably Makenna as well.

Her words, like a chemical that erodes my serenity, fuel my rising anger that I can’t control. I yell back.

“You can’t talk to me that way! You can’t you won’t.” I stomp after her into the kitchen and confront her face-to-face and see a look of boredom, a taunting smirk of, “So

what are you going to do?” mixed with “I can’t believe you are doing this to me.” But the taunting smirk is what fuels my sense of injustice and lack of appreciation. Why didn’t I step away, go down the hall, draw a bath, or take the dog for a walk? I wish it would have ended there.

Instead, with veins taut, face hot, I grab her shoulders and shake her. I remember feeling constraint, shaking gently almost, but pulling her body close to my face so she can see how angry and wounded I feel.

“You are hurting me with your words. You can’t talk to me that way. That is it. NEVER again. Never again. This is it, the last time.” I release her and return to J.C. I fall into his arms. He knows. He knows. He understands. He has told her too on other occasions. “You hurt me when you say things like that.” He knows. I know that he doesn’t like to witness or be a part of these intense scenes that play out, but he feels the injustice, the insolence, and in some way he feels she deserves this outburst from me. And right then at that moment I feel justified, even righteous.

But later I feel nauseous. I can’t sleep. I have failed as a mother, as a person who has missed an opportunity to explore my daughter’s vulnerability. I am sick of my anger, anger that seethes every moment that I feel so unappreciated, pushed away, not included, misunderstood, left behind—abandoned. Is that how Makenna feels?

I walk in the door after school in eleventh grade. My usual “I’m home. What’s for dinner?” is met with silence. I listen for my mom’s voice, in rhythm with mine, “I’m in the bathroom,” or “Come on back to the bedroom, I’m sorting clothes.” Silence echoes back. I round the corner from the living room to the hall and head to my room to drop my books. My parent’s bedroom door is closed. It is never closed. I stop at this barrier as if I have lost my way, embrace my books and swallow. A woman’s voice is sobbing from behind the closed door. I don’t recognize the voice. I embrace my books tighter as if to improve my hearing. Turning my head to the side, my “listening to secrets” ear reaches to distinguish the cry. I’m not sure I recognize it.

The door opens. Marie, my mom’s best friend, steps out. She’s not crying. I make a quick duck-and-look move, but see nothing before she clicks the door shut behind her.

“Your mom is just feeling a little sad today about things.” She hesitates. “Don’t worry.” Her voice fails at the effort to calm me and carries an edge that says there is nothing else to say. Her round face and blue eyes move close, as her kleenexed hand presses the side of my arm.

“Sad about what?” I try to read her face. Nothing.

“Just things.” She reaches behind to turn the knob, opens the door just a crack, and slides back in. The door clicks shut again.

I stare at the door. Its faded, fake wood intimidates me. One of my books slides to the floor with a thud and I stoop to catch the rest before they follow. The weeping continues. The hollowness in my chest enlarges, my throat tightens. I

don't recognize my mom in the cry. I don't want to believe that my mom is hiding something from me. I am left to wonder if mom is sick again. I want to know, but I don't knock. I don't ask to come in. I don't want to know. I don't want to see my mom cry again.

The last time I saw her cry was the day my 24-year-old brother, Ronnie, was killed in a car crash. I'm older now. I can brace myself this time from the shimmer of loneliness. I gather my books tight again and walk in solid steps to my bedroom. Once I click the door shut, I listen for the cry. Faint, but still there. I can't stop the shimmer. Tears swell in the corner of my eyes. I just stand there, as if not moving will keep the tears from escaping the ledge. But one drop and with it my legs buckle and I slip with my books to the pink shag rug by my bed. I can't cry. I won't cry. I know how important it is for me to be strong for mom. At least that is what I always believed.

All I ever knew was that my mom was sick. She had a bubble in her brain that could burst if any one of us upset her. That is what I remember the doctor telling all of us at the Mayo clinic when I was ten. But she didn't seem sick to me. She was there in the kitchen at her perch when I returned from school, asking about my day. She was there at the stove at dinner time, dishing up one of our favorite meals, of spaghetti and meat balls, pork chops and fried cabbage, or sauerkraut and mashed potatoes. She was ready to head out the door on the weekends to shop for some special occasion—a homecoming or prom dress, or just an outfit to begin the school year. She was ALWAYS there for me, ready to plop down on the couch and listen to whatever I needed to tell.

Is that what Makenna will take away from our interaction today? Did she feel abandoned by me for not understanding? Did my mom feel abandoned by me in her sickness? Did I feel abandoned when my mom died when I was 17? Abandonment feels like rejection, neglect, desertion. Is that what my mother felt? Are these bursts of failure within us, ready for deployment at any sign of attack? Do we carry them secretly unbeknownst to those we love that they are in grave danger of stepping too close to these minefields with the utterance of one simple password?

In writing these stories and remembering their mothers, Carly and Patricia realize that not only do their memories aid in their goal to become the type of mothers they see in themselves, their hope is that they are considering and reconsidering what memories they might be creating for their daughters.

The Lessons in Memories: Re-Considering the Layered Selves

The uses of autobiographical memory have direct, self, and social benefits (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin,

2005). As parents in our interactions with our children, memories of love, joy, loss, and trauma are inescapable. Interestingly, these instant vivid flashes of memories are more likely to occur to people who have dealt with some form of trauma (Berntsen, 2010; Schlagman & Kvavilashvili, 2008). Traumatic experiences are more likely to be recalled due to the intense emotions associated with the event, which makes it easier for people's brains to remember (Berntsen, 2010).

Grief is a multifaceted response to loss; the loss of someone or something in which some form of bond was formed (Ellis, 2014). Yet, it is in remembering during times of loss that we are capable of finding peace, where memories amplify our "appreciation for the qualities of caring, love, vulnerability, and relational connection" (Ellis, 2014, p. 17). There is something in our past that offers wisdom. A resolve to move forward is made possible by individuals' innate ability of recall—to examine the experience and apply the lesson. This supports the notion that these memories are goal oriented.

Therefore, autobiographical memories can serve as a defense mechanism, as if our past selves are desperately trying to send us a message of reassurance or warning of things to come (Schlagman & Kvavilashvili, 2008). It's as though our subconscious gives us these memories as a means of encouragement, prodding us to move forward, providing us a sense of resilience when faced with hardship. Because autobiographical memories pertain to our identity and our set goals, the ones that are linked to loss, trauma, and pain becomes a means to guide us through similar situations in the present.

In the following narrative, Carly describes an experience that intertwines interactions with her daughter with her own childhood, which brings her closer to her mother.

It is noon and it is hot. Sitting in my car, I try to relax as I wait for my daughter to come out of her grandmother's front door, typically toting a new toy in one hand and her dad's hand in the other. "He takes forever on purpose" I think to myself as I feel my forehead crinkle at my hairline. I suck in the warm air and consciously make an effort to suppress the anger and resentment I feel toward Sofia's father. I hold it all in and sigh as my shoulders slouch forward in defeat, my forehead now resting on my steering wheel. My sigh feels like a confession; I am threatened at the second life he provides her, that I can't provide as a single mom. As a result, I feel a constant pull to compete for our daughters' affection, always wondering which of her two lives she prefers.

I lean my head back on the head rest and look up at the dusty sun roof and wonder about my own childhood. As a toddler I constantly reminded my mother of my own preference.

My hands and face feel itchy from the hours of play time at school. I am angry that I don't get more time to play with sand castles so I kick the back of my mother's driver's seat on the way home. I know she won't let me play because every day after school I only get one cookie and then my mom thinks I'm sleepy and she puts me in my room for a nap. But I'm not sleepy, I want to play, so I sing with angry eyes at her.

"Daddy is my favorite; I can't wait till he gets home. I want daddy."

Only silence from the beautiful woman driving the car.

Attempting to shake off this unsavory memory, I switch positions in the car; the warm moisture in the air engulfs me and I close my eyes and wonder, what is it about my mother that draws me to her only for me to defiantly push away? Perhaps it is that no matter how our relationship has evolved, she has always felt so out of reach.

I am cuddled into my sheets with my blankie tucked under my chin and rubbing against my lip. Her soft voice makes my eyes feel heavy while her long, graceful fingers trace shapes across my back in rhythm with her singing.

"I can't get enough of my sweetie bear." Her wide jaw, dark long hair, and round blue eyes are all I see as sleep shuts out the noises of the world around me.

I'm brought back to the present by the sound of children playing in the street in front of me. I squint as I try to pick out Sofia's silhouette in the blistering sun. She is not there. I lean back in my car, close my eyes, and am immediately flooded with questions these memories have ignited; why couldn't my mother tell me all of her secrets, why didn't I understand the knowing glances she sent my dad when one of us said something funny, absurd, or insulting; why wasn't I the regal woman she was in the midst of chaos? It was as if she was the secret, and I was never invited to be a part of it. This worries me. I don't want my daughter to feel as if I am out of reach.

Sofia finally pops into view. Her strawberry blond hair bounces at the edges of her face as her green eyes search for me on the street. Her eyebrows are creased. She is sass. You can tell by her walk; her shoulders set, her stomach pooched out, and her thick thighs stomp toward me with purpose. I step out of the car and I am immediately stricken by the Southern California heat as well as my car's irritating reminder that I have left it with the keys still in the ignition. Beep-beep-beep, my car blares in succession. I ignore it and smile at my daughter as I silently grab her dainty hand and lead her back to my car, back to me.

I plop her into her car seat and buckle her in while making silly noises with my mouth to keep her from crying for her dad. This time there are no complaints, so I scurry around the back of my car to get into the driver seat, I shut the door:

"Mommy you're mean and I'm sad," I pop the car in reverse. Outbursts like these from my three-year-old have been happening more frequently than I admit.

"Mommy I want daddy" sounds like "Carly you are failing as her parent," in my head.

Lost in thought I am awakened by yet another statement:

"Mommy I can't wait till daddy gets home." Pieces of my thick black hair fall into my eyes so I can't see her reaction. I wrinkle my forehead to let her know I'm not happy, and I curl my hands into fists, tightly squeezing my navy blue jumper to show her I'm angry. My mother is my favorite, so I do not know why I am not happy with her, either way she needs to know how I feel.

"He will be home soon honey," is all she says sleepily. Now I'm even more angry.

A brief sense of fear sets in as I attempt to grasp the intensity of this memory. I press on the break at the stop sign and I look back into the mirror, unsure of which toddler would be in the seat. Sofia pretends I am not there and lazily gazes out of her window. I look both ways and ease on the gas as I make a left onto the familiar road back home. A pang of guilt shoots from my neck into my belly for putting my mom through the same anguish. As I swing on my sunglasses I understand that Sofia doesn't mean it and I hope my mother understands I never meant it. Yet the parallel between my two lives as daughter and mother is haunting.

For a moment, I am unnerved at my uncanny ability to be pulled back into vivid bits and pieces of my own subconscious, of a time and a place I forgot existed. When will this happen again? Will I be ready? Will I ever become accustomed to these hauntings?

As I drive back home, I coo at Sofia:

"I can't get enough of my Sofia Bear with bright green eyes and cinnamon hair!"

Her eyes droop into sleep, and her pudgy fists slowly open as if letting me back in and rest gently on her lap. I accelerate on the gas as I merge onto the freeway and smile. A sudden calm washes over me; perhaps it is gratefulness that I am finally in on the secrets I so long assumed only my mother possessed.

Carly uses these memories as a form of reconciliation. They are painful gifts; both unforgiving yet understanding. Leaving stillness in its wake, these memories reaffirm her role, reaffirm her power, and bring her closer to both her mother and her daughter.

Memory's Perspectives

Motherhood is both a rewarding and challenging journey full of uncertainty. As researchers and mothers, we explored memories of hardship and loss with our own mothers, but the question became how to make use of them when they come to us so unexpectedly? We now know that autobiographical memories serve social functions of conversation, relationship maintenance, teaching, behavior control, and

emotional regulation (Kulkofsku, Wang, & Koh, 2009). In fact, the “social functions of autobiographical memory and reminiscence often refer to using memories as a medium to build new relationships, nurture current relationships, and promote intimacy, as well as social bonding with larger groups” (Kulkofsku et al., 2009, p. 94). Therefore, autobiographical memories have the capacity to nurture a strong bond with our daughters. In turn, as mothers, our own experiences as daughter’s aids in our mothering.

In terms of mother–daughter relationships, attachment and comprehending emotional situations is tethered to memory (Belsky, Spritz, & Crnic, 1996). Therefore, autobiographical memories can serve as a means of intimacy to build stronger mother–daughter relationships (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Kulkofsku et al., 2009). In fact, Cassidy (1994) suggests that to strengthen the quality of attachment with our own mothers, we must be open and flexible regarding a wide range of emotional experiences through the sharing of autobiographical memories. There is no road map, or right or wrong way to mother, yet these types of memories provide us with some form of understanding on how best to proceed.

Patricia realizes how memories of mothers become instructive. They give us a confidence that what we’re doing to support our daughters is what our mother would do. So we feel comfortable with our parenting decisions based on the memories that we are able to ignite of our own mothers.

I hold her tiny 96-pound body in my arms as her tears, pain, and disappointment reverberate into my own body. Her boyfriend of four months, her first love, Ryan, has told her,

“I am confused. . . . Did you expect us to stay together forever? In the future, we will break up, we will date other people.”

She cries into the phone,

“Are you breaking up with me? Please tell me. I love you. I want things to be like they were. How can you change from yesterday to today? Have you been lying to me? How can I trust you? I trusted you.”

I can hear his deep voice responding, but I don’t know his exact words, but I do know what he is saying. I can see it in Makenna’s shaking hand as she dabs at each and every tear, in her trembling body, in her mouth struggling to repeat what she can’t believe she is saying.

“Please Ryan. Please tell me we are okay. Please tell me that you love me, that we can go back to who we were. We are awesome together. Please. Please.”

I remember how my mom read my vulnerability like a crystal ball and mothered me in ways that I try to mother Makenna. I’m remembering that I too was 16 when my boyfriend Paul broke up with me just as suddenly as Ryan broke up with Makenna.

“What do you mean? Why? I thought you loved me.”

“I do, I did. We just met too young. We need to see other people, to know for sure.”

Mom peeks her head into my bedroom. I signal her to come in and sit with me on my bed. I can’t talk any more. I just want her to hold me. She knows that.

“I’ll see you tomorrow? At my locker?” I sob through muffled tears. I lean into mom’s arms as I hang up the phone.

“Oh mom, mom, Paul broke up with me. What am I going to do? Why? Why? I just want to die.”

“Oh baby, baby girl. I know. I know.” She strokes my hair and she pulls me close. I grasp her tight and feel the wetness of my tears on her cotton shirt.

My mom’s support in a deep moment of despair is just what I needed in that moment. But here in this moment, I have never seen Makenna in such pain, ever. I cringe, hold my chest, and tears flip over my lids again and again as I remember the sight of her pacing, sitting, pulled tight into a fetal position, and begging, yes, begging Ryan to forget this, to go back to the way they were. I walk in step with her, as my mom had held me close when Paul broke my heart at 16. With each step from her bedroom, to the dining room, from the floor, to her bed, is a movement of all three of us toward some kind of hope, lost, left behind in the little piles of crumpled, soaked tissues.

In all of the four months with Ryan, I witnessed my daughter skip to the door to greet him, sigh a long, loving goodbye after an afternoon together, and sing out loud any love song that she “discovered” had new meaning, speaking directly to her since she met Ryan. Her blossoming into a woman, a woman in full bloom with each and every kindness and attention Ryan showered on her—a cuddly bear lightly sprayed with his cologne, holding in its paws the sweetest of love notes, a bracelet from Hawaii, another love letter at their three-month anniversary, a necklace with a charm engraved with “forever,” compliments and kisses, and then just a few weeks before the break up, a ring that he tells her “holds a place for the real thing when we get married.”

That first night, Makenna held out hope that things would be better in the morning. But the thread was worn and bare, with no more “I love yous” at the end of a phone conversation, or the end of a text like there had been for as long as she can remember.

“He sounds distant, like he has made his mind up,” she says with her weary, teary voice as I rub her back and then fall asleep in her bed, holding her together as best I can. My mom instructs me how to stay by her side; that is what she had done for me on so many occasions.

These involuntary memories of my mother on my bed, listening, holding me close seem to come when I need them. I sense my mom inserting herself into the relationship with Makenna to help me figure out what to do. Suddenly, I realize something instructive about what I can or should do with Makenna.

But then I witness what I knew and hoped would occur; Makenna rose like the phoenix and gathered strength from all the friends, even teachers, at school. Through their eyes and words, the injustice and sense of cruelty about how Ryan chose

to break up with her was real and confirmed. Both friends and admirers swooped in to make plans with her for Saturday night, so she accepted an invitation to sooth the pain and move on to the anger that would inevitably arrive.

However, when I look in her eyes now, I don't see the eyes that Ryan got lost in as they floated next to each other in our backyard pool on their very first date. When I tuck her in at night, I don't see the bright smile that says I am waiting for my last goodnight text from Ryan. I see a weary 15-year-old that has learned some very hard lessons about love and life. She will be tentative, guarded, and not so eager to dive into her next relationship—it is both a curse and gift that Ryan has bestowed.

Patricia embraces the memories of her mother as a way to be present with Makenna—to witness her pain and search for ways to mother her as she has been mothered in the past. Interestingly, as Makenna has moved beyond her teenaged years into adulthood, Patricia has been mothered by her in ways that she had mothered Makenna in the past.

Interpretations and Discoveries

Sitting at the kitchen island, papers strewn over the counter, we lean in, grappling over our stories, searching for patterns or a new insight as we intertwine memory, experience, and our research. We find ourselves remembering our mothers.

Carly reflects: *Ah, but that is how I was with my mother. After all of these years, I never realized how I hurt her, until I was hurt by my daughter. In a sense I feel ashamed for treating her in that way, my embarrassment also comes in the sense that she was always one step ahead of me, all the while allowing me to think I was the one surprising her with my anger.*

Patricia reflects: *Since mom died when I was 17, a senior in high school, we talked very little about the past, her mom, or what it was like to mother me. Had my mom talked about her resistance to her mom or my resistance to her, I might have been more prepared for the resistance that I faced with Makenna.*

A random conversation one day led us to the realization that in our day-to-day interactions with our daughters, we experience vivid memories of being with our mothers. The *full circle* offers layers of understanding of mothering through memories and stories. For Patricia, these are memories of times over 40 years ago before her mother died; for Carly, the memories are more recent, 10 to 20 years ago, and today her mother is very much a part of her life, mothering her and being a grandmother to her daughter. Through this research, we have gained layered emotional understandings—of what we may have resisted in our moms, what they may have resisted in their moms, and the new

meanings of resistances that lead us to see both our mothers and our daughters outside the confines of their singular role of either daughter or mother.

Autobiographical memories did not offer us time to reflect; they were instant. And in that split moment we often decided to mimic the patterns of behavior we found in our mothers. A natural progression of the way we were mothered; we scrutinized uncertain mothering moments, always grateful for these memories that flooded into our current reality. And as a result, we have gained stronger relationships (real and imagined) with our mothers, reflecting on how they mothered us and then putting into practice these new understandings. Although at times painful, embarrassing, or sad, we now know that we must consciously and fearlessly dive into these memories, because they create more room for a stronger relationship with our daughters. Over and over again, we find that “we’re back in a moment of echoes and shadows and ghosts” (Henson, 2017, p. 224); it is this process that moves us through complicated emotions of guilt, regret, sadness, empathy, and compassion.

The experience of coming full circle with memory is not something to run from. It is not unusual for someone to say, “Why do you dwell on moments in the past?” as if it is more important to move on and live only in the present. Instead, we have found through this research, the ways in which memories become the stories we live by in the present. As one autoethnographer to another, we agree with Poulos (2016) when he says,

I have found that memories can become stories. As an autoethnographer, I know what to do. I perk up, and follow the clues. I have learned to embrace memory when it comes, even when I don't like the first few steps along the path. I have learned to follow memory where it leads me. (p. 552)

Patricia still owns Carole King's *Tapestry* album, which came out in 1971, the year her mother died of brain cancer. And it is only now, in writing this article that Patricia remembers clearly singing along to “If you need, you need me to be with you, I will follow where you lead.” The words haunted and comforted her, as if they were spoken by her mother. But now she realizes that through memory, where her mother leads she will follow.

Reflecting on the challenges of motherhood by exploring memories, Carly has begun to mend her relationship with her mother. What has grown in the space of emptiness is a profound appreciation for her mother's unwavering patience and understanding. This has calmed the sense of resentment she felt always having to catch up to her own mother's greatness. Acknowledging this resentment and analyzing it has stirred uncomfortable emotions of guilt and embarrassment, which so miraculously enabled Carly to reconcile with herself as daughter and mother, stoking a confidence she can only assume is precisely the secret that her mother possesses.

Resilience, just like mothering, is ineffable. The strength comes from accepting and reflecting on those tough moments when we feel we have failed as a mother. Listening and remembering are key to this strength—listening to the voices of our children and remembering and reflecting on the memories of our mothers that come to us involuntarily in those challenging moments. For some, these memories offer insight about what to do next; for others, the insight is what NOT to do next. Recognizing these memories as reminiscent of a similar moment with our mothers offers clues to new understandings of our daughters, our mothers, and ourselves.

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