Community Voices

Voices of Motherhood

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INTRODUCTION

As feminist academics and mothers, we've noticed some serious limitations in academic writing and thinking about motherhood. The sense that much of the existing work doesn't reflect our experiences as mothers, nor those of most women we know, has spurred us to try to bring some new voices to the study of mothering. Until recently motherhood held little interest for scholars of women's lives. This is starting to change. But still, much of the important work focuses on motherhood's negative, burdensome, and oppressive aspects.

One thing routinely lacking from feminist studies of motherhood is the dimension of joy. One friend struck a chord when she noted that feminist mothers tend to be "underprepared for joy."[1] Granted, it may be better to be underprepared than to be drawn into disappointment and despair by some television fantasy of the perfect mother. But wouldn't it be more helpful to move away from either extreme, toward a feminist analysis of motherhood that reflects its very real contradictions - the burdens, the frustrations, but also the rich emotional rewards?

The motivation for this project was to provide space for a diverse group of women to speak, in their own voices, about their experiences of motherhood. We invited seven women from the city of Victoria to write a short essay or give an interview on issues important to them. We provided basic suggestions for subject matter, including their expectations of motherhood, positive and negative experiences, changes in their lives as a result of being a mother, and reflections on society's views of mothers. Within tight space limitations, we tried to encompass as diverse a range of mothers as possible. Published here are the words of women who identify themselves in a wide variety of ways - an older mother, a teenaged mother, a lesbian mother, a mother of Dene background, single mothers, white mothers, mothers of colour, an adoptive mother, a mother of a child who has special needs, working- and middle-class mothers, student mothers, married mothers, a divorced mother, mothers who work for pay and stay-at-home mothers. These women cannot speak to all the possibilities of Canadian motherhood. But they do provide a range of perspectives.

As editors we come to the project with our own perspectives. Both of us are historians at the University of Victoria, both married, Lynne being bisexual and Elizabeth heterosexual. As white women in professional careers we enjoy a great deal more privilege than most women in our community. Yet, as we've been schooled to expect, we pay a price for trying to "have it all." We've been overcome by guilt while peeling the fingers of a sobbing child off our bodies at daycare drop-off, and have trouble being lively and engaging in the classroom after staying up all night with a sick child. We work for an institution that allows for our entirely unexpected desire to go part-time while our children are little. At the same time, we worry that our colleagues think we have "dropped out" of full commitment to our careers. And we admit to the odd blush of envy when we see those around us launching new books. The decision to go part-time, for now, is worth the price. For one thing, it provides more space for the joy that mothering a child can bring.

Although we are concerned that most feminist work has not adequately conveyed this aspect of mothering, we are still surprised to see the theme of joy emerge so consistently - almost defiantly - from these essays and interviews. Critics

might protest that the focus on positive elements indicates that the women have been overly influenced by dominant discourses of ideal motherhood. We find the situation to be far more complex.

Many of the women who speak here are critical of dominant images and expectations, and know full well that the magazine picture of the white, heterosexual, youthful, married mother does not include them. The exclusion can render their experiences invisible. Kyle Mitchell, for instance, felt accepted as a mother in her "moms' group" only as long as she was silent about her lesbianism. Exclusion can also mean being defined as a less-than-authentic mother. This has happened to Heather Olsen as a teen mother, and to Vicky Wyatt as an adoptive mother. The joys of motherhood can lead to acute anguish when a woman finds herself powerless to protect her child from the racism, homophobia, and ignorance of the larger society. Sonia Carmichael, Kyle Mitchell, Suzanne Batten, and Ann Auld provide powerful insights into these tensions.

The feminist project of challenging racism, homophobia, and idealized notions of womanhood holds benefits for many mothers. But many of the women we have spoken with don't feel part of any feminist project. Some, like Sarah Hilliard, are part of supportive networks of mothers, while others, like Sonia, long for a greater sense of community among mothers. Mothers' communities are not generally feminist communities. Is part of the problem here the failure of the feminist movement to relate to mothers? A crucial struggle for many mothers - the fight for affordable, quality child care - has long been a platform of the Canadian women's movement. However, other aspects of women's lives as mothers have been of less interest, or ignored altogether. Some of the women we have spoken with have chosen to stay at home with their children; others would stay at home part-time if finances allowed and employers were accommodating. Kyle has shelved other opportunities to set up a home daycare that allows her to be with her children. Sonia and her partner do an intricate juggling act, alternating day-shift and night-shift work so that one parent is always at home for their son. Still other women have to face the humiliating, intrusive, and inadequate social assistance system if they wish to stay home with their kids. Such decisions are certainly not for all mothers. For many women combining full-time employment and motherhood is the preferred option. Nonetheless, decisions to stay at home or work part time if possible reflect the carefully considered and deeply-felt choices of a significant group of women.

The women's movement of the last decade has focused on the need to recognize the diversity of women, and to challenge all the barriers they face. The voices presented here suggest that for mothers, as for all women, there is a great deal yet to be done in resisting racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. We hope that these voices also serve to remind us, as feminists, of the need to recognize and support the diverse ways in which women mother, and to acknowledge the complexities of motherhood - its burdens and its joys.

ENDNOTE

1. Personal communication, Susan Prentice. We also thank Kyle Mitchell for her comments on this introduction, and the University of Victoria's Vice-President Academic for helping to fund this project.

Lynne Marks and Elizabeth Vibert

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ANN AULD

Following are excerpts from an interview with Ann Auld on July 13, 2000. In addition to talking with interviewer Louise Côté, Ann read extracts from her motherhood journal (presented in italics). Significant omissions from the interview text are noted by ellipsis points[...].

From the interview:

My expectations of motherhood were fairly typical in that I assumed that somehow the TV version would be my own experience. I have to laugh now because, of course, none of that occurred. ... I can share with you an excerpt from my journal at about the twenty-seventh week of pregnancy, when a lot of things changed:

"Almost a week now following three ultrasounds, six blood punctures, two shots, and a huge amount of anxiety in three-and-a-half hours. You, the Bean,

may have duodenal atresia, a blockage, and may also have an extra chromosome or Down syndrome. Even writing this is difficult due to a sense of fear on my part to jinx the otherwise positive aspects of your continued growth and activity. I am cautiously optimistic that it will be alright in the end but also have a slight feeling of unreality. I have faith that the medical people are doing what they can in our family's best interest but I do have inner turmoil as to anyone's ability to know with absolute certainty that what they see is the truth. Perhaps I want to remain in denial despite the facts having been presented. I can only scratch the surface of my ultimate fear that somehow I deserve this. I have to fight my soul to convince myself this is not a punishment. It will pass and I will cope, with help. So, Bean, keep kicking, keep letting me know you are doing well. I love you."

So my idealism started to change long before Zola was born. But with that change I started to become resolute within myself that whatever the outcome, it was going to be alright.

Ann's response to a question about her first reaction upon her daughter's birth:

I saw her little almond-shaped eyes emerging from my body, and my first thought was that of course, she has Down syndrome, and I was so happy to see that she was pink and lively, that I felt incredible relief, and this overwhelming sense of protection and love. It was just instantaneous. ... I also deferred to our maternity GP, who declared "she's perfect." Of course, that is what I saw and I knew. ... No matter what, she was seen as being a perfect little being, a perfect child. In other words, her birth was something to be celebrated and not something to be ashamed of or anything. ... I think we were extremely fortunate that that message was conveyed very, very early on. It helped me to do more and more of that accepting and that process of bonding right from the word go. Most families [of children with Down syndrome] report having less than stellar beginnings to the birth of their babies. One of my commitments is to try and re-educate medical and other people at the time of diagnosis or the time of the child's birth, to celebrate the birth of the child first. And I say this universally rather than just focusing on Down syndrome. I knew, as soon as I saw my daughter, that indeed all the possibilities came true: the Down syndrome, needing surgery, all those things were certainly very apparent within those first few moments after her birth. But the overall sense was a fierce, protective love that has been sustaining all the way through this last three-and-a-half years.

Journal entry at the time of Zola's surgery at four days old:

"Under the knife, and you did beautifully. Every day people called, came, cooed, cried and generally made a wonderful fuss. You have given us so much already and we continue to gain and learn. Be strong, Zola B!"

When Zola was nearing three months old:

"What a range of physical, emotional and psychological perspectives I experience on a daily basis. Lately I have been dealing with motherly guilt. *I ask, 'Where do I park this collective guilt?' I feel the ultimate responsibility of Zola's care as well as the growing acceptance of her Down syndrome life. This is so hard. I want so badly for Zola to have a great life. To know all of the love she possibly can, to grow and develop the best way imaginable. And through all this I know I can only do so much. I have to trust that she will do what she needs to do."*

Ann's response to a question about her relationship with her daughter:

Of course it's sometimes very frustrating for those of us who don't have a partner to take some of the strain and stress. When I'm on as a parent, I'm full-on. I don't have the luxury of kicking back because the minute I kick back or release my guard, Zola's into mischief. ... But when I'm fully engaged with Zola and we both are in sync, it's an absolutely, tremendously rewarding time, and I can't imagine it any other way. I can't really remember what life was like before having Zola. I have a feeling I was probably pretty self-focused and self-centred. Zola has helped me to be much more of the person I always envisioned myself to be. ... I am, in some respects, much more tolerant. I still don't suffer fools gladly, I don't let certain things go. ... For instance, maybe an ignorant comment comes, or a misguided or just downright cruel comment regarding Zola. I have to make a decision on whether or not I'm going to

actually try and change that perception. Obviously my role as that advocate for her is life-long.

One of the biggest things I've said from the very beginning is, "Don't pity us, don't pity me, don't pity my daughter." Certainly don't pity my daughter. She knows she's loved, she knows she is thriving and doing extremely well. So the *last* thing I want is to be pitied. I think that the experience of being Zola's mother is probably the greatest role I'll ever have. That sounds so trite, but it's so true. I feel so honoured. ...

Ann's response to a question about society's views of mothers:

My own work is pretty typical. As much as my daughter's birth was celebrated and honoured and acknowledged, there came a time just before I got back to work, just over five months after Zola was born, [when] the expectation was that somehow I was going to carry on as per usual, fulfill all my duties at work, and that parenting was kind of something off to the side. I nursed Zola until she was thirteen months of age, and I would have to run to my parents' place, a block-and-a-half away, to nurse her. Or I would have to sit in the van of my then-husband to nurse her. There was no place I could breastfeed my child. I still think of that as a terrible loss.

Somehow we're supposed to keep providing for ourselves, for our children, for our partners, for society, and somehow do that in a twenty-four hour period, and it's basically impossible. We *do* it, because we have to. ... At times I definitely feel like I'm wearing the super-mom hat and the cape and I'm whirling around, literally whirling around, trying to ensure that all of these needs are taken care of. What I do have to remind myself is that we're dealing with the rearing of a little person here, this little child. All the other stuff really is - not quite unnecessary, but extraneous. When it comes to conflicts, say, between work commitments and family commitments, my family has to be first. It's gotta be first and foremost, despite the fact that I need to work to maintain the financial obligations that are there.

Journal entry, winter 1998-99:

"Another Christmas has come and gone. I've looked through the photos of us all, especially Zola and her first year. The changes are tremendous. Walking - running - climbing - jumping - talking - comprehending ... so much going on ... testing, pushing, pulling, playing, hurting, on and on, and then sleep - deep, dreamless, or fitful, filled with terror of unknown origin. Soft humming - rocking - soothing to settle - dragging myself around work the following morning. Few others know what the scene is. Not a totally marvelous time in a mother's life. There is so much more of the constant discovery. The dawning of new ideas, the pure enjoyment. Zola lifts her shirt for more belly tickling with my hair, giggling away, squirming 'more, more.' The sheer delight of being alive. ...

The grindfully hard work of being a single parent has set in. I will not be broken by this. I have come through incredible setbacks and gained so much insight. ... Now I've turned thirty-nine. I would never have guessed that this is where I would be from ten years ago. My previous journal entries will tell different - far different - tales. All the aches I felt ... longings for permanent stability. This has certainly happened although the settling is a little too deep for my sense of balance. Maybe I'll change that *over the next ten years. Happy Birthday to me."*

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KYLE MITCHELL

On the diverse continuum of motherhood I am a forty-one year old white lesbian mom. I have two sons. My eldest is eleven and my youngest is eighteen months. I have been both a parent in partnership with another woman and a single mom. I have raised my children on social assistance, on student loans and most recently with a modest "middle-class" income. Currently, in order to spend time with my youngest, I run a small family daycare.

Much of my mothering experience, I would guess, is quite similar to many mothers'. I want to raise my children to be loving, respectful, productive and passionate human beings. I want them to experience good health, to eat well and be active; to study hard and use their minds. Promoting these values and habits within the boundaries of the expected challenging childhood behaviours and our current social climate is a time consuming, life-changing, exhausting, exciting, and growth-filled experience.

What is out of the ordinary about my situation, are the consequences we live with as a result of my lesbian lifestyle. And what is particularly interesting is the fact that I was raised by a lesbian mother. I have lived both the role of the child in a lesbian family and that of the lesbian mother. While I have some important insights concerning issues connected with lesbian-headed families, I also carry a lot of old emotional baggage that interferes with mothering my sons. I think this "baggage" is largely a result of both the concrete and the imagined homophobic responses I was victim to as a member of a lesbian-headed family. I felt isolated, unable to blend into the mainstream as part of the functioning heterosexual nuclear norm. As a result, I experienced an invisibility that at the time felt like a cloak of protection but really only contributed to my isolation. I found this painful as the child of a lesbian mother - I find it far more heartbreaking as the lesbian mother of two sons.

My mother came out when I was six; however, I did not question our lifestyle until I was thirteen. It was then that my mother told me she was a lesbian. And even though there were many wonderful lesbians in my life, women who were kind to me and whom I liked, it was then that I realized I needed to hide my family from the world because, living in rural Vermont in the seventies, we were radically different from those around us. Our county was largely a farming community with the exception of the small "hippie" population. I knew, as did everyone at school, that lesbians were sick. Nobody wanted to be one, nobody wanted to be associated with one. Needless to say, I became very isolated. My home life was a secret, I erased a big part of myself to be in school. I had very few friends and they knew nothing of my home life. I was silent and withdrawn at school and angry and withdrawn at home. I spent hours drawing or cutting pictures out of the Sears catalogue of the perfect nuclear family. It felt like an obsessive and necessary task even at the time. I suppose that I felt comforted by the fact that I could have what everyone else seemed to have even if it was only in the abstract.

I had both my sons within lesbian relationships. However, my eldest son's reference point for family is the heterosexual nuclear version. This I believe he has absorbed from mainstream media. As a result of this mainstream culture coupled with homophobia, I watch my eldest son doing what I did as a young girl; he is silent about his home life when he is at school and painfully selective about sharing his home life with kids from school. He is afraid of the teasing and abuse he will receive if kids start talking about his lesbian mom. He has been the target of a lot of teasing and bullying, so his fears are justified. Not all the teasing that he has experienced has been related to my lesbianism. However, I often wonder if homophobia has helped to fuel a climate for my son in which kids find it easy to tease him. He makes a great scapegoat and target when one is needed.

As a mother, I want to make a link between his worlds without making it worse. I want him to make this link within himself so that he does not feel disjointed, disconnected and somehow wrong or unacceptable in the world. If I ask him to be out and proud about his family I cannot promise him he will not be teased. My childhood experience complicates my response to the situation I see my son in. More than changing the world I want to protect him from the abuse that always accompanies homophobic responses. Perhaps I would be more daring, more bold and perhaps I would ask my son to be as well if I didn't carry around so many old wounds.

As a mom who is a lesbian, I still experience isolation and invisibility. It surprises me that most people assume that all mothers are heterosexual. I suppose there are many people who cannot imagine conception without intercourse, and others who find the notion too awful to entertain. My identity has been hidden by motherhood. This was clear to me when shortly after my second son was born I decided to join a mothers group, as I hadn't any close friends with babies and I felt out of touch with mothering a baby - the world of diapers and colic, long nights and exhaustion. I went to a local community-centre mothers group. There were perhaps twelve women in the group and on the day I arrived the topic for discussion was becoming sexual after childbirth. Around the circle we went. I knew I must make the choice to either remain evasive and secretive, which is really quite easy and acceptable when speaking of sex, or to "come out" to this group of women, making myself the token lesbian and very possibly the weirdo in the group. I chose to speak abstractly about my nursing body

and sex without mentioning a partner. I chose to hide my lesbian identity. I knew intellectually that we could bridge our experiences and find the commonalities, but at the time I found the task daunting and exhausting. I would have come out to many different reactions. Perhaps several of the women would have felt comfortable. There also would have been several who would have had to work through their aversion to me and others still who would have felt disgusted and unable to accept me. I made myself invisible to avoid this scenario. I'm sure the group had no idea that I was hiding far more than the details of my sex life as a new mom. They probably thought I was shy. This experience was, for me, sad. I felt isolated and lonely. I didn't go back to that group.

From my mother I have learned that I must be true to myself. I have learned that diversity is good, interesting and necessary. I have learned that we all experience good times and difficult times and that again it is all necessary. I trust that my sons will learn these things and much more. They will always know that they grew up in a unique home, with a lesbian mom, very well loved.

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HEATHER OLSEN

I got pregnant when I was fourteen years old. I was a good student and well liked by lots of people. I was the last person my family ever thought would get pregnant. I never told anyone I was pregnant and lucky for me I never put on much weight so no one figured it out. I didn't know how to deal with being a pregnant fourteen-year-old, so I just never was one to anyone but my boyfriend and me.

I had no idea how being pregnant and having a baby was going to change my life. What I did know was that no one was ever going to think of me the same again and that was important and scary to me. While I was pregnant I always thought of how I would be treated by the people at my school and the people around me. I thought that their negative thoughts and remarks and the loss of my reputation would be the one thing that would really get to me. I thought people would look at me differently and treat my child and me differently so that it would be really hard to get ahead. I had heard what people say about pregnant teenagers and I had seen many young, single moms with their heads down and struggling with their lives.

As soon as my daughter was born I knew immediately that she deserved better than that. She deserved to know that she was not a mistake and to have a mom who did not hang her head in embarrassment. I made the mistake. That didn't make her a mistake. And she was going to know that. Yetsa was going to grow up to be as "normal" and accepted as any other little girl. She did not deserve to grow up in a town where people whispered behind our backs.

The minute she was born I knew it was going to be my reaction to all the negative comments, stares and nosey questions that would make a huge difference in the way we both would feel about ourselves. I quickly taught myself that no matter what had happened in the past, I had to be proud of who I am now and of my beautiful daughter.

There were plenty of stares. Whenever I went to town or on a bus people would stare at us when they realized I was the mother. It didn't help that even when I was fifteen I sometimes looked only twelve or thirteen. There was a lot of talk at school - everyone was shocked. My family couldn't believe it. People just assumed that I was a promiscuous, irresponsible teenager - and I wasn't.

My whole world had changed and I knew I had to figure out how to deal with it. Nothing about Heather Olsen was the same as it used to be. Kids would point to me in the halls at school and I could hear them say to each other, "That's the girl that had the baby." I would meet kids from other high schools and they would say, "Oh, you are the one I heard about. You had a baby at fourteen." Some mothers even said "Isn't it too bad you didn't have an abortion." The thing that was hardest to take was when people who didn't even know me would criticize the way I mothered Yetsa. They would see me looking like a normal teenager at school, but what they didn't see was the mothering I was doing the rest of the time. It was really hard to take the harsh judgement from people that didn't really know me.

So as both my daughter and I got older I learned to speak up and inform other kids of what it is like to be a teen mother. I wrote about being a mother in essays for my classes. I answered

people's uncomfortable questions to help them understand. I gave speeches at other schools. I also learned to block my ears to any negative comments that came my way. I never spent a lot of time believing what people said. It was too important for me to get on with my life and provide a healthy life for Yetsa.

I don't know if anyone can understand how much pressure there is on a really young mom. The looks, the stares, the comments come right at a time when your self-image is so important to you. It is enough to make you want to crawl into a corner. A young mom has to decide what to do about it. There is no way to escape it. When other mothers are having babies everyone is so happy, they all smile at the baby and are so excited. But when a young teenager has a baby everyone stares. They point at your baby. I knew that would hurt Yetsa so I did all I could to keep my head up.

I think it made a difference. I think people resonded in a positive way. Teachers at school supported me. After a while I don't think they looked down on me. I think they respected me for the work I was doing. I even got an award for dedication when I graduated. Once the kids at school realized that I wasn't going to give up and I was okay with it most of them accepted me. A lot of the kids kept their distance from me at first because they also didn't know how to deal with such a young person becoming a mother. They didn't know how to hang around with me anymore. I had to make them feel comfortable and show them that although I was a teen mother I was also a teenager and could still fit in. By the time I graduated they all congratulated and were proud of me.

I think everyone is open with Yetsa now. I really believe she is healthy and has a good sense of herself and of belonging.

Having a baby is not the easiest route for a teenager, but for Yetsa and me it is the best. She has not held me back - she has pushed me forward and forced me to have goals to become something. I am going to college and will pursue a career, like any teenager my age. Having a daughter at such a young age has made me a stronger and more mature person. It has taught me how to deal with people around me and that the strength to be who I really am has to come from inside me. I have to teach that to my daughter by the way I act.

Sometimes I feel bad that because I am so young I can't give Yetsa all the things I would like to. But I am proud that I have been able to give her a sense of pride in who she is. I think I have done that.

Yetsa has given me a lot too. She has taught me that when my life seems so difficult it is the simple things that make the difference. Holding Yetsa's hand and hearing her laugh are enough to keep me going.

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VICTORIA WYATT

Technically I became a mother in the fall of 1994, when the courts in Guatemala approved the adoption of my son Robert James. Psychologically I had felt like his mother since the day in April when I heard his name on the telephone and initiated his adoption. I actually met him in Guatemala City in late November, when his passport was ready for travel to Canada. By that time, a couple of weeks before his first birthday, he was running and kicking a ball. My applied experience as a mother started with Toddler Immersion. This was a rollicking way to begin, especially as he was one of those toddlers you cannot let out of your sight for thirty seconds. Having one child was too much fun not to magnify, and I was unable to resist another adoption despite some qualms, as a single parent, about practicality. In October 1997 my daughter Marita joined us, also from Guatemala, just after her second birthday. Robert is now six-and-a-half, and Marita is five.

"Bonding," which receives such prominent attention in childcare literature today, was a non-issue, although both were very alert, perceptive, and aware of changing worlds. As their mother, I already loved them before I met them, and they trusted me immediately. Both had been in excellent foster homes in Guatemala: they had always had a mother, expected to be loved and well cared for, and had been prepared for their move here as much as they each could understand at their ages. They showed no concerns about it as long as I kept up the (very high) level of services and indulgence to which they were accustomed. For one adult, this could be difficult.

My experience as a single parent is probably much easier than that of many, though,

because I knew at the outset that I would be a single parent and could plan accordingly. It is a lot harder than it would be if I were married to someone who helped, and a lot easier than it would be were I married to someone who didn't. There is no question that I have had to make major cutbacks in the time I can devote to my career, and that these changes are more dramatic without the help of a spouse. This seems more like a working-parent dilemma than a single-parent challenge, though - in fact, being a single parent gives me license to spend the time with my children that I want to spend. When I can't trade off with a spouse, there is no balancing act in my "free" time between kids and career. Before deciding to adopt, I accepted that my work week would be cut back to about forty hours from sixty or seventy. I knew that I could do a job I felt pleased with in the areas I care most about, but it would likely be a long time before promotion. It's an issue I do not need constantly to reevaluate.

Being a mother is of course all-consuming in terms of work, but nothing I've ever done has been so much fun. I've read essays by parents who say that their mind atrophies when they spend time with their kids instead of adults, but I've experienced the opposite: I don't know of another situation when I have needed to be so alert to what is going on, when it was so compelling to consider complexities and alternative explanations before acting, and when I had to think so intensively and make split-second decisions relentlessly. It's fascinating to try to understand how each small person interprets the world, how that has changed from last month, how the mind is working and why. Being a mother seems intellectually exhausting as well as physically exhausting, in the most positive way. I don't hear or read much about this aspect of parenting, which seems to be downplayed: there is a reluctance to admit to finding children intellectually challenging. I find, too, that it is not a normal part of the work place culture to talk much with colleagues about children, as if being interested in youngsters suggests less engagement in adult affairs. I particularly appreciated it when some colleagues recently initiated parent discussion gatherings at our university - an active step towards altering this atmosphere.

Having adopted adds another dimension to being a mother, one I have particularly enjoyed. It is just plain fun, when someone compliments me on how bright or handsome my kids are, to agree wholeheartedly with no fear of appearing conceited. More seriously, though, I don't take for granted things I probably would have taken for granted otherwise. My kids' birth mothers chose adoption for them because they wanted their children to grow up with basic necessities. When I watch Robert and Marita eating a good supper or heading off to school, it's a great feeling. Any parent should feel happy knowing their kids have enough to eat, but I probably would not have been so conscious of this under other circumstances, or enjoyed these daily routine moments anywhere near as much.

As an adoptive mother I am frustrated that society tends to cast adoption in a negative light. The media favours sensationalistic stories about adoption; however unrepresentative these may be and however slanted the journalism, they reinforce attitudes that affect my kids. I have had well-meaning people call me "noble," as if loving these children who don't have my genes constitutes an act of charity. Even the language people commonly use to talk about adoption implies we have an artificial family. My children have frequently heard people ask whether they are "really" brother and sister. One of my son's kindergarten classmates insisted for some time that I am not Robert's "real" mother. Robert came to me completely bewildered by that position: "What are you, made of tin?" he asked.

Adoption is a wonderful way to form a family. Our relationships feel no less authentic than those of families formed by biology. I hope that over time, popular culture and the media will start casting adoption more accurately - as cause for celebration rather than consolation. The greatest privilege of my life is being the mother of these exuberant, animated young people. Each night, when they are (finally) sleeping and I tiptoe in to look at them, I still catch my breath to think that I am their mother. Most mothers, adoptive or biological, probably know that daily elation. There is no more demanding job, and no finer feeling in life.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH SONIA CARMICHAEL

Following are excerpts from an interview with Sonia Carmichael, conducted by Louise Côté on July 10, 2000. Significant omissions from the interview text are noted by ellipsis points [...]. For biographical information please see list of contributors.

Sonia's response to questions about positive and negative aspects of being a mother:

Being a mom has taught me patience. It's taught me to look beyond the words. It has given me a chance, a second chance, at childhood. And doing things, seeing things through [my son Brent's] eyes ... I've just broadened my horizon; it makes me want to do more. Not only for myself but for him. And it's just been the best thing that has ever happened to my life. I can honestly say that he is the best thing that has happened in my forty years of living, to me.

The negative aspects of being a mother? No [laughs]. If I had to think of a negative, it's that I just can't travel as I want to anymore, or I can't work the schedules I want to work anymore, or pick the jobs I want to, because I always have to consider who is taking care of Brent, and what's going on in his life. But it's not really negative; it's just something that I'll do later, when he gets older.

Sonia's response to a question about how being a mother affects her relationship with her husband:

Because we have no other family here ... we have to coordinate it so that someone is home with Brent. So when I'm working days he works nights; when I'm working nights, he works days. So we see each other in passing, and then we see each other for two days a week. ...But we make time for each other as much as we can.

Sonia's response to a question about being "second mother" to five younger siblings:

That was tough. I have a lot of resentment, because I never had a childhood. I started that when I was eleven, twelve years old, having to do the cooking and the cleaning, taking care of them. ... I always resented the fact that I got to take care of them and let them have a childhood, and in turn I lost mine. And for a period I thought, "Oh! I'll never have a kid. Once these kids are all gone, that's it!" And then after they were gone ... I was in the military and I did quite a few other things and I thought "no, I want a family of my own," something that came from me, that I can nurture ...

Sonia's response to a question about being a woman of colour and a mother:

I got posted to Victoria in the military, and it was a culture shock because it took me a year before I saw another black person. ...

When I had Brent, it was amazing ... I went through so many different emotions: there was anger, frustration because people would come up - I've had people say to me, "Does your son have a tail? I've never seen a black person yet. A black baby." And then you have to swallow and step back, and think "now, this is just ignorance." ... People wanted to touch him. They wanted to know if he was like other normal babies. So you had to walk the street, listening to these comments and think, "okay, this is just ignorance, they'll learn." And so it was difficult. And then as he grew up, and went to school, and kids would say to him, "What colour are you?" And he would come home crying because he wasn't like the others. And I would have to explain to him: "You're O.K. That's who you are." But there was no one else to say, "Look, there's someone else that looks like you." So it was difficult. For the first couple of years ... I just didn't want to go out with him, for fear of someone saying something derogatory to him, or to me. Because as an adult, I never noticed it. You know, I just ignored it, until I had him. And then he would come home and say, "Mom this person said this to me." And then it brought up all those feelings of living in England, and the prejudice, and having to live with it, and to cope with it. But then it also gave us a chance to talk to him about it, and to tell him what to expect, and to encourage him to feel good about himself. And to always praise him, and let him know he's an individual, and he's just as good as anyone else: it doesn't matter the colour of his skin, the colour of his hair - it doesn't matter. He's an individual who is worthy. And that's what we do everyday: we try to reinforce that "you're just perfect the way you are." And that's how we live in Victoria.

Sonia's response to a question about whether she has experienced any barriers or prejudices because she is a mother:

No, I've been fortunate. I haven't had any negative reactions if I had to take time off. ... I've always had really nice, supportive bosses who understood that I had to be home when he was sick, and that there were times that I had to make sure he was safe before I came in to work, like make sure his dad was home before I left. So I've never really had a problem being a mother. And I think it is because wherever I worked, I always said, "I have a child, and that child comes first." And if it means that I get fired, then so be it, but I will not hurt my child for a job. ...

We had a son before Brent ... who died when he was five days old. And I had a healthy pregnancy, he was ten pounds. And within five days he was gone. ... And that day that he died I promised myself, that if I had another chance to have another child, there was no way I was taking it for granted, looking forward and thinking "we'll do this, and we'll do this." ... We enjoy every single day. And Brent never goes to bed without knowing that we love him, that I love him, because there's no guarantee of tomorrow. And so it's changed my life in that I've taken a step back, and instead of wasting my days, I make sure I fill them with memories. ...

Sonia's response to a question about her son's cultural identity and whether they keep the traditions of Barbados:

All the time. We cook the foods. He's been there quite a few times. We travel quite a bit back and forth. ... He gets a taste of what it was like growing up, and actually he likes being over there. ... So it keeps it fresh in his memory and we talk about the stuff we did as kids and he laughs and he says that we are so old fashioned, that we are from the dark ages, and we had to make our own toys. ... So we keep it alive by discussing the things that we were allowed to do. ... My husband and I grew up on the same street. We said to him the whole community raised us. You know if you did something wrong any one of our neighbours could punish us. But now, it doesn't happen. ... You would never see a neighbour saying "that's not right," but when we grew up it didn't matter who it was they could say to you "that's not right" and they could take you home to be punished. So it is a whole different community but we still try to keep it because he has to know where he came from ... where his beginning is. But he loves it, he calls it the dark ages [laughs]. And he loves it. ...

A friend of mine from Africa talks about the same thing because she has the same culture and the same [view]: you have to be there for your kids when they are growing up, you have to teach them when they are growing up. And I think if more parents were like that we could form a community of mothers who could inspire each other and help each other and be there for each other. You know, like when I grew up, my grandparents ... every evening after supper we would walk out and the mothers would talk about how bad the kids are and how they are doing in school, and they are so complicated -- blah, blah, blah. But they loved us and we saw that. ... We knew that no matter where we went on that street we were safe because there were other mothers looking out. We don't have that anymore and I miss that. I wish my son could grow up in that environment, where mothers were mothers no matter if they had kids or not. If they were on that street in that area they were a mother. That's what I miss. That's what's society. That's what it should be.

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SARAH HILLIARD

Hugh was conceived on my fortieth birthday, a big surprise after almost twenty years of partnership with Jim. It wasn't until I felt those butterfly kicks that I really began to feel pregnant; until then I felt only nausea and disbelief. It was hard to imagine what parenthood would bring. I knew the part about soggy diapers and bleary eyes but I had no idea what joy was in store. Hugh was born by caesarean section after eighteen hours of labour: he had not budged after three hours of pushing. A huge disappointment for me - labour had been so powerful and to leave it unfinished was devastating. After months of preparation with our midwives it had not crossed my mind that my body could fail me. I don't know what I would have done had it not been for their care, support and guidance. Hugh, though, was beautiful. Almost nine pounds and with a too-big head - he looked so much like Jim! Because of the surgical drugs and pain-killers

it wasn't until the day after that I was able to hold him with any awareness, but from that time on I was smitten. The primal feelings of love and protection were astonishing. I don't think either Jim or I realized we would fall in love so passionately. What a happy time!

The first few weeks were so intimate. We stayed in bed, recovered from surgery, slept and ogled our baby. I was surprised how little we wanted of the outside world. We even avoided visitors by allowing them only when the baby was asleep. He was changing so quickly and we couldn't bear to miss anything. I took pictures and pictures and pictures. Hugh grew and grew and grew. He gained almost a pound a week until he reached twenty- four pounds. My friends said there ought to be a new adjective in the dictionary: hughesque. He had rolls down his legs that stopped people in their tracks.

Parenting has changed so much in our lives. Before the baby we had spent nearly twenty years of living together, working, and renovating, lots of renovating. We bought a falling-down Victorian house in 1979 and had almost entirely rebuilt it over the following fifteen years. Hugh's appearance brought all this to a grinding halt. Sleep deprivation was a big issue in the first two years. I could barely read a magazine let alone work on the house. My inability to cope with sleep loss is the one down-side to parenting in my forties; my body and mind don't have the resilience they once did. As a stay-at-home parent, not working for pay left a hole financially, but one of the many benefits of being an older parent is that we are well established. We made our final mortgage payment before Hugh's first birthday and our renovating years have provided us with two rental suites, so we manage with one part-time income. I feel fortunate to have the freedom to stay at home.

My life has changed dramatically. My circle of friends now includes new parents like me. I knew I needed a support group and most of my friends were having grandchildren, not babies. I started with a mum-and-babe aerobics group where we danced and did baby push-ups to tone our post-natal bodies and then went on to take a series of parenting courses. Meeting other mums and sharing baby and birth stories was very supportive. It was amazing to fall in with a group that has such a strong common interest. I marvel at my luck in meeting such wonderful families, yet I think this is partly to do with my being older. I know that the person I was in my twenties wouldn't have recognised my need for support and education.

I was surprised how challenging breast feeding was. It sometimes was warm and cozy, but more often it was uncomfortable and frustrating. I struggled constantly with wanting my body for myself again. If only we could take a vacation and come back to it rested and revived. We persevered and Hugh nursed until he was over three. He still occasionally asks for "Mama milk" and latches on for a second or two, and I'm sure if you asked him if he still nursed, he would say, "Yes, all the time!" There are so many perks to getting older but the benefits to parenting are especially satisfying. I suspect that ten years ago I would not have had the patience to enjoy the extended breast-feeding relationship we had.

Staying home with my child and living and learning along with him has brought so much to my life. Parenting courses continue to enrich my experience in ways I could not have imagined. When I was at school, lectures, reading and studying were interesting and intense but so different from my experience of learning now. I read parenting books like novels. I can't get enough, I take what I like and leave the rest. I have the distance from what I'm learning to be objective in a way I wasn't able to be in my youth. I watch Hugh change and go through phases that would have left me despondent ten years ago. Now I have the patience to let him be and let him learn through his own nature. I synthesize what I learn in a more confident way. I'm not afraid that I'm making mistakes - not that I think I'm doing it all perfectly, I'm just more able to accept how it goes. Parenting educator and author Barbara Coloroso says "there is no mistake so great that it can't be fixed" and I must say this is becoming my mantra.

For Jim and me the birth of our son has brought a richness to our life that we weren't aware was missing. We both had our lives, work and friends, joint holidays and projects but we didn't have something we shared so passionately. When I look at Hugh I am reminded of why we fell in love and of the values and dreams we share. We've learned to co-parent and appreciate one another's strengths in a new light. Early on, a friend told me that the medical term for mothers over thirty-five is

"ancient mother," and an ancient I'm happy to be. Age has given me so much more patience and compassion; I'm a different person than I was at twenty-five. The years I had to myself have allowed me to focus these years on my son. My perspective is broader and my connection to the community is greater. Without Hugh I wouldn't have a singing voice: labour softened my vocal cords and lullabies tuned my voice. My only regret is that at forty-four there is little likelihood of another child.

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"CONSTANT FLUX"
Suzanne Batten

"How are you feeling?" a man in a white coat asked.

"A little stoned," I told him.

I was lying on a bed, fully dressed, but my clothes felt strange, as though they were not my own. I tried to sit up, but was a little groggy.

"Don't get up just yet. Take a few minutes," he advised soothingly. "Just relax. You've had a slight shock, but there's nothing to worry about."

"What am I doing here?" I asked.

"You're a bit woozy because we gave you a sedative. You collapsed on the sidewalk and were brought here."

I remembered being on my way to work this morning ... I remembered waiting for the bus ... then a woman ... a homeless woman who stepped onto the street in front of me, in front of a bus.

"What about the woman?" I asked, remembering, but only in flashes.

"It's all right," the doctor said. "You're in a hospital now. You have a mild concussion. But everything's fine."

"Did she ...? Is she - dead?"

"Afraid so." He jotted something on his clipboard. "Did you know her?"

I shook my head. "Never seen her before in my life." She was First Nations, like me. She was about my mother's age.

The doctor nodded. "Most street people are mentally ill as well as have substance abuse problems," he said, dismissively. "Witnesses say she walked right in front of the bus."

What an unfeeling bastard! An unknown woman; someone's daughter, someone's sister, maybe even someone's mother or lover had died. Right in front of me. And he was telling me about it like it was nothing.

"I didn't see anything," I said.

"Well, now, would you like us to phone your husband?"

An image of my estranged spouse moved into my mind. We had separated several months ago because he had hit me.

"I'm no longer married," I said, as though it was a religion.

"Boyfriend, then?"

"I don't have a boyfriend," I said. "But I should phone my work." They'd be wondering where I was.

The doctor frowned. "Father, then. We can phone the father, let him know everything's fine."

"You can't call my father," I said, angered by his insistence on bringing men back into my life. "I've never met my father!"

The doctor frowned again. "I'm sorry, Miss - it is Miss, isn't it? Miss -?" He was mistaking my anger for parental resentment - quite reasonably, I supposed, but I was in no mood to be reasonable.

"It was Miss once, before it became Mrs. Now I'm just Suzanna." The event of the woman's death dwindled to a distant dream-memory as I became more worried about the here and now. "Why do you have to phone anyone? I'm all right, aren't I?"

"I thought you might want the father to know that you and the baby are fine."

My hostility dropped. My attention wandered. Wandered all the way past the medic's expectant face and fixed on the big ticking clock, with its plain black numbers and little lines symbolizing the minutes between each quarter hour. Suddenly, the clock itself, not the time, seemed fascinating.

I heard myself say, "Pardon, me?"

"The baby's fine."

Many - like my great-auntie who raised me - fell prey to the belief that women needed men in their lives. Auntie was a product of her era, a Dene woman who was both very Dene and very Christian.

"I just hope you've been careful, my girl," she said. It was as though she was shaking her index

finger at me, but her hands were busy on her knitting needles. "Pregnant's not the worst thing you can get."

"Safe sex is the way of the world, nowadays," I assured her. But it was also true that sometimes the body randomly sucked up ideas, objects, and viruses from the surrounding environment.

"The father is your husband, isn't it?" Her knitting picked up nervous momentum.

I did not reply. Auntie and I were supposed to go to the hospital together for my first prenatal examination. I only said, "It's time to go. We don't want to be late."

After endless waiting in the women's ward, I was asked to pee in a cup before being poked and probed by a young obstetrician. I was a little nervous and uncertain about the whole thing, and shocked, too - I was having a hard time believing I was pregnant. And all the natural fears of a two-headed baby, of spina-bifida, even of twins, were surfacing along with the underlying question of the father's identity - though I knew it could only be my husband.

"Do you want to take a walk while we wait?" I asked my aunt, in need of distraction.

"Yes, dear, maybe we can find some coffee somewhere."

When we finally found the coffee machine it was out of order. So we just kept walking the endless corridor, lined with identical doors like a divine passage - it was almost as if I was being guided through endless repetition, constant flux, almost as if this were a visual cue of the Creator, showing me the web of a mortal's future.

"I remember the night you were born," Auntie said dreamily, when we found ourselves at a door leading outside. We went out and sat on a bench.

God, I thought, was she preparing to retell that tale? I was too preoccupied for sentimentality.

"Yes, but what time was I born?" I asked. This had always been a big question because I had once sought to have a detailed astrological chart made, but without this information it was difficult to accomplish. And Auntie could not remember. The drama of the event was paramount to her.

"The snow as high and deep. It was dreadfully cold for April," she trilled. "How am I supposed to remember the time?"

"What does the weather have to do with it?"

Auntie looked upset, as if I ought to know that it had everything to do with it ... What a gap of mind-set between us. I would never quite know the "feel" of her generation, especially as she was the result of severe colonization and assimilation policies. Just, I supposed, as she had never quite known the feel of her own mother's life experiences, living in the bush, off the land; nor would either of us truly know what my child would know.

"Well, of course, the weather had everything to do with it," Auntie replied. "I'd driven to Highlevel to fetch your mother and bring her to Edmonton - she still wasn't due for four weeks. You were supposed to be born at the General Hospital because there were no real doctors up north. No real hospital with a proper delivery room."

I was about to remind Auntie of our traditional ways, as had been practised for centuries before the Europeans' invasion. But I'd repeated this each time the story was told - I didn't feel like doing it now.

"A storm came in from the arctic. The conditions were life-threatening. The roads were impassable. Your poor mother panicked ... panicked so that she went into premature labour. I delivered you myself in half an hour. But then there were complications ... she was haemorrhaging, was unconscious by the time the emergency chopper arrived ..."

There was no need to finish the story. I knew that my sixteen-year-old mother had died two hours later. I became her legacy to Auntie. My father had never entered the picture.

Now it is twenty-five years later and I am (according to those who knew her) the image of my mother. Parent and child grown into equals. Though I am always running, running, following a ghost's stride, belonging of course to my unknown mother.

I looked away from Auntie, whose face was contorted with the darker side of memory. I suddenly wished I could change my auntie's life for her, and fix my own while I was at it.

"Are you Suzanna?" A nurse had come out. "The doctor has been waiting for you."

The nurse escorted me to the doctor's office. Auntie waited in the car, having complained about the "hospital smell."

The doctor told me I was three months

pregnant. That everything was perfectly normal.

"Your baby is fine and healthy, and I see no concerns, but I strongly advise you to notify the father..."

I left with those words ringing in my ears. I stopped in the washroom to give myself time to assimilate the information, cool down, before I faced Auntie. Somehow I suspected that she wouldn't be able to hold it in much longer, and would soon be badgering me with questions.

I could be, at the same time, aggressive and nurturant, sensitive and rigid. The fact that another life was forming inside me right now came the closest to providing the fulfilment I hoped to get in life.

I was suddenly aware of the role that luck - in which I had never believed - played in my own achievements. Because this baby was mine. It had to be sheer good luck that had brought it to me. I had never done anything to deserve the lifetime of joy we would share.

I faced my aunt. I was smiling. I reached for her hand, something I had never felt inclined to do. There was a shift somewhere within me because I knew that change was imminent. I was, in fact, already changed forever, beginning a renewal, as the elation, the exhaustion, the complexities of motherhood, lay before me.

I was no longer deficient in human qualities.