

Who is Mother? by Matt Hopwood

A midwife in Oslo, Norway. | Karen Beate Nøsterud/norden.org via Wikimedia Commons.
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"Who is there in this world but Mother?

I am Mother, you are Mother,

Mother is mine, Mother is yours,

Everything is Mother."

Traditional Baul Song from Bengal.

Since 2012 I have walked thousands of miles throughout the United Kingdom and spoken with people around the world, asking them to share their experiences of love and connection. What are the loving narratives of their lives? What does love mean to them?

As the journey has grown so the experiences have deepened, and the sharings with others have deepened too. What started as a personal journey of exploration has become a shared endeavour, and the meetings, stories and connections have evolved in response to the experiences and emotions of the people I've encountered.

In the spring of 2018 I experienced the loss of my grandmother. Her being had encompassed a family of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She was the rooted mother, the solar star round which our numerous lives had orbited. And through the lens of that tender physical loss, I began to engage in an exploration of the role of Mother in our lives and communities. Who is Mother? How do our profound and essential experiences of Mother shape our behavior - how we form connections with others, with ourselves and with the world?

I wanted to meet with individuals and offer them a space to be vulnerable, to be heard and to share something of their experiences around these questions. A selection appear below in italics, interspersed with more from my own experience.

A Mum, The Mum.

"So the physical and unconscious linking of giving birth and your body taking total control of you as you birth another being - I haven't had that experience. This is the 'a Mum' for me. But I've had the experience of nurturing, being there - good or bad - come what may.

A constant little star in the sky every night. And I feel that, maybe, 'the' Mother is what I can be to people. You're giving an example of love, and unconditional love. I think that's what it is: a Mother goes through, for me, the physicality, the body changing and the natural birthing. But the Mother is the representation of what we hope is the best that a child, a young person, anybody, can receive love and wisdom through. So it's to do with love and wisdom, isn't it?"

My story of Mother to this point had included the profound connections of biology and emotion with my birth mother. The deep pain when those cords needed separating and the endless changes that occurred and still manifest as age and circumstance evolve – joy, frustration, confusion, love and the suffocation that this love can bring, the sense of home and safety that abides deeply beneath it all. But my story had also begun to include a growing awareness of a sense of Mother within me, the yearning to nurture, the longing to give love, to hold, to create. Can I Mother too?

A Way of Being.

"You asked about Mother – and I was thinking about the yearning of our world right now to embrace the mother figure as a way of being in a place of seeing and hearing one another, and being at more peace with one another. And that this yearning is on a bigger level than just how we do motherhood. There are ways of infusing our daily lives and our political lives in ways that honour the more feminine within all of us, not just women. The qualities of nurturing, compassion, of intuition, creativity and presence. And we are aching for that now. Our communities need that now. So this does seem to be the time. This isn't just about motherhood or mothering on a one on one basis, but how we practise society."

And so the picture widened as people began to share love stories that expressed deep longings for experiences of Mother in their everyday lives; people yearning to be nurtured, to be loved, to be held. They began to express experiences of connecting with Mother within and beyond themselves; people calling for a sense of motherhood within our social and political structures. Stories of Mother that were longing to be told.

To be a Free Woman.

"I am in this work of parenting to raise her as her fullest being: of being this strong, imaginative, creative, compassionate, reasoned, smart woman. And a free, a free woman. And maybe that's the work that I am doing too. How do I be completely free knowing that the world doesn't know what to do with really free women a lot of the time? I can't protect her from racism. I can't protect her from sexism. But I can do my best to help her to be fully herself and know when it's safe to show up one hundred per cent or seventy-five percent or when it's time to say, 'This isn't me but I'm showing up in the way that I have to for this moment just so I can live to the next moment.'"

These stories evolved naturally, eventually coming together in a book called Mother - A Human Love Story: stories of motherhood, of childhood, of longing to be a mother, of the inability to give birth, of the desire not to mother; experiences of the feminine Mother rooted in all genders and orientations. These stories weave narratives of nurturing and compassion, love and connection, loss and pain; stories of hurt, resilience and beauty, of ecstasy and joy. Gathered throughout the brooding spring of 2018 and into the furnace of summer, the stories are reflections shared in a moment of openness and vulnerability. They are hard and soft and brittle too, stirrings of feelings and outpourings of emotions long held, the stoic and effusive.

Letting Me Go.

"My God, how different we used to be! There is so much emotion and so much pain and so much desperation but it is definitely coming from a place of more quiet now, saying, 'Let's not do this again, let's not do this ever again, let's see what's really important.' And what is important is our connection and our love. And, as much as we go into the pain, on the other spectrum of that pain is this abundant unconditional love, because the reason why we experience so much pain, is because we love each other so much."

As I've journeyed into these conversations of the heart, I have found myself awakening to a more expansive expression of Mother. Through these experiences, I am beginning to feel that motherhood and Mother are less about what we are - the physical function of giving birth and our biology - and more about how all of us we act in this living experience. If Mother is rooted in action and not just in biology, then it becomes a transformational space where all genders and orientations can find a mutual home and expression.

Let Love Live (after losing those we love).

"Different messages of love and support. Over a thousand of them. This showed me who human beings really are, and what is at the core of our beings is love and compassion and a desire to reach out and connect beyond race, culture, beliefs, religions and all of that. So I became involved in a different kind of a love story: I started a romance with life, falling in love with humanity itself. And that's what has been my survival and healing, because I still feel it. The loss is still there. It doesn't go away, but you learn to live with it and then just shift the focus. It does keep the love alive - it keeps them alive. I have learned that the first gift from life is love and the last gift my daughter and husband left me was love."

At its best, mother is nurturing, loving, constant, intuitive, fierce and creative, a gift of compassion available to us all, from us all. Mother is transcendent, not fixed to physiology, gender, orientation, race or nationality. There is no division.

They're All Sunshine to Me.

"We shouldn't have physical contact with the men [in prison]. If somebody's distressed and in pain, it's incredibly difficult and feels inhumane not to reach out physically, even if it's just a touch on the arm, to connect and acknowledge that pain and distress. So much of it is re-parenting. They're so un-boundaried: a lot of them have a complete sense of entitlement, and they have no confidence. The only way they know how to show their frustration with whatever is happening to them is through aggression, because that's worked effectively before. I call the men in custody 'Sunshine', because there's no way I can remember all of their names. Most of them really like it. You know, I spend my time with men who have committed the most heinous crimes - but they're all Sunshine to me."

As biological mothers, all animals are impelled to put themselves aside physically to give birth to their young. As The Mother, each of us has an opportunity to choose to set ourselves aside for others and inhabit the world as a nurturer, a carer, an intuitive, or a healer. In this way, I am Mother and you are Mother. We can all help to constellate a more compassionate world.

Matt Hopwood's new book is Mother - A Human Love Story, published by Birlinn.