

# Steering The Mothership

The Complexities  
of Mothering  
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attach *vt* to fix or fasten to something; to appoint to a specific group; to ascribe, attribute \* *vi* to become attached; to adhere **attachable** *adj*

loss *n* a losing or being lost; the damage, trouble caused by losing; the person, thing, or amount lost

isolate *vt* to set apart from others; to quarantine a person or animal with a contagious disease; to separate a constituent substance from a complex substance

grief *n* genuine sorrow caused as by a loss; distress

abandon *vt* to leave behind; to desert; to give up completely to an emotion or urge; to get rid of from inhibitions; — **abandonment**

humiliate *vt* to cause to feel shame; to bring disgrace on; to force by shame (*intr*); to humiliate by showing superiority; — **humiliation**

"Incredible insight into  
the human condition"

## **Introduction**

This is the book I never thought I could write. This is the book that terrified me when I started to think about how I would get my words onto the page. Writing about motherhood filled me with terror because the one area of my life that I couldn't reconcile, no matter how hard I tried, was the relationship that I didn't have with my own mother.

But something happened to me on Mother's Day 2013, something that had never occurred before. Previously, I had managed to get through many a Mother's Day either by ignoring it, tolerating it or accepting it and trying to deal with it. I celebrated myself as a mother with my own children, but I was unable to be a daughter and to have been mothered. But on this day, it was different as I woke up weeping – not only because I saw myself as the mother, but because I had started to understand my own experience of having a mother in a completely different way.

I started to write, to pour my words onto the page in a bid to understand what was tearing through my body. I felt a powerful surge of shame and pain and distress as I wrote a blog called How To Become A Mother and then shared it on my website.

What happened next is what gave birth to this book because, in understanding something within me about this deeply complex relationship, I received endless texts,

emails, messages and replies to my post. In an instant, they gave me the knowledge that writing about this was something that I absolutely had to explore, whether I was ready to do so or not.

The mail that was sent to me represented the depth of emotion for mothers lost, for mothers who never mothered, for mothers who were relying on partners to acknowledge their huge contribution – that of raising the next generation – to the world on a macro and micro level. There were so many messages of connection, pain, loss, hurt and joy that I knew in that moment that this had to be my next book.

If you've read any of my other books you might ask why I wouldn't have explored this intricate relationship first, before all other explorations. Like most children of parents who haven't been able to look after them for whatever reason, I felt a loyalty and I didn't want to cause hurt and upset to my own mother, were she ever brave enough to read my writing. When I wrote about adults who had lived through the care system, I can tell you that every single person in that book wanted to protect their mother first, and then the rest of their family. Either they made that explicit by telling me that they did not want to talk about that relationship, or they merely omitted to mention their mother in their interview. The most anyone would say was that they did not have a relationship with their mother and therefore there was little to say in that regard. Loyalty was fierce, even when someone had been used by their mother

to be abused by men in return for love. Complexity doesn't even begin to explain the myriad of emotions that are alive in this setting.

This observation of loyalty gave birth to the second epiphany that came to me, allowing me to write this book: the relationship between baby/child and mother is a complex, visceral, intensely private and often unarticulated aspect of each person. We are all born from The Mother. It is the beginning. It is therefore everything before there is anything else.

I came to realise that I hadn't developed a deep enough understanding about this to help me make sense of it; in terms of revelations, far more was to come. By writing this book I seek to explore this. My intention is to help the reader to better understand their own relationship as a mother and as a child of The Mother.

So what changed, and why now? Nothing changed and everything changed all at once. Having learnt the gift of sharing stories that enable connection, it seemed absolutely necessary that this relationship be explored. Why now? Because I have been on the planet long enough to understand more than I ever have about people, relationships, the good, the bad and the beautiful.

For some, making sense of this relationship can take a lifetime. How do we do that? One way is by allowing ourselves the chance to explore the relationships that work, and those that don't.

I seek to tell stories: the untold stories<sup>1</sup>, the difficult aspects of life where there is often no platform for making known what we feel so deeply inside.

This is not a book about blame or pages of ranting and anger and despair. Neither is it a book that is an academic reference or an exhaustive list of all that there is to say.

There are also many untold stories of mothering. I have chosen to share the stories of those who came to me when I announced I was starting the project. This way I trust that exactly the right people for the book will come forward. I could have approached it in a much more journalistic way and sought out people with specific stories that I might wish to include but I feel that working in the way that I do creates a certain authenticity about it and fits in with my view of the world.

All the contributors are women. I feel that I am getting closer to writing with men and sharing their stories but so far I have not found men who are comfortable writing about their emotional space in this format. I am certain that this will change and that the opportunity will arise that allows me to do that but for whatever reason, it is not now and it is not here.

What I do offer you is a book about the complexities of mothering and how we start to understand ourselves as

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<sup>1</sup> Nearly all of the contributors have asked for their identity to be concealed through changing identifiable details and their names.

mothers and as children of The Mother, while exploring the essential need for The Mother to have the best possible opportunity she can with her baby/child from conception, thereby seeking to ensure that trauma can be limited for both.

My purpose is to understand what happens to us, how it affects us and ultimately how we heal from our experiences.

## **PART ONE**

# Steering the Mothership

## **Chapter One**

Life is messy – a complex web of perception and understanding, underpinned by a unique set of people, circumstances and events that create the fabric that is life. And it is because of that that I have written this chapter several times while going through huge changes and shifts in my own understanding about mothering. Little did I know how much would change when I embarked upon this particular leg of the journey in terms of the learning I have gained, which has enabled me to understand myself at a level far deeper than I could have hoped for.

Creating this work has also allowed me to unfold my own personal journey of forgiveness, compassion and understanding with my mother where there had previously been only anger and distance. Whilst the learning that I have undertaken has given me that, it has also brought me to a place where I accept that there will always be distance, physically and emotionally. I can live in that place but now I can be there without the anger.

In this book, we can start to explore and understand Mother as the social construct that it is, dependent on the era, location, society, the class/sexuality/marital status of the woman, the politics of that time. It is mothering itself

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that I am interested in. The ‘doing’ of mothering. And beyond that, the ‘doing’ of mothering that is often not spoken of, so there are many reflections in here from the child’s adult perspective. Messy, complicated, taboo, disconnected, uncomfortable, real, painful and often hidden.

So what is my starting point? Well, I have been an abandoned baby, grandchild in situ, a stepchild, a child in care, living in foster homes and residential units, nobody’s child. I have been a single mother, a married mother, a stepmother, a mother in a relationship. I have also worked extensively for over two decades with adults and children who have led their entire lives shaped by their experiences of being – or not being – mothered, or of being a mother struggling to do so. There is no other relationship that is so life-forming, defining and shaping.

My assertion is that the relationship between The Mother and baby is completely unique and cannot be replicated. The Mother is the beginning, before there is anything else. It offers a period of time that excludes all others; from the moment of conception through to the cutting of the cord there is no one else present in this relationship. The hearts beat as one, in sync, silently while they both start to get to know each other.

There are a number of books that explore the universal complexities within the relationship between child and mother. There are also endless texts that offer a

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traditional look at mothers, babies, parenting and all that this throws up on a daily basis as we weave our way through this maze of a life-changing event. What should we feed them? When should they sit up/crawl/walk/talk, etc?

Steering The Mothership is an exploration of and an opportunity to understand the pain that is felt when there is loss, grief, guilt, shame, abandonment and isolation. It looks at how this relationship shapes our lives in the life circle and how we can go on to heal, grow and ultimately break the cycle of pain.

I have read many things about the relationships we have with our mothers and the types of mothers that there allegedly are, a lot of which focus on the mother as 'bad' or 'good'. This is generally an approach of duality that our society takes when it can't understand things or, I would also argue, when it can't 'control' things. The domain of the mother is a female space and as such has been subject to the same lack of input, connection and importance as anything else in a society that does not place value upon women. However, women have sons, of course, so again, as with much of what is deemed as unimportant, this affects us all.

I have seen many books that seek to label the 'types' of mothers 'available', including the narcissistic mother, the inadequate mother, the abusive mother and so on.

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In the dualistic world of 'good' and 'bad', the 'bad' mother construct tells of a woman who doesn't want her child, can't connect with her child and can't take responsibility for her child. For a long time – and this still pervades our culture now – the 'bad' mother is usually a single mother. She can come from any ethnic background and is probably likely to be working class. Her sexuality will be gay or straight. She might have a disability.

The 'good' mother construct is most definitely heterosexual and married, probably doesn't work (or works part time), is white and middle class and helps out at the school with reading groups.

I don't wish to explore these constructs any further here but this simplistic view of a mother is never far away from us, even in a changing society, and will always have a part to play in how agencies respond to and work with mothers.

My mother was the 'bad' mother and essentially, although this was playing out from deep within my sub-conscious as well as my conscious thinking, I was the 'bad' child.

While the impact of this upon my life has diminished greatly after years of recovery and personal development work, it has never completely left me and it never gave me another lens through which I could view our experiences.

What I'm saying here is that all the therapy in the world as an adult could not touch the deep, visceral, inaccessible space created within me as an abandoned baby with a

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disturbed bond. Therapy was not enough. Not one person from whom I sought help, nor my own professional training, could give me the information I needed to heal.

However, there were two things I knew instinctively, without question and without exploration. Firstly, when I became a mother myself and I sat on the floor with my newborn son who I was soothing through my own tears of exhaustion, as I gazed deeply into his eyes and connected with him as only a mother and baby can, I knew that I had never been on the receiving end of that depth of connection with another human being. How could I know that? How could I possibly, in that moment, truly and with acceptance, know that?

Secondly, I knew that in order to heal my own feelings about not being mothered, I needed to become a mother myself and heal the damage within me through my love and connection with my own children. Often I have heard teenage girls from difficult backgrounds talk about having a baby so they had someone who would love them. My drive to be a mother was not to have someone who loved me but rather that I had someone who I could love. In doing so, I would be able to heal some of the trauma and pain that had yet to be explored and named; heal and recover.

Both of these things were instinctive; they were not rational thoughts, I had not read these things. I had no friends with babies at that point and had not been around

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‘mothering’ at all on a personal level. And yet I knew these things to be true.

What I also knew to be true was that I was just a woman having a baby; not ‘bad’ nor ‘good’ nor any other label that attempts to define the space of mothering. I knew that I had little or no support. I didn’t know what I needed and if I had, I wouldn’t have known who to ask for it. I had created my baby with a man I had no interest in, lived in a flat rather than a community, and was without family.

Becoming a mother is far more complex than we are ever led to believe, although many times I have wished that I could have understood the roadmap of meeting someone, falling in love and creating a life of love and support together. But I was in my twenties and had gotten as far as I had with no roadmap to get me anywhere. I didn’t understand how it all worked, what it all meant and how on earth I could make beautiful things such as loving relationships happen for me. For now, it was just me and my baby exploring our unique bond.

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