My Mother, Myself

No matter how hard you try, you can't divorce your family

May 1, 1996 By Kiki Mason

People often say to me, "You're so caring and giving and loving, you must have a wonderful family." Or they ask how my family has been throughout the many ordeals of the past six years. I reply with a bitter laugh, an uncomfortable cough, a quick subject change. I don't generally talk about it, except to very close friends. When I actually sit down and tell them the story of my family, their jaws drop lower and lower. It's weird and dysfunctional beyond anything you'll find on one of those daytime spill-all shows.

As I have dropped the fetters of my own male ego, and as my testosterone levels have slid, I have discovered something new and wonderful: Freedom and serenity. When you stop worrying about being a man and get out of that box, life becomes whatever you really want it to be. I swore that I would never write about my family, but I hear so many stories of pain and confusion when families try to cope with our illness, I feel compelled to finally write about it. So this is the story.

I actually have two mothers. Marilyne, my natural mother, didn't raise any of her three children. My eldest sister and I were given to her sister Joyce, and for the first ten years of my life I was led to believe that Joyce was my real mother. My other sister was sent to live with my grandparents, and we were told that she was our cousin. We were never told the truth; we found out on our own. Like so many things in my family, the revelation was expected to be swept under the rug. But you can't fool a child. Somehow, I always knew that something was going on beneath the surface.

Marilyne would swoop down upon us periodically, and it was an event. She was an actress, an anti-war activist and a Marxist. Marilyne didn't look like any of the other women in our oh-so-tasteful suburb. She wore white go-go boots and mini-skirts, two or three falls, false eyelashes, white lipstick, revealing blouses. While the women we knew talked about the best way to polish your appliances, Marilyne talked about issues. She constantly fought with my right-wing grandfather over everything. She was outspoken and never hesitated to let you know where she stood on anything. In a family where any display of emotion was frowned upon, Marilyne was a walking opera, a cross between the *Mikado* and *Carmen*.

Joyce, on the other hand, was president of the Junior League. She was also a good-looking woman, but existed within the boundaries of WASP good taste. Her handbags always matched her shoes, and she never said or did anything controversial. She was struck with the day-to-day job of raising Marilyne's children, and we weren't easy. Looking back on her, I have discovered a clinical

psychological term for what she was suffering from. Joyce was flat. She never went up, and she never went down. It was a kind of static depression born out of years of doing what you were supposed to.

After the truth came out, Marilyne, being a groovy ’60s type of woman, sat us kids down to “rap” about it. We just stared at her. She wanted us to share our feelings. Joyce acted as if none of this had happened. Grandma baked a lot of chocolate cake. We started taking drugs at an early age. My childhood was a war zone, and a prison. At an early age I knew, felt somehow, that there was a different life out there. I can remember asking Joyce when I was five years old how long I had to stay there. When she told me that it would be until I was 18 and went to college, it seemed like an impossibly endless stretch of time. It was.

I left the suburbs at 17 and moved to New York City. Marilyne helped me, found me an apartment and paid the rent. I had wanted to live with her, to try and finally have a real mother-son relationship, but her latest husband had forbidden children, so I was on my own. As adults, my sisters and I tried to maintain a relationship with her. But she was just so damn hard. Marilyne was an early and ardent devotee to the cause of animal liberation, and my grandmother would often say that she cared more about the little animals than her own children, especially since animals couldn’t talk back. You were always on edge with Marilyne, and the rest of the family was no better. It was never loving or close or anything that we are taught to idealize about family in this society. Our gatherings were brittle, cold and fraught with too many years of lies and undercurrents.

Still, for many years I tried to keep up with my family. I went home for the holidays and attended weddings and reunions, even though I would be emotionally wrecked for weeks afterwards. But gradually my visits became further and further apart. My sisters stopped speaking to Marilyne, yet I hung in there. The last straw was when my grandmother died. I was the only grandchild who went to the hospital bed and stayed there for two weeks until she died. Everyone behaved badly throughout the whole process, and I decided that I was never going through this again. The next year I was diagnosed with AIDS. Marilyne immediately fancied herself an expert on the subject, and advice came pouring in. I should become a macrobiotic vegetarian, she said, and was treated to endless lectures on nutrition and AIDS theories. While she did offer to help me financially, the money came with a lot of strings. I had to see her. I could see the fantasia unfolding in her mind: Marilyne proudly nursing her gay son through this horrible (gulp!) terminal illness, a fabulous movie of the week about a mother’s devotion. I realized that I had to make a decision about whose disease -- and life -- this was going to be. I decided to do it my way and stopped speaking to her five years ago.

Joyce reacted to the news with denial and fear. I continued to get the same Hallmark cards with nary a mention of my “condition.” While my sisters would tell me that she was worried about me, Joyce and I never actually talked about what was going on in my life. Two years ago, I agreed to go on a vacation with my family. It was a nightmare of denial, and I brought up every negative emotion of my childhood. While I was there I read Paul Monette’s biography of his early years, *Becoming A Man*, and it saved my life. I realized that my family couldn’t help me and I was

shouldering too many burdens to carry them through my illness. The decision to cut them off was based on my survival and sanity. They were all too wrapped up in themselves to give to me. I would end up drained.

We all have a dream about what we would like our families to be. People cling to these dreams, no matter what the reality is. When I tell them that I no longer speak to my family, they shake their heads sadly. Yes, I am sad about it, but I'm not going to live a lie. Marilyne made one last attempt, sending me a letter at Christmas about a year ago. "I may have been a neglectful mother," it read in part, "but I was never deliberately cruel to you. You, on the other hand, are being incredibly cruel by not speaking to me." One of my women friends made the comment that neglect is the ultimate form of cruelty because it negates the individual. I sent her back a simple letter. "I forgive you. Forgiveness does not mean starting a new relationship. Please respect my wishes." Frankly, it's not my job to educate my family on how to cope with AIDS. Maybe if I were a better person, I'd have the patience. Sorry, I gave up trying to be a saint years ago.

In the meantime, I have created my own family. They have carried me through these awful years, and it is those people I will gather around me at the end. They love me for who I am, and are not afraid to show their emotions. Like any family, we have emotional crises and squabbles. We fight and cry and laugh. I wouldn't have it any other way.

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