

Honor Thy Daughter

Marilyn Howell, Ph.D.



Marilyn Howell is an educator who specializes in mind-body medicine. She was trained as a biologist, earned a doctorate in education from Harvard, and created the first mind-body course in public education at Brookline High School, where she taught and developed the curriculum for three decades. To follow is an excerpt from her memoir, *Honor Thy Daughter*, which will soon be published by MAPS. The book chronicles her experience of doing MDMA therapy with her daughter, while her daughter was dying of cancer.

Prologue, 1988

“Mom, did you ever do drugs when you were in high school?” Mara asked.

She was 15, a junior at Brookline High, well past the peak of adolescent angst. Her chopped hair and bitten fingernails had grown back, she no longer avoided me in the corridors at school, and she had even decided to sign up for the senior science course I taught on the connection between body and mind.

“I don’t think any kids at my high school did drugs back then,” I said. “I heard stories of kids getting drunk, but the most I ever drank was a sip of my parent’s wine. I didn’t like the taste.”

Mara fixed her eyes on mine. “What about later?”

This was a question I’d anticipated, wondering when she would ask, and I was glad it came when she was mature enough to hear the truth.

“It’s a long story.” I paused, suddenly a bit unsure of myself, how much to say, where to start. “Let me give you a little backstory first.”

Mara raised an eyebrow, but it was clear that she was listening. I went on.

“When I was your age, my chest was actually concave. Lying in a bathtub I could hold a half cup of water right in there.” I pointed to the base of my sternum. “And my ribs were jacked up like this.” I held my hands above my lower ribs to show her how they used to be. “I was born that way, with a structural deformity.”

Mara looked away and folded her arms as if to protect herself. She seemed to know that she was going to learn more than she bargained for.

“Back in the mid-70s, when I was getting interested in mind-body connections, I went to a workshop taught by a psychotherapist who did ‘character analysis,’ Ron Kurtz. By looking at people – their posture, the way they moved, the tension in their muscles – he could make some very canny deductions about their personalities and emotional histories, even how old they were when they had traumatic experiences. I asked him what he thought of the dent in my chest and my flared ribs. He claimed unequivocally that when I was still a fetus in the womb, my mother didn’t want me, and as a response my chest folded in on itself. Later on as an infant I sensed my mother’s disapproval whenever I started to cry and I puffed up my

little ribcage to hold back my sobs.”

Mara looked at me for a long moment as though she might be about to cry herself. “Did you believe him?” she asked.

“I didn’t know what to think. I never heard anything like this in my training to be a biologist. But he shook me up, and he got me to the next step when he suggested some mind-body methods to open up my chest and heal the hurt. I knew I had to find out more. That’s when I started Alexander lessons, took Feldenkrais classes, got Rolfed, and went to all kinds of workshops. It was the first time in my life that I felt like a bad student. My teachers kept telling me I had to relax, to stop trying so hard, but I didn’t know how. I was like an Energizer bunny running around looking for the off switch. After two years of trying, the pit in my chest was still there and my ribs hadn’t budged. At workshops I heard some stories about experiences of people who had used psychedelics. In particular, I heard that LSD psychotherapy might lead to a breakthrough.”

“LSD psychotherapy? Now that’s a combination I never heard,” Mara said. At first I thought she was being sarcastic, but she didn’t move an inch from where she was sitting curled up with her legs tucked under her. She was waiting for more.

“Let me give you some context. In the 50s

and 60s a certain group of psychiatrists and psychologists used LSD to help their patients uncover the hidden roots of their problems. I did some research and learned that LSD psychotherapy could be a way to get to the truth when your conscious memory is shut down, and that's usually because of trauma."

"Were you scared?"

"Yes, I was. It wasn't that I thought I'd go crazy or jump out a window. It was more like the fear I got the first time I jumped off a high diving board. I got very reasonable before I jumped. I looked down and checked it out, and there was water in the pool and a lifeguard on duty, and I had seen other people go ahead of me, so I let go and made the leap. Since then I've read much more, and the data is clear. LSD is quite safe in a therapeutic setting."

There was a quiet moment. Mara seemed to be taking in the information. I decided to stay quiet and let her ask a question when she was ready.

"So," she said finally, "how did you find your psychedelic lifeguard, and what was it like to jump?"

"Good questions," I said. She was helping me frame my thoughts, like a good partner on a research project.

"I tracked down a person who was familiar with the procedures for LSD psychotherapy and asked him to act as a therapist in my home. He gave me a therapeutic dose of LSD, and he played music tapes he brought with him. I stretched out on the floor with blankets and pillows and put on a blindfold to keep my attention internal. After that his job was to stay by my side, kept me safe, and do what I asked." I stopped for a minute and took a sip of water. I didn't want to hurry ahead; I wanted to stay aligned with Mara.

"Are you ready for what happened?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so," she said.

"Keep going."

"About half an hour after I took the drug, I began to wail. It was a sound that had never come out of my mouth before, a chilling sound like a ghost, a banshee. Later on I learned to call it a primal scream, but at the time it was not something I knew about, not at all. I guided my therapist's hand to apply pressure to my rib cage, and I knew exactly what place, what angle, and what pressure I needed. My conscious mind split into two parts, one half of me an observer and the other



a suffering infant. I cried more deeply than I ever had before. The pain went into my heart and my chest, and crying was the only way to release it."

Mara could hear the quaver in my voice. She reached out and touched my hand. "It's OK, Mom. Keep talking."

"The sound changed from a wail to a long, resonating tone, and for four hours I repeated the sound *Aaaaaah* over and over. My identity dissolved, and there were no boundaries between me and my surroundings. I was the sound. I was love. I was peace. Every emotion I had ever felt seemed insignificant by comparison. That's when I really knew what a mystical experience was. It might sound strange to you, but I understood what it meant to be one with God. It had nothing to do with faith or religion or belief. I had *experienced* God."

I stopped and looked at Mara. "Is this okay? Does this make any sense to you?"

She touched my hand again for just a second. "What happened next?"

"I was so tired after the therapy session that I slept for 12 hours. It wasn't until the next day that I realized what had happened to my body. During the hours I was vocalizing, my ribs had flattened and the pit in my chest had become only half as deep. It was as though the sound of God had come through me to release the infant's grief."

After a long pause Mara asked, "Was Grandma still alive?"

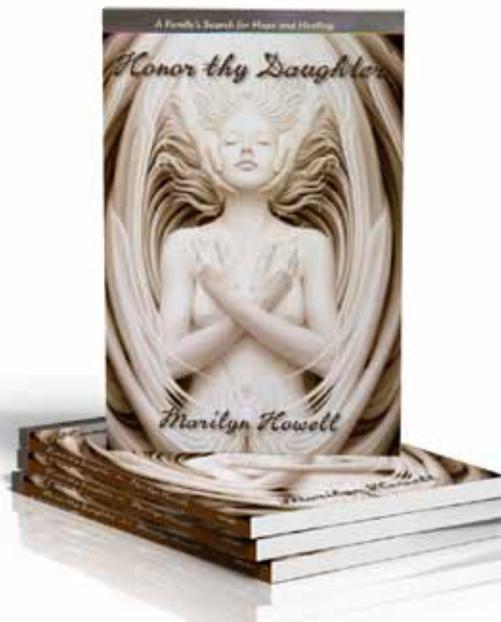
"Yes."

"Did you tell her what happened?"

"I did. It wasn't easy. I said that my life was a search for truth. I told her that I knew she loved me, but I just had to know what she felt about me before I was born. She broke down and admitted that she was angry when she found out she was pregnant, and that she'd hoped for a miscarriage." The silence was as if the air had been sucked out of the room. I had no idea what Mara was thinking. The late afternoon light that had been spilling through the window was nearly gone. I got up and turned on a lamp, waiting for Mara to say something. Minutes went by before she spoke.

"Thanks for being honest with me, Mom. Can we not talk about this anymore?"

And we didn't – not for a long, long time. •



Marilyn Howell's book, *Honor Thy Daughter*, will be published by MAPS in Spring 2011.