

Caring Parents who Emotionally Damage their Children

Sylvia Plath, Failed Love, and the Lost Self

(adapted from my manuscript, *Failed Parental Love and the Lost Self*)

The notion that caring parents could emotionally damage their children may puzzle some and offend others. If you are a parent yourself, you may well feel a surge of indignation. If caring is wrong for the child, then what next—love? As a parent, you have attended to your children's needs and fretted about them since the day they were born, and so for someone to suggest that the love, caring and attention you have given them could be harmful is more than perturbing—it's outrageous.

No, caring is not bad. It is good. It is important. So let me explain. There are many loving, caring parents who have raised wonderful children. But unfortunately, there are also many parents who do harm. The obvious circumstances in which harm is done are those in which the child has been sexually or physically abused. The less easily identified cases are those in which the child has been emotionally maltreated or neglected. Repeated degrading, punitive verbal maltreatment and gross neglect are obviously harmful. But within the category of emotional maltreatment there are also families that appear outwardly normal, in which parents are caring, good-intentioned, and want the best for their children. The motivation of these parents is not in question. The emotional harm results from the parent's failure to be *attuned* to the emotional needs of the child, from her failure to truly listen to the child.

The parent may be totally unaware that his love is flawed, that there is a lack of attunement. The child is likely to believe that the failing is on his side. The love of failed attunement is love that hurts. So, despite the good intentions of the parent, the child suffers.

What makes failed love in which there is a lack of attunement so insidious is that in many ways it looks like love with attunement. A child does not make subtle distinctions between love with attunement and love lacking in attunement. And so where there is a lack of attunement in an atmosphere suggestive of love, the child will feel confused: she perceives her parents as loving and yet the love she receives is emotionally painful.

There are degrees of failed attunement and in more pervasive, deeply impaired cases of failed attunement, the parent is emotionally incapable of valuing the child for who he or she is. In these cases, the parent unconsciously relates to the child in a way that elicits responses from the child that fulfill the *parent's emotional needs*. These parents are not willfully or vindictively tuning out to their children's emotional needs. They mean well. But, as a result of a serious failure in attunement, such a parent relates in a harmful way that draws the child into mirroring what the parent needs to see reflected of her own self-image, her own attitudes, her own emotions, and her own beliefs. In other words, the child needs to fulfill the image that the parent has created of the

child. The parent tends to only acknowledge and accept in the child what is a reflection of her own needs. In the extreme this need for mirroring is a pathology of narcissism.

There is, of course, no parent who can be perfectly attuned to his son's or daughter's emotional needs all the time. But when a child is repeatedly required to mirror his parent's emotional needs, the emotional development of the child is put at risk. The failure of parents to be sensitive and responsive to the emotional needs of their children may at times be due to stressful situations in life, but there are parents whose lack of attunement is rooted in their own upbringing that has left them unable to connect with their own blocked off emotions. *The sad irony is that parents who fail in their ability to give attuned love are victims themselves of failed parental love in their own childhood.* It is a legacy of hurt that is passed on from generation to generation until the chain is finally broken.

The child who receives love lacking in attunement experiences himself as wrong, bad, not good enough, or in more severe instances as being worthless. When the parent repeatedly ignores, minimizes, dismisses, negates, or devalues the emotions of the child, those emotions become squelched, undeveloped, hidden, and cut off from the conscious self. Those cut off emotions prevent the child from developing a healthy self-image and forming healthy relationships with others. The pain of those buried emotions will accompany the child into adulthood and the unhappiness and dissatisfaction that mark his life become an expression of the disconnection from his buried, lost self.

Children who come from homes in which they were not valued as unique individuals with their own emotional needs, and yet thought that they were loved in a genuine way, may have little awareness of the source of their negative feelings about themselves. These children will come to regard themselves as weak, or inadequate or failures. If these children eventually end up in a psychologist's or counselor's office later in life, they will likely reveal that in their childhood they never really felt listened to, and had no one in whom they could confide and share their inner feelings.

Only by penetrating below the surface of family life, can one know what truly goes on. If parents themselves cannot see the damage they cause, then one can hardly expect outsiders to be aware of any shortcoming. Only by probing deep into the heart of the family can one understand how damage occurs in those homes that appear normal, where the intent to love was sincere, but the delivery of love failed.

Who we are is very much a product of our life experiences, and the most important of these are the early experiences of our childhood and youth, since these form the foundation of our person, and shape our emotional relationship to the world. For those who are the casualties of failed parental love, each one in his or her own unique way will throughout life follow the path of the lost self.

In what follows, I examine the tragic life of American poet, Sylvia Plath. Plath's despondency and lack of sense of being worthy as a person have their roots in her childhood. Plath's path as a poet was driven by the need to reconnect with her lost self—that inner part of herself that was never valued as a child. I feel a special affinity to Plath, for she came from a similar cultural background as I, and in her home, like in my own, love was closely bound to performance. Her home, like my own, had the appearance of normality. Like in my home, there was caring and good intent. Her mother was devoted to her success. But as I will show, Plath felt unvalued for who she was. She was a victim of failed love.

SYLVIA PLATH: QUEST FOR SELF-TRANSFORMATION

Sylvia Plath was a sensitive, intelligent child, who excelled in her schooling, and strove toward perfection in what she did. Her passion was writing. By the age of twenty she had already been successful in having many of her poems and works of prose published. Plath's ambition was to be a successful novelist, but it was her poetry that drew attention. She showed exuberance and vitality, constantly working on improving her craft. Her first book of poems, *The Colossus*, was published when she was 28. She seemed to be on the course toward success and fulfillment. But at the age of 30 she ended her life.

Plath's father first met Plath's mother when she enrolled in a German course he was teaching at Boston University. Two years later, Plath's father married her mother. He was twenty years her senior. Ten months later Sylvia Plath was born. While tending to her new infant, her mother was also engaged in the task of helping her husband revise his dissertation to submit to a publisher.¹ It had previously been her mother's ambition to one day write novels, but now instead she was setting aside her own aspirations to help her partner realize his. Her skills as a writer helped her husband to further his career at the expense of her own dreams. Plath's mother was never given proper recognition for her contribution to her husband's work.

When Plath was two, her father developed health problems, and would come home at the end of his work day feeling tired and run down. His condition worsened over the next several years. So that her father could have peace and quiet when he came home from work, an arrangement was set up in which he stayed downstairs and the children had to remain upstairs, except for half an hour when the children were allowed to spend time with him. During that time together, Plath and her younger brother would entertain him, and try to cheer him up. What little affection and attention the children received from their father was mainly during that brief encounter. At the end he would give them a hug, and they would go back upstairs. Apart from these scheduled encounters, Plath had little interaction with her father.² Wanting to please him and do something to make her father feel better, Plath would write him poems or make drawings. At age seven, on father's day, she gave him a card which said, "My heart belongs to Daddy."

When Plath was eight her father died. Plath's mother did not want the children to attend the funeral, since she was worried about how they might react.³ Plath and her brother were not given

the opportunity to grieve, and their father's death was never really discussed. Both children were raised by their single mother, who had to find work to support the family. To save space, Plath and her mother shared the same bedroom.⁴ Plath worked hard in school, obtained high grades, and won various awards. She was praised for her writing skills and often submitted her poems to various magazines. Her mother encouraged her daughter's academic achievement and supported her decision to attend Smith College.

Plath as a child had been in the habit of keeping a diary, recording her activities and experiences. When she entered College, she began writing in a fresh notebook that would become the start of her famous journals. At age 17, the first entry of this gifted, achievement driven individual, with a voracious hunger for learning, was, "I may never be happy, but tonight I am content."⁵ At the age of 20, still in college, Plath was already gaining a national profile as a writer. As she had more and more of her writings published, she became depressed over fear of not measuring up.⁶ She intensified her achievement driven activities.

After learning that her application to Harvard's fiction writing course was rejected, she began to have death wishes and cut herself with razor blades.⁷ She received electroshock treatment, but her mood deteriorated, and she attempted suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills. She was hospitalized and received further electroshock treatment and psychotherapy sessions. After Plath recovered and returned home, her emotional breakdown was a topic that her mother avoided discussing.

Plath returned to her studies at College, and enrolled in several classes including one on Tolstoy. In her copy of *War and Peace*, she had marked the following passage:

To be enthusiastic had become her pose in society, and at times even when she had, indeed, no inclination to be so, she was enthusiastic so as not to disappoint the expectations of those who knew her.⁸

In the margin she wrote, "Ah, yes!"⁹

Plath worked hard in her studies, won further awards, and published more of her writings. She graduated with honors. She went to England where she enrolled at Cambridge on a scholarship to study English Literature. There she met Ted Hughes, an aspiring poet. They were immediately attracted to one another, shared a passion for literature, and within four months were married. Plath helped Hughes in typing the manuscript of his first book of poems, which was published and received rave reviews. Hughes was to become one of England's most celebrated poets. Plath, who had not yet published a major work, questioned her artistic ability. It was not until several years later, that Plath succeeded in having her first book of poems published.

In 1962, after seven years of marriage, Plath discovered that Hughes was having an affair with another woman. She was devastated. She said to a friend, "When you give someone your whole

heart and he doesn't want it, you cannot take it back. It's gone forever."¹⁰ Some months later, in September, she separated from Hughes.

Plath wanted to make a new start, and moved into a small flat with her children. In late 1962 and until her death in February, 1963, Plath wrote with feverish intensity. She found a new, vigorous voice in her writing, born out of her sense of betrayal, anger and loneliness. It was her hope to support herself with her writing. She was disappointed when publishers rejected most of her new material, which she thought was the best of what she had ever written. She became more depressed. She made overtures to an old friend, indicating a desire to become involved with him, but he was not interested. She and Hughes talked about reconciliation, but nothing came of that.

Near the end of her life, Plath sought emotional support from some friends, and briefly stayed in their home. She was severely depressed at that point. While there she asked her friends to go to her apartment and bring back some items she needed, including her copy of Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*. For reasons unknown, Plath changed her mind about staying with her friends, and returned to her apartment, where shortly thereafter she killed herself.

Plath won recognition as an important poet two years after her death, when her book of poems, *Ariel*, was published.¹¹ These highly personal poems are built out of the intense emotions she was experiencing after her separation. The images are stark and menacing. Themes of loss, death, and transformation of the Self run through these poems.¹² Her verse surges with feelings of indignation, bitterness, loneliness, and anger.¹³

Critics have expressed polar views regarding the merits of her work. Some view Plath's *Ariel* poems as self-indulgent expressions of an abandoned woman, others as expressing larger, more universal ideas of self and identity in the context of social values—ideas that were particularly relevant to women of her time. The truth likely lies in the middle. Plath wrote the poems because they expressed an important struggle she was facing: the emergence of her repressed self. She used her “informed and intelligent mind” to shape those experiences into something “relevant to the larger things.”¹⁴ Even so, the ideas expressed in her poetry reflect the painful struggle she was experiencing that ultimately led to her suicide.

Even years before her famous *Ariel* poems, Plath was preoccupied with her outward social being juxtaposed against her inner self. In many of her journal entries she reflects on questions of identity, lack of comfort with who she is, and her efforts to access parts of her inner self that are out of her reach. She says, “And I sit here without identity: faceless.”¹⁵ She asks herself, “How can I find myself & be sure of my identity?” and “How can I know who I am?”¹⁶ She writes about feelings of loneliness and disconnectedness from others:

God, but life is loneliness, despite all the opiates, despite the shrill tinsel gaiety of “parties” with no purpose, despite the false grinning faces we all wear.¹⁷

Plath not only was expressing disconnection from her inner self, but she had difficulty feeling herself as a separate person. She described how it felt as if there was only “one skin” between her and Hughes.¹⁸

In order to try and make sense of Plath’s emotional torment, one must consider her relationship with her mother and father. What follows is a heuristic construction showing how Plath’s fierce struggles with her inner self are best understood as evolving out of her child-parent attachment experiences. While one can never know exactly what happened between Plath and her parents, Plath’s writings give important clues. Her descriptions of her feelings toward her parents, in particular her mother, are consistent with what a child who feels unvalued would experience. Just as my parents seemed normal, devoted parents on the surface, so did Plath’s. Her parents were not cruel, they wanted the best for their daughter. But good intentions can go wrong.

Her father was a mysterious, rather inaccessible figure in her young life, a kind of giant, as she characterizes him in her poem, “The Colossus,” whom she could never “put together entirely.”¹⁹ As a child, her task, so to speak, was to entertain him during the half hour visit to help lift his spirits. She sent him poems and cards for the same purpose. She sought to win his affection by pleasing him with these gestures. What she received in turn was a hug. She learned at a young age that her role was to perform for others to gain acceptance and love. The parent-child roles were completely reversed: *rather than the father seeing to her emotional needs, the young Plath had to be attentive to his.*

Plath’s mother was a sacrificing, concerned parent, who wanted the best for her daughter. Her mother had an “excess of devotion.”²⁰ Her mother was never supported in her own strivings toward self-expression and authentic autonomy. She lived through and for her children. Plath’s mother was able to vicariously fulfill her own denied needs and wishes through her daughter’s success. Since she had to struggle as a single mother, and had never been able to realize her own dreams of becoming a writer, she likely hoped, as parents often do, that her daughter would achieve what she had not.

Alice Miller, in *For Your Own Good*, points out that Plath’s mother was intensively involved in being the good parent by encouraging her daughter’s successful performance and achievement, and so failed to be attuned to her daughter’s emotional needs.²¹ Her mother’s lack of attunement to Plath’s emotional needs in childhood would have its origin in her mother’s own repressed inner self. Psychologist, Susan Kavalier-Adler suggests that Plath’s mother was cut off from her own true emotions within herself, and as a result failed to mirror her daughter in the attachment relationship, she failed to hear the real concerns of her daughter.²² Kavalier-Adler argues that Plath’s inner self became hidden behind a false self as a result of her mother’s need to deny her own resentment, rage, pain and loss.

However well-intentioned the motives of Plath’s mother, what Plath likely learned as a child was that how one behaves, how one performs, is more important than how one feels. As Alice Miller

indicates, Plath's mother did not allow her daughter to experience her frustrations and suffering. As a result of her mother's avoidance in talking about negative and difficult emotions, such as those involving death and dealing with loss, or involving Plath's mental breakdown, that part of Plath's inner self remained repressed and undeveloped. Plath's self-esteem was almost entirely built on what she did rather than who she was. It was this realization later that was at the core of Plath's intense, conflicted feelings about her mother. The focus on performance at the expense of emotional needs shut Plath off from her inner self.

Both biographers and mental health experts have remarked on the dissonance between Plath's letters home to her mother and her private journal entries in terms of how she presents herself on the outside, and what she actually feels on the inside.²³ She usually wore a bright, buoyant, enthused persona in letters to her mother, while in her journals she would simultaneously express darker moods of loneliness and emptiness, and would express hateful, resentful feelings toward her mother. The anger she expressed toward her mother from the end of 1958 onwards was likely encouraged by her psychotherapist, as a way of working through unresolved childhood issues.²⁴ She says of her mother:

'So how do I express my hate for my mother? ...I wasn't loved but all the signs said I was loved...my mother had sacrificed her life for me...'²⁵

Plath fantasizes killing her mother.²⁶ Her journal entries reveal a painful inner struggle of trying to come to grips with her mixed emotions about her mother, who on the one hand had devoted herself to supporting her daughter's aspirations, and on the other hand had failed to be attuned to her daughter's emotional needs. Plath saw the hopelessness of "expecting mother to see how it really feels to be a mother. She is not able to oblige."²⁷ Plath experienced her inner emotional self as unvalued by her mother.

In one entry she commented that her mother must be baffled how her daughter could be happy doing something "so dangerous as follow my own heart and mind regardless of her experienced advice."²⁸ Her mother simply could not put herself in her daughter's shoes. Plath asks herself,

What do I expect or want from Mother? Hugging, mother's milk? But that is impossible to all of us now. Why should I want it still?²⁹

Plath still wants emotional nourishment, because she was deprived of the mirroring love she needed at an early age. What she was feeling was a missing part of herself, that inner part of herself that was not valued. She felt she had no clear, separate identity from her mother.³⁰

The too-closeness or "psychic osmosis" that Plath was struggling against was an intimacy that at times even her mother found uncomfortable and reminiscent of her relationship with her own mother.³¹ That unhealthy tendency to emotional fusion kept Plath's mother from seeing her daughter as someone separate from the image she had of her. Plath's struggle against the fusion of her identity with her mother's is symbolized in her poem, "Medusa."³² In that poem, Plath

struggles against the emotional “umbilicus” that still connects her to the monstrous female creature, who can turn a person to stone.

It was difficult for Plath to separate out her mother’s vicarious needs for achievement through her daughter from her own needs. Already at the age of seventeen Plath was obsessing over her need to perform and achieve: “Never, never, never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul--my poetry, my poems, my stories--all, poor reflections.”³³ Performance was the basis of Plath’s self-esteem. It was the basis on which she was valued by her mother.

With the emphasis on performance in the parent-child relationship at the expense of valuing the inner self, what became all important for Plath were achievement, recognition and success. From an early age on she strove for excellence in her studies and she had almost a compulsive urge to produce, to submit one poem after another, as a way of performing, of receiving acceptance, of proving her worth. Performance consumed her. Her extreme dependence on performance for acceptance and feelings of worthiness, made her susceptible to plunges in mood. In her journals on various occasions she records these extreme emotional troughs she fell into, when she was not able to perform at the level she had set herself. In one instance she castigates herself for having a block in her creativity. She describes herself as “paralyzed with fear, with deadly hysteria.”³⁴ Her self-blame is fierce and scalding:

I had been living in an idle dream of *being a writer*. And here stupid housewives & people with polio were getting their stories into the *Satevepost*.

On another occasion after rejection of a story, feeling bitter and dejected, she bluntly confronts herself: “so writing is still used as a proof of my identity.”³⁵

Plath realizes the extent to which her identity is wrapped up in her drive for achievement. What Plath was constantly searching for, as suggested by her preoccupations in her journal, and as symbolized in her verse, was her inner self—that part of herself that was not nurtured as a child. In her adult life, she continued to feel separated from that hidden, rejected part of herself, and she continued to hide her inner painful feelings from her mother, wanting her acceptance, presenting the agreeable daughter she felt compelled to show. She could only show her false self.³⁶

When Plath’s mother became aware of the negative things that her daughter had said about her in her journals, and Plath’s negative portrayal of her mother in her novel, *The Bell Jar*, a thinly disguised autobiographical work, she could not accept that these words reflected her daughter’s true self. While one should not interpret the unfeeling mother portrayed in the novel in a literal way, the characterization reflects Plath’s conflicted feelings about her mother. Plath’s mother, however, simply could not entertain the thought that her daughter was anyone but the kindly person she imagined, the one who wrote so sweetly to her in her letters home. Plath’s mother lacked the capacity to connect with her daughter’s deeper emotional world.

What one sees in the journals is that Plath had not felt loved for who she was.³⁷ She perceived her mother as a Doppelgänger, a double, “undermining her sense of herself.”³⁸ Plath’s long struggle was channeled toward accessing the inner lost part of herself. After her death, Hughes in his “Foreword” to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* stated, “I never saw her show her real self to anybody—except perhaps in the last three months of her life.”³⁹ He felt that Plath’s final *Ariel* poems, which she had written in the several months before her death, were the expression of her “true self.” It was however, an emerging struggle that overwhelmed and destroyed her.

After leaving Hughes, Plath’s desire was to make a new beginning in her life. The themes in her last poems, such as “Lady Lazarus,” attest to her interest in self transformation.⁴⁰ Through the psychological destruction of the old, she wanted to create something new. She wanted to finally “kill” her obsession with an idealized image of her father, as so vividly expressed in her poem, “Daddy.”⁴¹ That idealized image was born out of the impaired attachment relationship with her father—a parent who received love, but gave little in return. That idealized image became a template governing Plath’s relationship with Hughes.

Plath’s preoccupation with transformation of her inner self is suggested not only by themes in her poems, but by her expressed interest in her final days in Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*, of which she had a copy. In his book, Fromm explores the relationship between the individual self and society. He discusses how an individual’s submission to the pressures of society to conform to the expectations of others to avoid the risk of disapproval and isolation results in loss of spontaneity, loss of identity. The individual becomes powerless. Fromm states:

The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him, need not feel alone and anxious any more. But the price he pays, however, is high; it is the loss of his self.⁴²

Due to the lack of development of Plath’s inner lost self, threats of abandonment and rejection were particularly difficult for her to tolerate. Since her self-esteem was founded on achievement and pleasing others, when those aspects of herself were rejected, she had nothing left to fall back on. Hughes’ betrayal of Plath in their marriage was a devastating rejection for her. Emotionally, he had come in some ways to represent her lost father. With Hughes’ rejection of her love, her heart was gone forever, the same heart as a child she lost to her father.

During the last months of her life, she felt a burst of optimism that her new poems would finally prove her worth. While she was still struggling for wide recognition, her husband, whom she had helped to catapult to success, had soared upward in the literary world. With Plath already feeling deeply wounded by Hughes’ betrayal, the rejection by publishers of her latest deeply inspired poems likely had a magnified crushing impact. The feelings of rejection in this vulnerable person must have been immense, for these new poems, which she believed were the most creative she had ever written, were her desperate hope for a new beginning—a new self. These rejections of her performing self left her with nothing in its place.

Years after Plath's death, biographers and mental health experts still debate what drove her to suicide. Some biographers have focused "blame" on her husband, Ted Hughes and his infidelity, and others on Plath and her raging jealousy and mental instability, and still others on the mother. Differences of opinion have at times been acrimonious.⁴³ I do not think there are any villains here, only imperfect human beings, who may have failed at some level. The explanation that has been given by some that Plath was "mentally ill" and hence her act of suicide explains nothing. It merely begs the question: what contributed to her "mental illness," what brought her to suicide as the only solution?

It is clear that Plath was severely depressed in the last months of her life. Her friends observed her despondent state, and her doctor treated her for it. The breakup of her marriage was certainly a major precipitant of her depression. As noted by Brian Cooper, psychiatrist, after Plath learned of Hughes infidelity, she first reacted with rage and bitterness, and then entered a prolonged period of alternating between hopefulness and despondency.⁴⁴ In looking at her pattern of coping with the vicissitudes of life, Cooper suggested that her sudden shifts in emotion, her rage, her impulsivity, and her sensitivity to rejection, along with her history of suicidal behavior and deep sense of insecurity together are indicative of borderline personality functioning. Individuals with borderline personality features certainly have major difficulties with identity, trust, emotional regulation, and oversensitivity to rejection.

Plath's performance based self-esteem made her highly attuned to any signs that she was not living up to expectations, and highly vulnerable to feelings of rejection. Hughes described Plath as having sudden outbursts—rages that "began and ended like electric storms." Hughes had difficulty understanding these sudden emotional flare-ups. When he would try to reason with her, she "adamantly refused anything that sounded like criticism."⁴⁵ While we cannot be sure what contribution Hughes made to these outbursts, their description is certainly consistent with the type of responses one might see in individuals with identity issues and core problems in self-esteem regulation.

Plath's tragic life is illustrative of a person who struggled throughout her life with issues of self and identity that likely have their origins in her early attachment relationships, characterized by parental acceptance based on performance rather than a valuing of Plath for herself. The feelings of resentment that Plath had toward her mother were not arbitrary or accidental. They have a basis in the nexus of that relationship. Plath's emotional volatility in her close relationships, her struggle with her identity, her extreme jealousy, her prior suicide attempt, her obsession with achievement, and the intense abiding theme of transformation of the self in her poetry, are best understood as manifestations of a lost inner self.

What happened to Plath is particularly important in the present context, for her life shows that what one sees on the surface in relationships is not what necessarily goes on. It shows, as in my own case, *how a child can be emotionally damaged in a normal-looking home, despite a parent's sincere intent to love*. Plath's mother dedicated herself to her daughter's education and success.

There is no doubt about that. She wanted the best for her daughter. But what Plath learned was that in order to be valued for who she is, she must perform. She likely learned this through the way her mother related to her, emphasizing performance over talking about inner feelings. Plath was obsessed with achievement, and when her performance was considered wanting, whether by rejection of her work by publishers, or rejection by her husband, she had no valuing inner self to fall back on.

Plath's mother was never able to accept that her daughter had the negative, and at times hateful, feelings for her that were expressed in her journals or in her novel, *The Bell Jar*. She could not accept that side of her because she was blind to it. Like in Plath's case, my parents' intent was to love, but their method was damaging—damaging to a degree to which they remained totally oblivious. When in my teens my mother discovered my journal, and read the critical comments I made of my father, she was hurt and incensed, not unlike the reaction of Plath's mother. My mother simply could not entertain the thought that her parenting, or my father's, was harmful, for after all, they only wanted the best for me. She could only conclude I was terribly cruel, terribly ungrateful.

If I had suggested to my parents that I felt valued only for my performance, for what they wanted to see in me, rather than for who I was, they would have stared at me with hurt, quizzical looks. I know from my own experience, the few times in my later life that I attempted to discuss the negative emotional impact on me of my mother's and father's parenting, I was met with much defensiveness that quickly brought the conversation to a halt. My own mother—a woman who was at the core, kind—was perceived by friends and relatives as a generous, genial, somewhat stubborn, caring, contented, opinionated, light hearted person. In fact, she was all these things. She was not intentionally cruel. She hated cruelty. The very idea that my mother could be the cause of her son's emotional damage, that she could have failed in her parenting, would be incomprehensible—a despicable thought—to those who knew her, and it would certainly have been inconceivable and offensive to her.

What likely went on in Plath's home was a well-intentioned, superficially benign-looking, subtly shaped transaction between parent and child in which Plath's inner feelings were never allowed true expression. These early experiences underlay her painful, and ultimately tragic, struggle to connect with her unvalued inner self. She felt compelled to relate to the world with her "false" achievement driven presentation, and felt repeated dejection when her performance based self was rejected. Her only solution was to perform more intensely, to reach that unattainable final perfection that would win her acceptance at last.

Toward the end of her life, she finally was beginning to reconnect with her inner self, but by doing so, she was unable to bear the overwhelming emotions of rejection and abandonment that came with expressing that inner part of herself that was never valued. Those overwhelming feelings were the same ones that she had tried to avoid all her life by pleasing others, and doing what was expected of her—perform and succeed.

Plath may well have had some constitutional sensitivities that added to her challenges, but one does not end up with hateful raging jealousy, or perform acts of self-mutilation, or attempt suicide, or castigate the love of one's devoted mother, or finally, put one's head in a gas oven as a mere result of vulnerabilities. The pattern of her anguish is the pattern of a deeply impaired self that lacked the experience of being valued. Her sense of not being valued for who she was drove her creative energies and her desperate actions to find herself. The missing sense of worthiness in the core of her self-esteem has its source in what she experienced as a child in the relationships with her parents. Only those who have never felt truly loved, can know this gnawing emptiness. Plath's struggles in life resonate with those of children who are the casualties of failed parental love.

NOTES

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- ¹ Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (2004, p. 13)
 - ² Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (2004, pp. 19-20)
 - ³ Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (2004, pp. 22)
 - ⁴ Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (2004, p. 32)
 - ⁵ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 8)
 - ⁶ Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (2004, p. 42)
 - ⁷ Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (2004, p. 53)
 - ⁸ Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (2004, p.2)
 - ⁹ Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (2004, p. 58)
 - ¹⁰ Sigmund, "Sylvia in Devon: 1962" (1977, p. 108)
 - ¹¹ Plath, *Ariel: Poems by Sylvia Plath* (1966)
 - ¹² Olvir, *Sylvia Plath: Stasis in Darkness* (1983)
 - ¹³ Hilton, Sylvia on Aurelia Plath. (1995)
 - ¹⁴ Orr, *The Poet Speaks* (1966, pp. 169-70)
 - ¹⁵ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 26)
 - ¹⁶ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 460)
 - ¹⁷ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 31)
 - ¹⁸ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p.401)
 - ¹⁹ Plath, *Plath: Poems* (1998, p. 78)
 - ²⁰ Bennett, *My Life a Loaded Gun: Dickinson, Plath, Rich, and Female Creativity*. (1990, p. 163-4)
 - ²¹ Miller, *For Your Own Good* (2002, pp. 254-60)
 - ²² Kavalier-Adler, Vaginal core or vampire mouth. (1998, p. 227)
 - ²³ Miller, *For Your Own Good* (2002, pp. 254-60); Cooper, Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum. (2003); Schultz, "Mourning, Melancholia and Sylvia Plath" (2005, p. 164)
 - ²⁴ Cooper, Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum. (2003, p. 165)
 - ²⁵ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 433)
 - ²⁶ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 433)
 - ²⁷ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 461)
 - ²⁸ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 435)
 - ²⁹ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 456)
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 - ³² Plath, *Plath: Poems* (1998, p.195-6)
 - ³³ Plath, A., *Letters Home* (1975, p. 40)
 - ³⁴ Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000, p. 404-5)
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 - ³⁶ Miller, *For Your Own Good* (2002, p. 255)
 - ³⁷ Levine, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. (1988, p. 310)

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- ³⁹ Hughes, Foreword. (1982, p. xii)
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- ⁴² Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (1969, p. 184)
- ⁴³ Malcolm, *The Silent Woman* (1995)
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