

OTHER MOTHERS

(Excerpts from a Keynote Speech to Nurse Practitioner Students at the Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions)

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As we practice our healing craft, we must conduct our own personal exploration and take time for introspection. Self-reflection, and *curiosity* about our patients, helps us to be more emotionally present and available to them. I hope that this article will illustrate how personal experiences contribute to your growth as a clinician. I will do this by sharing a pivotal experience from my life (my mother's fatal overdose, its impact on me and how that event shaped my approach to patients). I hope that my story can show that nurses can provide greater comfort by truly listening to patients.

There are increasingly sophisticated ways to understand the human body and yet we still carry a stethoscope, the tried and true model of listening. Our stethoscopes remind us that we must not only hear our patients, but truly **listen** to the heartbeat of their core existence. In my work the ability to listen is essential. I have devoted my professional career to fortifying kids, preventing and treating depression and suicide, while decreasing the stigma that surrounds the need for psychological treatment. I have worked in a school-based health center for eighteen years collaborating with teachers, families and school nurses in an effort to provide an anchor for troubled teenagers.

Losing my mother to suicide when I was four years old cannot be sugar-coated. I will always miss my mother, but raising my three children with quiet confidence is possible because of the "other mothers" who have sustained me. I think of your work as nurses and the caring you give, and I know that for many people, you may be their "other mothers." You sense when something was wrong and by listening to patients help make sense of a complicated world. You know the importance of listening to the important message beneath the surface.

Self-knowledge is essential in order to be fully present for our patients and ourselves. The ability to listen profoundly allows our patients to know that their story is heard. I share the story of my mother's suicide to illustrate how the process of introspection can help one to listen more effectively. I started to write my story of loss, *In Her Wake*, in the middle of the night after the birth of my first daughter, Lila. Becoming a mother made me examine my relationship with my own parents. As a child psychiatrist I asked myself tough questions about my loss in order to be a better guide for others in their darkness. I pondered the most haunting question: "Why did my mother kill herself?" I wrote my story in order to find some resolution and to figure out how to move on. My journey is one of unrelenting curiosity and sadness. Dealing with my own grief and finding hope helps me to give hope to my patients.

I was a troubled seventh grader. I attended an all girl school and found the rules of the school

to be tedious, resisting them as best I could. I was rude and disrespectful to teachers. I started to steal things. When I ran away from home and spent the night in the school auditorium, it was the last straw. My father and stepmother arranged for me to see a therapist, Dr. Walker, who thankfully got me back on track. Obviously my

behavior was an effort to be noticed by someone—anyone—who might understand that I was one pissed-off, frightened kid.

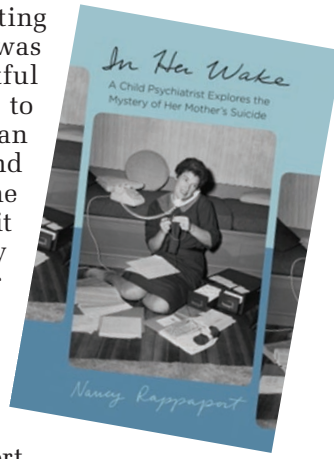
I started seeing a psychotherapist twice a week. Being a teenager, I felt times of desolation, guarded my hurt, and was slow to trust. I feared that my therapist would think, as I had come to believe, that I was responsible for my mother's suicide. Dr. Walter really listened. His unconditional acceptance and reassurance that my mother's death was not my fault restored my confidence. He helped me to see that suicide is tragic, unfair, and unexplainable. I know now that I was inspired to become a medical professional, because of my experiences with Dr. Walter.

Dr. Walthers was like my "other father" which leads me to another reflection...the role of men in nursing, whose contributions cannot be overlooked. Regardless of gender, our profession is about compassion, about being there, and as another friend so astutely said, "Men in any profession, nursing included, can inspire balance, confidence, and become the other parent to patients, customers, or staff they work with or oversee. Men can and do nurture—and male nurses are especially confident as they brave a predominately female profession."

What motivates you from day to day? Take inventory and reflect on what you need to cultivate the necessary stamina and compassion for your road ahead. This starts with the ability to listen. I never tire of working with patients and teachers to figure out how to help kids believe there is a promising future for them. Each patient has a story to tell, and by listening, we help begin the healing process. I understand as a psychiatrist and also as a mother, wife, and daughter the importance of communicating to patients that their stories are being heard. It is imperative to understand our own responses so we can stay present and attentive to our patients.

Matthew's Story

Matthew and I were in a high-stakes negotiation. He reluctantly tolerated what he felt to be my intrusive cross-examination as we tried to figure out what was happening to him.



He came because his family was alarmed by his increasingly withdrawn and caustic behavior. I initially thought he was depressed and smoking too much marijuana. After several sessions of careful listening he revealed his hallucinations, and it became clear that he was struggling with schizophrenia. And he was really scared!

Someone named "Tapper" made terrible things happen. Matthew was unable to focus, make decisions, or manage his thoughts. His illness dismantled any semblance of equilibrium; he could not stop his fear, nor reason his way out of his nightmare. My work with Matthew brought long buried emotions to the surface...I could not save my mother, but maybe I could save Matthew if I was a better doctor, if I do something differently...

Who do we blame when suicide happens? Surviving my mother's suicide helps me to understand that you can't keep someone alive who is determined to kill himself. Ironically my mother's suicide has given me the ability to endure, an equanimity that frees me to do the best I can. As long as someone is alive, there is hope to find relief and comfort. I follow in my mother's wake, moving in and out of my grief buoyed by the voyage of my own exploration of her dark reality to increase my understanding and to overcome my trauma of losing her. Because of my experience, I was more present to listen and offer guidance to Matthew. Self-examination is part and parcel of wearing our white coat.

My last piece of advice to you is to take care of yourself physically and emotionally. Your family, your colleagues, your patients are grateful that you have this drive and aptitude. You must find balance in your life, taking time for family and self. You must reserve enough energy to stay clinically competent and present for your patients and to preserve your deep love for this healing craft. When we stop caring about our patients, and start to feel irritable and overburdened, this is a signal to replenish ourselves, to nurture our capacity to care deeply.

As you move forward, I hope you remember those who have influenced you: other mothers or other fathers who helped you along the way with tireless encouragement. And remember that you may be "other mothers or fathers" to others!

Nancy Rappaport, MD is the author of *In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explores the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide* (Basic Books, September 2009) www.inherwake.com.