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NEW: Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance with Our Mothers

A New Collaborative Memoir Re-examines the Mother-Daughter Relationship



Seated, left to right, Lori Toppel, Vicki Adesso; standing, left to right, Susan Hodara, Joan Potter; photo by Douglas Sarnoff
March 1, 2013
by Susan Hodara

The faint scent of perfume after a kiss... the bitter sting of a slap in the face... too many unspoken words – these are among the vivid memories my three co-authors and I captured when writing about our mothers for our collaborative memoir, *Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance with Our Mothers*. Vicki Adesso, Joan Potter, Lori Toppel, and I have recalled and reconsidered our relationships with our mothers and, in the process, become closer friends.

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My fellow authors, all Westchester residents, and I met in a memoir workshop that Joan taught at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center in Sleepy Hollow. In 2006 we formed our own writing group, meeting weekly in my dining room here in New Castle, and, to our surprise, these memories became our focus. We found that not only did our understanding of one another deepen, but our perceptions of our mothers were transformed.

The four of us come from very different backgrounds. *Still Thinking of You* first reveals the individual circumstances that brought us together, and then presents each of our stories of our mothers. The book concludes with a section that reflects on how sharing our memories affected us.

Vicki, who joined the writing group shortly after she had breast cancer surgery and treatment, had taken several of Joan's memoir classes in the late 1990s. Vicki had written about her mother, a loving woman who was lonely despite raising four children and taking care of her in-laws in the small home they shared in Eastchester. However, Vicki felt her writing wasn't focused enough to paint a clear picture of her mother's life and the complicated relationship the two shared. "The stories I wrote were scattered; they wandered through time and place," she recalls. "It wasn't until years later, in our small writers group, that I found my way back to her."

Over the years as a writing teacher, Joan had helped others record their memories, but had largely neglected her own. Twelve years after her mother died, she arrived at the writing group with an old folder of stories she had written about her mother, and a 20-year-old cassette tape in which her mother spoke frankly about her early experiences growing up in Tupper Lake, a remote logging town in the Adirondacks. Listening to the tape, Joan learned for the first time about some of her mother's history, such as the pain she suffered at age

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eight when her own mother died and her family was separated, and, later, her father's suicide. In looking back, Joan says, "I wonder: what if I hadn't spent those years writing and rewriting my memories of my mother? Would she still be as vivid a presence in my life? Or would she have faded away?"

Lori, who enjoyed a privileged childhood growing up in Puerto Rico and New York City, is the only one of us whose parents were divorced. Once an affectionate and vibrant woman, Lori's mother turned bitter after her marriage fell apart, causing terrible strains between mother and daughter. Lori says that by writing down her mother's story, she felt she could relive early memories of her mother during more joyful and carefree times, like when she, her sister and her mother sat at a pianola singing "Que Sera, Sera." "The point was to recall how she had once been, not just how she ended up," Lori says.

I am the only writer whose mother is still alive. I had spent six years in Joan's memoir class, where I wrote a lot about my father, a strong-willed man who often berated me and my forbearing mother. We lived in an observant Jewish home in a middle-class suburb of Boston. It wasn't until I turned my attention to my mother in our writing group that I began to regard her as more than just a passive figure. I started to recognize her quiet acceptance, her tolerance without judging, as one of her greatest strengths. For the first time in my life, I caught a glimpse of who my mother really was.

We hope the book will inspire readers to reexamine the relationships they have or had with their mothers, and to view them in a different and more accepting light.

Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance with Our Mothers (Big Table Publishing; March 1, 2013; \$15 paperback, \$7.99 e-book. Available at Amazon.com. For more information and upcoming readings: www.StillHereThinkingofYou.com.

The authors will read from and discuss their work at the Chappaqua Library on May 8.

Susan Hodara is a journalist, memoirist, and teacher who has lived in New Castle for almost 20 years. For more information: susanhodara.com.



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