My Mother's Story as a Narrative of Contradictions

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Why do we tell stories to each other? According to Candace Spigelman and Walter Fisher, stories help us to make sense of our lives, since "human understanding is intrinsically conditioned by narrative insight" (Spigelman, *Personally Speaking*, 90). While the narrative paradigm has served the general populace for centuries, the world of academe has only in the last decades begun to consider the personal narrative a legitimate genre. Perhaps this is, in part, due to postmodernism's renunciation of meta-narratives that, in turn, encourages us to practice what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls "'little narratives,'" described by Hans Bertens as "small-scale, modest systems of belief that are strong enough to guide us, but are always aware of their provisional nature" (143). Or maybe we turn to personal story-telling as an antidote to the malaise brought on by postmodernism's insistence on lack of closure and coherence. Or perhaps the personal helps us respond to what Margaret Willard-Traub calls "the diversity of experience within the current moment" (28). In any case, as life writing becomes increasingly popular within the academy, we ask a number of questions. First, how do we establish parameters within which to tell our stories in an effort to safeguard academic standards? Second, why and how do we tell our stories?

And lastly, what happens when these stories appear as convoluted, contradictory pieces?

Briefly, to the first question, critics who are opposed to the use of the personal within the academy suggest that such a practice makes assumptions regarding an autonomous self, that it has a tendency to essentialize, and that its proclivity is towards narcissism. My research, however, indicates just the opposite. Serious scholars who advocate for the personal are among the first to acknowledge, as Judith Summerfield does, that "there is no return to the event, except 'virtually'" (185); they are also careful to acknowledge the local-ness of their stories, and to state their political location; and they include elements of the personal not in order to put themselves forward, but, conversely, because they desire community and dialogue. Additionally, the critics who espouse personal academic writing, because they are aware that "the personal is … problematic [precisely] because the *uninterrogated* and *underevaluated* personal narrative is seductive and, consequently, dangerous" (Spigelman, "Argument and Evidence" 83), practice an unrelenting self-reflexiveness.

Given that many academics choose to deal in the personal, the question then becomes: why? I suggest a likely reason is because, as critics Jane Hindman, Richard Miller and Smaro Kamboureli suggest, the divide between the private and public worlds of the academic is too difficult to sustain, and is, perhaps, after all, a fabricated separation; moreover, a link between the two is inevitable. Indeed, Hindman professes that her "personal and … professional life often fold into one another" (92); Miller insists "that all intellectual projects are always, inevitably, also autobiographies" (50); and Kamboureli speaks of a "personal and academic weariness" that sets in from "the intricacies of the seemingly tangible gap that separates academic discourse from social reality" (*Scandalous Bodies* 2). In order to make sense of our lives, then, many of us feel the need to acknowledge the inevitable fusion of our private and public worlds. It is such a fusion that informs both my mother's story, at the heart of this essay, and my academic exploration of it.

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Many years ago I wrote a paper for an undergraduate course in which I juxtaposed my mother's life with mine. Coincidentally she and I spent a good chunk of our lives, consecutively, as young wives and mothers in the same house, and so the comparison seemed both logical and intriguing. That paper eventually grew into a Master's thesis in which my mother's story became the dominant focus. Because I concur with Spigelman's caution regarding an "uninterrogated" personal narrative, I recognized that I needed to evaluate my particular situatedness in relation to both

my material and, in particular, my chosen interviewee. Susan Brison's assertion that "the contexts from which experiential writing emerge are, in and of themselves, significant" (Spigelman, *Personally Speaking* 75) was especially true in my case, as a child writing about a parent.

Indeed, although acknowledgements of political location can lead to a distancing effect in the case of authors who begin their work with a long list of disqualifiers, for me the potential pitfalls lay on the other side: as the daughter of the interviewee I was more likely to be guilty of limited objectivity than I was of a "scholarly bias" (Willard-Traub 37). Thus I needed to be certain to create enough objective distance to make the story academically legitimate.

Specifically, I needed to be aware of how the story I was telling fit into the larger picture of daughters writing about mothers. Carolyn Heilbrun suggests that women who write memoirs from the 1990s onwards tend to remove themselves, philosophically, from their mothers, because they do not forgive their mothers for "preferring to suffer and strive without affronting society's conventions" (*Women's Lives* 54). This was not the case for me, however, because my mother was not a woman who preferred suffering to confrontation. Although she did not find a constructive solution to her frustration, my mother vociferously resisted society's sexist assumptions. Thus my response to my mother's story was different from those daughters whose mothers chose the more conventional option of maintaining the status quo. I resonated more closely with Marianne Hirsch, who insists that the symbiotic nature of a mother/daughter relationship creates a "mutual dependency," and that the narratives we write ultimately "connect or separate [mother and daughter]" (27). Certainly this awareness, and the recognition that I was dealing with material that was simultaneously my own and not my own, grew as I began to construct a narrative that was both my mother's and mine.

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My mother tells me: "when I got married everything changed for me and nothing changed for dad." In the interviews I conducted with my mother about her past life, as research for my thesis, she tells me the story of how frustrated she felt at a time when society allowed, even encouraged, my father to be extremely busy in the public sphere of administration and church work, while she was expected to be perfectly happy at home surrounded by domesticity. As I continued the interview process, I became aware that she was not only forthcoming, she was also eager to tell her story. Where did this eagerness come from, after all these years?

I strongly suspect that because my mother knows she can now share her side of the story, she sees this undertaking as a way of dispelling

deep-rooted, burdensome shadows. In Aritha van Herk's wonderfully creative and compelling *Places Far From Ellesmere*, van Herk re-tells the story of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, in order to "rescue [Anna]… [to] give her a second chance, another life, a different fiction" (77). She releases Anna from Tolstoy's patriarchal discourse that assumes male dominance within society, "un/reads" and then "re/reads" her on the island of Ellesmere, in order to allow Anna to present her case, finally, in her own words: "Here Anna, there are no determinations of public morality. Here Anna, there are no judgments exerting themselves, no old wives with their domestic tyrannies" (110). Similarly, my project was intended to release my mother from a situation that presumed the authority of the male voice, and to give my mother a voice of her own, a forum from which to un/read and then re/read herself, to re-construct, to connect to a receptive, understanding audience.

My mother's insistence, that "things were so hemmed in" in those days, is indicative of her desire to make plain why she acted and reacted as she did. In the 1960s, my mother did not step, or fit, easily into the submissive role of housewife and mother. Although she wanted children and enjoyed sewing and cooking, she also wanted to use her fertile mind. But because, as Heilbrun explains, "it can be less painful, for a woman, not to hear the strange, dissatisfied voice stirring within her" (26), my mother's sometimes unconventional behaviour represented a threat to those women who felt they needed to safeguard their lives with husbands who needed domestically inclined, understanding wives.

Clearly a number of societal influences worked against my mother's desire for intellectual fulfillment, and ultimately propelled her finally to tell her story. Since she experienced the bulk of her frustration in the 1960s and 1970s, works like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Carolyn Heilbrun's *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979), and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) – works that describe a social milieu that was confining to women who craved intellectual stimulation – present themselves as an appropriate theoretical backdrop to my mother's story. Indeed, my conversations with my mother, as well as various hints in her writings from the 1970s, contain sentiments very similar to those expressed by the middle-class, frustrated housewives interviewed by Friedan: "I'm desperate, I begin to feel I have no personality" (21). Friedan's question, "Where is the world of thought and ideas … When did women decide to give up the world and go back home?" (36), directly connects to Heilbrun's assessment of the social situation in which the husband "need[s] someone to take care of … [his] domestic, cooking, cleaning, sexual, breeding needs while … [he is] out attending to civilization and … [his] own appreciation of life" (172). Certainly this is an apt description of my mother's circumstances.

But that was in the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, in 2008, my mother was aware that her story is more likely to find a sympathetic ear: she tells her story to a daughter who understands the desire to develop one's intellectual interests and who staunchly defends feminist concerns for equal opportunity for women and men. And as the interviews continue, I begin to understand not only why, but also how, we construct our stories. I recognize that my mother is reconstructing her life with a specific agenda in mind. As I identify the various gaps, deferrals and emphases in her story, I understand what Jerome Bruner means when he says that we typically "frame experience" (or construct a world that makes sense to us), and then that "framing pursues experience into memory" (56). Because my mother speaks of events that occurred long ago, her reconstruction of an experience "is already a… translation… the basis of which can never be recovered" (Spigelman, *Personally Speaking* 63), and because one's memory and imagination are so intimately complementary, my mother's story is free to take on a particular tone. Indeed, it is intended to convey a specific message: caught within a patriarchal situation both at home and within her community, my mother remained frustratingly stuck, with few intellectual outlets.

And if the opportunity to tell her story results in complexities and contradictions, so much the better. As I looked at the ways in which her life was thwarted because of patriarchal practices within society and, more specifically, within the church, I became aware of conspicuous discrepancies in my mother's narrative. While the interview process provides much of the material for my project, my mother reminds me that, despite her frustration with the lack of intellectual opportunity, she did in fact have some of her written work published during the very time in her life that was mostly spent performing domestic chores. The writings she refers to are a collection of articles written for the *Gospel Tidings*, a bi-national church magazine that was published monthly by the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren conference. In these articles, written in the 1970s, my mother connects what happens in the everyday to the bigger picture of life. What I have at my disposal then is not only the information she gives me during the taped interview sessions, but also a comparison between that 2008 oral narration and a written narrative, her monthly anecdotal column within a religious publication. This comparison becomes a fascinating study of what Spigelman calls "competing narratives" within a single life. For indeed, my mother's story shifts from one interpretive construction to another even within her oral narration, and combines ways of seeing that seem at odds with one another. But these narrative shifts become even more conspicuous when the larger narratives are juxtaposed to one another, when the story she tells me orally fails to jibe with her published work of the same time period.

Spigelman tells us that "competing narratives overlap and complicate each other" (*Personally Speaking* 79), and that these narratives ultimately bolster the reader's confidence as she recognizes the "multiple truths that might be gleaned" from the telling (79). Not only are there myriad ways of responding to a seemingly contradictory text, but the complexity of a life story mirrors the messiness of life as it is actually lived. I suggest then that competing narratives within a life story are not only inevitable, but also provide a narration that is more credible to the reader precisely because of the complexity, the contradictions that are offered. The following brief analysis of my mother's writing presents several examples of just such contradiction.

Although my mother wanted to be a housewife and mother and was wary of second-wave feminism with its seeming advocation of career over family, she was nonetheless an independent thinker with a mind that would not easily be turned off. While my father was a very busy man outside the home, working a full-time job and often taking on additional church leadership roles, my mother's duties were solely domestic. Indeed, although she loved to bake brown bread and cook well-balanced meals for her family, she was frustrated that the gender division of her community meant that "all I was expected to do was to keep the kids quiet and the food coming" (Kae Loewen, Personal Interview). My mother tells me that although my father, Bert Loewen, was initially drawn to her independence and to her love of learning – as a single woman, my mother taught school for two years and later became the first woman to graduate from the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, with a Bachelor of Theology degree in 1949 – "those things became liabilities after we were married." And so my mother was eventually encouraged by her husband, by society and by her church to "live vicariously through her kids" (Kae Loewen, Personal Interview). Indeed, the degree to which women were expected, cheerfully, to subsume themselves within the lives of their husbands and children is difficult for us to conceive of today. In one of the interview sessions, my mother relates a particular revealing incident. She was a visitor at a Christian ladies' meeting and when the chairperson found out who my mother's husband was, she ran up to my mother excitedly and asked: "Would you be willing to tell us about your husband's work?"

This vignette is indicative of both the wider (patriarchal) world in which North American, suburban women found themselves, and the particular, religious, social situation in which my mother lived. In fact, an examination of her specifically Mennonite context helps to illuminate one of the many competing narratives that insistently embed themselves into her life story. My parents were very involved with the local Mennonite church and its influence had a huge impact

on my mother's life. Both Gloria Neufeld Redekop's assertion that "the dominant trend in the 1950s and 1960s was for Mennonite women to accept their [submissive] role in the church, home, and women's society" (77) and Royden Loewen's suggestion that "town life seems to have brought with it a new emphasis on female subservience and expectations of a new 'lady-like' etiquette" (234) describe the gendered situation experienced by my mother, and help to explain why a woman with intellectual interests would balk at many of the religious, societal expectations within her community.

Much of my father's busy-ness was due to his church obligations, which included his job as the interim pastor for the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in the 1960s and 1970s. Although this particular church conference preached love, forgiveness and pacifism, and its members were well integrated into mainstream society, like many other institutions in North America in the 1960s its teachings and practices were based on sexist principles that allowed only men to hold the more public, and the policy-making, positions. Because of that, although *both* my parents had earned theology degrees, it was my father who had access to the pulpit, while my mother was allotted a teaching spot in the women-only Sunday School classroom.

Consequently, as the interview process continues, I suggest that perhaps the church had something to do with how frustrated and "caught" she felt. Instead of concurring, however, my mother vigourously remonstrates: "Oh no, I would never blame the church [for my disillusionment]!" However, several of her published writings of the same time period tell a different story. Certainly, in some of her articles, my mother implies that she is relatively happy and that her concern is for the wider world; however, there are others in which her unhappiness simmers fairly close to the surface. (Indeed, just as my mother shifted in her interpretive constructions of her story within her oral telling, her written work demonstrates even greater contradictions.) As the wife of a busy man, my mother was often frustrated with how much time my father spent away from his family. She was not allowed to speak out, directly, against anything deemed to be "the Lord's work," however; this would be tantamount to blasphemy. Indeed, my mother recalls that there were "very few resources [for women] especially if your man did what was called 'working for the Lord'… because anything he did, well, he was working for the Lord… You were expected to put up with [the] long hours" (Kae Loewen, Personal Interview).

Nonetheless, my mother's column gave her an outlet to vent her feelings of confinement, if only through carefully worded observations. For example, in March, 1974, in an article entitled "On Being Relevant," my mother skillfully situates herself in the world of the middle-class women for whom she was writing. She describes a typical,

vibrant home of the 1970s, infuses it with emotional vulnerability, and hints ever so cautiously of inequality within marriage:

> When our youngest child was ten days old, a cousin came to visit. It was a bad time to come. I was trying to manage 6 kids and a house alone. In a week's time a mother's helper would be available. In the meantime a gentle layer of dust had settled on everything. And sad to say, it did not look like a fine patina on antiques. It simply looked like dust! The older children were either loud and demanding at home, or at school. My husband was ever so busy. Instead of feeling elated and exhilarated, I was weak, frustrated and mostly near the point of tears. (4)

Here, although she sounds like one of Friedan's women as she talks about the busy husband and depicts herself as a wife who harbours no ill feelings towards him, perhaps implicitly making acquiescence sound noble rather than frustrating, she also opens the door to the possibility that domestic duties were not completely fulfilling and that husbands who were gone a lot were an obstacle to that fulfillment.

In February 1971 she submitted an article entitled "Gifts, Anyone?" in which she writes: "sometime ago my husband made a business call to the city, and my little girl and I went along. It was a bitterly cold day, and he was a long time coming back" (2). Here she covertly questions the assumption that her husband's work is so important that she shouldn't mind waiting for him. And in the October 1977 article, "Concerning Some Men in My Life," she writes about traveling ministers who had left their families to provide for a week of special church services, and who needed a place to stay. As it often fell to my parents to play the hosts, it was my mother's gendered duty both to feed and to free up a bedroom for these preachers. In the process she became personally acquainted with them. In this article she not only describes these visitors, but also takes the opportunity to stage a talk about loneliness and to hint at her own.

She remembers the widower "Rev. A.P. Toews … [who] was lonely," and adds: "It's hard to be lonely" (4). Later on she recounts her experience with "Mr. Wiebe" with whom she had coffee in her kitchen every morning for a week, after my father had left for work, but before Mr. Wiebe turned to prepare his evening sermon. Now she directs her attention not to any loneliness he may have encountered, but to that of his wife back home. It was "just the two of us" having coffee and "I'd feel sorry for his wife, wondering if she was lonely, as I [woul]d be in her place" (4). Couched within the sanctioned discourse of the church – sanctioned because it is a story about a visiting minister, a "man of God" – my mother writes about the loneliness of wives, and

implies that this loneliness is due to the gendered practices of society, and of her church in particular.

Within this collection of articles, her most powerful example of subversion is proffered in January, 1974. Because this particular column deals, rather overtly, with the church's patriarchal practices that result in men spending time away from their families (and thus tacitly implicates the church), she chooses to write in the third person. Until now, all of her articles have been written in the first person and addressed specifically to "the ladies," and speak of topics relevant for women. This one, however, is addressed to "the men only" and contains the subtitle, "how NOT to live your faith." In this column, she assertively dares to enter the man's world. She transgresses the sacred space of/for women, the domestic home, first by entering the public realm of published writing, and then by addressing her column to men. It is therefore highly ironic that this article deals with her unhappiness at the hands of a man who is busy in "the name of the Lord" and who neglects his family in the process. She is both victim and rebel as she contemporaneously crosses gender lines and questions the church's sacrosanct notion of ecclesiastical leadership.

In this article she writes about two fictional characters, Agnes and Annalise, both wives and mothers to small children. Agnes was "not a Christian," and her husband was a blue-collar worker who spent time at home with his family and "drank lots of beer, cheerfully and loudly" (7). Annalise, on the other hand, was "a Christian" whose husband Bill was "a deacon in the church… [who] led congregational singing… [and] felt very much appreciated in his church" (7). The Wednesday before the Easter weekend:

> Bill came home, greeted the family happily, and said it was all arranged – the [church] quartet was going to leave Thursday noon, and go on tour until Monday nite [sic]. The boss had been most gracious and given time off. On Easter morning, Annalise took her three little girls to church as usual. When she came home, Agnes called out cheerfully from her back yard: 'Hi Annalise, isn't it a gorgeous day?' Annalise looked around, she really hadn't noticed. Agnes' husband was rough-housing with the kids and drinking his beer as usual – his hair was tousled, he wore washed-out shorts, had a lovely tan, an infectious laugh. He looked real good. 'Where's your man this morning? Oh yah, I remember, this is his weekend for touring, isn't it?' Then glancing around at her husband and kids, she lowered her voice and continued: 'Gosh, I'm glad my husband hasn't got religion!' Annalise slowly took the youngest girl's hand and went into the house. She was crying." ("For Men Only")

Recalling the stories my mother told me during the interview process, it is not difficult to see where this narrative comes from. Never mind that my mother's name was not Annalise, never mind that she had both boys and girls, never mind that my father more likely visited various churches to preach rather than to sing – the story is my mother's.

These articles, then, contradict the message my mother gave me during the interviews. First, they are proof that, contrary to the overarching message I received from her oral telling, my mother did have an intellectual outlet at the height of her frustration with domesticity; this public forum suggests that she was strategically creating a voice for herself in the very decades that she found so stultifying. Second, while she is adamant that the church is in no way responsible for her frustration, these writings clearly, if subversively, call several of the church's foundational practices and assumptions into question. By acknowledging her frustration, her loneliness and her unhappiness, she indirectly interrogates the church's patriarchal underpinnings that provoke such responses. Certainly the last example describes a poignant instance of how the church refuses to acknowledge the physical and psychological toll the pastor's role exacted on his family. Her highly subversive suggestion that the non-churched neighbours with their beer-drinking habits and "tousled hair" have "gotten it right" would have been far too damning in the first person. And so, using the third person, my mother covertly challenges and undermines the patriarchal status quo that was sanctioned by the church, and that affected her life so very deeply and personally.

The above examples thus serve to demonstrate how my mother's oral and written narratives contradict one another, and how they represent the conflicted nature of her desires as she struggled at once to belong to and resist the middle-class, as she simultaneously defended the spiritual richness found in church and railed against its male privilege. I see that her need to remain an upstanding member of her church even as she resisted many of its presuppositions was difficult for her, and that she was likely unaware of the contradictions she lived. However, the inconsistencies in these competing narratives do not serve to detract from the persuasiveness of her account. In fact, they serve to underscore it, because we see "the narrator… [as] a human being, with biases and conflicts" (Spigelman, *Personally Speaking* 79). Her audience is sympathetic because we recognize, in her story, the very inconsistencies we experience in our own lives.

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Because it is inevitable that our personal worlds collide with our professional worlds, then, a fusion of the two makes sense. The critical discourse built up around the genre of personal narrative offers an

explanation as to how and why we tell stories, and how and why my mother tells her story. As she reconstructs her life, she reconstructs herself. As Bronwyn Williams says, "any teller of a story shapes that story" (297). So as Spigelman, Kamboureli, Hindman, Bruner, and Williams help to deconstruct and explain the workings of storytelling, I recognize in my mother's narrative the desire to be understood, and to set the record straight.

Clearly my mother's story is rife with contradiction: she wanted to be free of domestic duties and yet she boasted about her tasty homemade soup; she railed against the status quo that middle-class suburbia brought with it, yet she loved to receive bouquets of flowers from her husband; she remained steadfastly loyal to the church even as its patriarchal underpinnings played a large role in her unhappiness as it condoned and even supported my father's time away from his family.

Many inconsistencies emerged within my mother's oral narration. But contradictions were even more pronounced when her oral story was thrown up against the record of her written work, as the examples presented demonstrate. These seeming contradictions found within a single life, taken from different methods of telling, serve to push further the notion of competing narratives suggested by scholars Spigelman and Summerfield; as story stubbornly refuses to accept easy resolution, the dialogue is guaranteed to continue, both within and without the academy.

Critics who espouse the use of the personal within academic walls do so in order to facilitate community, to generate hope for professors and students alike as their private and public worlds converge. Composition specialist Richard Miller's question, "What is 'really useful knowledge'?" (42), arises out of a deeply personal situation: his father has tried, twice, to commit suicide, and Miller is convinced that his father "will… need to tell the stories he has never told in order to escape the terrible power they have over him" if he is to recover (49). Because of this conviction, Miller is committed to teaching his students how to write stories, to allow them to synthesize what happens to them outside the world of academe with what happens to them inside the university.

If we consider the telling of stories a legitimate undertaking, if we allow competing narratives to smudge the pages of more traditional academic writing, if we value the creation of community over the thrill of competition, as many scholars are seemingly willing to do, the individual academic's "weariness" spoken of by Kamboureli will slowly be replaced by the hope spoken of by Miller. At age eighty-four, the telling of her story generated hope within my mother; it has engendered a kind of self-understanding within me, and it has produced sympathetic awareness within others who hear it.

While the thrust of this paper has been the compelling nature of competing narratives inherent within life writing, allow me to make one further observation in the context of Smaro Kamboureli and Shirley Neuman's *Amazing Space*, a collection of essays, many of which are written by women like my mother. The editors observe that "women who do not call themselves radical feminists" become "events in the unwinding spiral of women's writing in Canada," and that "out of the margin… [these women writers] have made many centers" (xi, x). I suggest that while my mother's writings published in a "marginal" journal should indeed be considered one of these "events," it is the agency she found in the 2008 telling that most effectively represents the "recuperation of a female tradition" that was side-lined for too many years. By engaging in her own un-reading and re-reading, my mother has participated in what Miller calls "the ongoing process of entertaining alternatives," one intended to "construct… a more humane and hospitable life-world" (50). Indeed, during the interview process and as the words began to appear on the page, my mother and I created for her an "Ellesmere" as we gave her a second chance at life.

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