

Book Reviews

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Pearlman, S.F. (2012). Mother Talk: Conversations with Mothers of Lesbian Daughters and FTM Transgender Children. Press Demeter: Bradford, ON

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Sarah Pearlman's book "Mother Talk" is a compilation of stories from twenty-four mothers, twelve of whom have lesbian daughters, and twelve who had a biologically female daughter that was planning to transition to male. Pearlman began to interview mothers of lesbian daughters in 1990. Most of these mothers learned about their daughters' sexual orientation in the 1980's, a time when lesbianism was seen as an abnormality. Ten years later in 2000-2001, her curiosity spurred her to continue her interviewing process, in hopes to discover if mothers were reacting differently to the coming out of their child, with lesbians and gays being much more visible and accepted in society. It was during this time that Pearlman discovered a whole new group of mothers. This group had transgendered daughters who were born biologically female, but were planning to transition to male. "Mother Talk" is divided into sections entitled, *Devastation, Not the Only Issue, Adolescence, Keeping the Connection, and Activism*. These different sections capture the major themes that arise from the stories of these mothers, and captures the complexity of coming to terms with the fact that they have a lesbian or transgendered daughter.

Although their experiences are similar, there is a definite distinction between mothers of lesbian daughters and mothers of daughters who identify as transgender. Both groups "have numerous fears and concerns, most often focused on the potential for violence and threat to physical safety" (p. 1). However, while mothers of lesbian daughters may have a difficult time

with changed expectations, they still have a daughter. This is in contrast to mothers of female-to-male (FTM) transgender children, who have more of a life changing experience and “a more complex and difficult course of adjustment compounded by greater shame, as well as the actual loss of a daughter” (p. 2). One of the mothers, Debra, who has a transgendered daughter expressed that the difference between lesbians and FTM transgendered individuals is that “one is gender, and the other is sexual orientation. Totally different things, but they have so much in common” (p. 99). Aside from these differences, mothers of lesbian daughters, as well as mothers of female-to-male children have many similarities. Many common themes arose through the experiences of these mothers. “The thread linking all of the stories was motherhood and the complex relationship between mothers and daughters, how they had wanted to mother, and their experience of being mothered by their own mothers” (p. 12).

As previously stated, an initial and persistent concern for every mother was potential physical violence and threat to safety of their daughters. The worry of being discriminated against because of sexual orientation or appearance was a major concern for these mothers. One of the mothers, Mariam, who has a lesbian daughter, stated “I’m afraid for her. I think she’ll be lonely. Discriminated against. On the fringe. I’m afraid she’ll be attacked. I’m afraid of people pointing fingers at her” (p. 68). Hannah, a mother of a lesbian daughter voiced her concern by saying “What if something bad happens to her? I didn’t want people looking at her, judging her. Pointing her out. Making fun of her. Calling her names. How can she be happy?” (p. 21). Another mother, Debra, who was the mother of a FTM daughter, stated that her fear for her daughter was that “people wouldn’t understand and would ostracize her. That she’d be a social outcast because she was different” (p. 92). Debra also expressed her fear of hate crimes and physical violence against her daughter who was transitioning to a male. Debra was not alone

with these fears. Almost every mother interviewed mentioned some level of concern for safety, whether it be physical or emotional.

While many mothers did express fears regarding their daughters safety and well-being, most “related that their own feelings, at least initially, took precedence” (p. 5). These mothers had feelings of sorrow and loss, as well as, shame about what others would think about them as mothers if they found out. The embarrassment and shame of what others were thinking was a big obstacle for many of the mothers. Hannah, a mother of a lesbian daughter stated “You want to know the worst part? I’ll tell you. What if people find out? What will they think of me? I feel so ashamed” (p. 21). Another mother, Edie, felt so ashamed of her daughter coming out as a lesbian that she wished her daughter “not be alive rather than be gay” (p. 25). She acknowledged that those feelings were selfish, but the emotions and feelings of these mothers were so intense that they could not help but feel this way. Many “grieved the bridal showers, and wedding celebrations that would not happen and - unless they anticipated grandchildren from other child - mourned that they would not be grandmothers” (p. 5). One of the mothers interviewed, Mariam, whose daughter is a lesbian, stated “I can’t seem to make peace with it. All those weddings. All those showers. Me being a grandmother. I feel ripped off. I feel rejected” (p. 68). The disclosure of sexual orientation to these mothers also brought about disturbing sexual imagery. Hannah mentioned in her interview that “for a while all I thought about was the sex part. Two women! I couldn’t get my mind off of it. I tried not to think about it. I didn’t like what came into my mind. I really had to block it out” (p. 21). Some of the mothers had such disturbing sexual imagery that they completely lost all interest in sex. Mariam stated, “I don’t want to sleep with my husband anymore. I mean have sex with him... when he tries I think of my daughter. I think of women

having sex together. I can't help it" (p. 68). Feelings of shame, sorrow, and loss were very prevalent in the lives of the women interviewed.

The feeling of guilt or responsibility was another recurring theme found in the interviews of these mothers. Almost "all mothers attempted to identify causes or explanations for their daughter's lesbianism" (p. 6). Many questioned their own mothering, and were concerned that they had done something wrong when raising their daughter. One of the mothers, Hannah, thought that her husband was to blame for her daughter's lesbianism. She stated that "he wasn't an easy man" and that could of possibly turned her daughter off of men all together. Another mother, Mariam stated that "My husband blames me. Says I was too lenient letting her do whatever she wanted" (p. 67). Jenny, a mother of a FTM transgendered daughter stated "I wonder if it was something I did when I was pregnant. Did I take a medication that caused his brain to be male and his body to be female?" (p. 76). Lila, whose daughter was a lesbian, stated "I didn't blame myself that she was a lesbian, although I did wonder if it had anything to do with getting love from another women that she hadn't got from me" (p. 120). While identifying the causes of lesbianism and transgenderism was a central theme throughout the stories, "mothers of lesbians tended to focus on family relationships as the cause of same-sex attraction, while most mothers of FTMs came to believe that genetics, specifically the amount of androgen secreted during early pregnancy – commonly referred to as the 'androgen wash' – affected brain development and explained transgenderism" (p. 11).

A commonality between the mothers was that they reached out to PFLAG for information and support. Many mothers found the answers they were looking for at PFLAG, as well as a sense of belonging and being able to relate to other mothers that were going through similar situations. One of the mothers Mariam stated "one good thing about going to PLAG was

that a couple of times some of the women talked about this. Losing interest in sex. You know, I'm not the only one. Before I heard other mothers talk about it, I thought I was just going crazy" (p. 68). Many of the mothers joined PLAG within in a year and a half of disclosure, and many became involved in reaching out to other parents of lesbian and gays within their community.

Pearlman's hope with writing "Mother Talk" is that it will

bring about a deeper appreciation of the challenge to comprehend and accept a child who will live a life outside of social norms- and the complexity of coming to terms with the loss of a daughter who has changed sex, or the loss of anticipated relationship with a daughter, now a lesbian, who has different interests and will lead a different life. (p. 14)

Pearlman also hopes that this book will make a significant contribution to the fields of "lesbian, gay, transgendered, motherhood, family, and gender studies" (p. 14). However, there are limitations in the book. First of all, "Mother Talk" is a "collection of stories of mothers who were willing to share highly personal information about themselves and their children" (p. 3). This suggests that the mothers who were interviewed were the mothers that had come to terms with their daughters coming out, and were comfortable enough to talk openly about it. This excludes the mothers that are currently ashamed of their daughter, or who have ultimately rejected them and no longer stay in contact. Another limitation is that the mothers interviewed are mostly of the same demographic group, being middle-aged, white, heterosexual, and North American. Only one of the mother was an African-Caribbean women, since Pearlman had difficulty finding "other ethnic-racial minority women interested in being interviewed" (p. 3). The last limitation I identified was that of universality. Pearlman agrees that "although many mothers will find themselves in "Mother Talk", the themes and concerns described cannot be applicable to a wider population of mothers of lesbian daughters or FTM transgender children" (p. 13). However, although these interview took place in 1990, and in 2000-2001, these mothers'

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stories continue to have relevance to mothers today. I believe “Mother Talk” would be of interest, as well as extremely informative, for parents, mothers, and relatives of lesbian and FTM transgendered individuals.