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Love Them and Leave Them:

Paradox, Conflict, and Ambivalence among Incarcerated Mothers

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I was in a prison within myself. The drugs controlled my life. If I'd been thinking about my daughter, I wouldn't be here today. But I didn't think that then. Then I didn't think I was doing anything wrong. It was fine. I was young and could care less. That was my attitude. That's the thing, if we were really thinking about our children, we wouldn't be here, right? but you couldn't have told me then. I loved her. I did. But that's not what controlled me.

These are the words of a mother serving a long prison sentence at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York State's maximum-security prison for women. Her daughter, a youngster starting elementary school when she came to prison, was a teenager in the throes of adolescence when her mother spoke to me, a fellow prisoner and mother, during one of several long "talks." These "talks" between myself and fellow incarcerated mothers were part of my research on the experience of long-termer mothers in prison* for my Master's degree program in psychology.

Gloria (names and other identifying details have been changed to preserve confidentiality), like many mothers in prison, spends long hours trying to make sense of a central paradox of her life: How could she, who loved her child—"more than loved; I was in love"—leave her by coming to prison?

That question, sharp and intensely personal, is echoed thousands of times over. The number of women in local, state, and federal jails and prisons tripled over the decade from 1980 to 1990 to 90,000 (American Correctional Association, 1992), fueled primarily by changes in sentencing laws for drug-related charges (Owen &

*Under current New York State law, people are sentenced to an indeterminant sentence in which they must serve the full minimum before they are eligible to be considered for parole. They can be held up until their full maximum sentence. For the purposes of my research, I considered a long-termer to be anyone with a sentence of 8 and $^1/_2$ to 25 years or more. Of the original women I interviewed, all were serving sentences of at least 15 years to life, except for one who had a sentence of 10 to 20 years.)

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Bloom, 1995). Seventy to 80 percent of incarcerated women are mothers, the majority of whom were the primary caregivers of their children at the time of arrest. In addition, approximately six percent of women are pregnant when arrested and will give birth to babies while incarcerated. In 1982, there were an estimated 21,000 children whose mothers were incarcerated. By 1993, that number had increased to approximately 150,000 (Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, 1993). Children are the unseen victims of a mother's incarceration.

Most research on women in prison involves statistical surveys or single-session interviews of random samples of women prisoners. They reveal a consistent sociological portrait of women in prison nationwide. Incarcerated women are disproportionately African-American, Caribbean, or Latina. The majority are poor and undereducated. In 1993, Bloom and Steinhart found that 55 percent of incarcerated women had less than a high school education. Sixty-five percent were unemployed at the time of their arrest; the vast majority of those who worked received minimal wages. Over 63 percent reported an annual income under $10,000. Almost two-thirds reported using drugs or alcohol regularly. The majority reported histories of physical and sexual abuse as children or adults.

Quantitative descriptive studies point to the social problems that contribute to women's incarceration, but they do not reveal the faces or voices of the women who lie behind the statistics. Some view these women as criminals and perpetrators; others see them as hapless victims of circumstances beyond their control. Similarly, traditional psychological perspectives on women in prison tend to objectify and pathologize prisoners as products of impoverished, deprived backgrounds and dysfunctional families who are in need of "correcting" (Carlen, 1985; Sullivan, 1990). Both perspectives deny these women their agency. Ironically, this view is often mirrored in the consciousness of the incarcerated woman herself.

As an incarcerated mother, graduate student, and researcher, I wanted to understand my experience on my own terms. This desire led me to seek out the voices of other mothers in prison. The mothers I spoke with were well aware of the impact of socio-economic factors on their lives. Yet they resisted solely sociological explanations, which denuded them of the complexity of their personalities and their own sense of responsibility for their life choices. In talking about their experiences as mothers prior to incarceration, they often expressed a sense of confusion over seemingly contradictory feelings of deep attachment to their children and investment in their mothering roles on the one hand, and ambivalence and conflict over their ability and willingness to be the mothers that their children needed.

The ethnographic case study approach enabled me to explore the interplay of sociological and psychological factors that brought out a deeper level of complexity in the portrait of particular mothers in prison, their relationships with their children during their imprisonment, and their recollections of what those relationships were like before incarceration. That complex picture reveals issues that are particularly relevant for those working in the field of early childhood intervention and education.

How I came to this study and what I bring to it

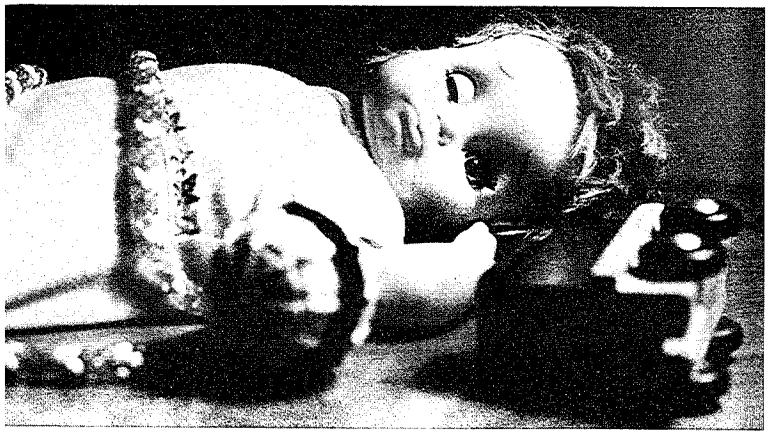
This article grows out of research I conducted for my Master's thesis in psychology, completed in 1993 during my eleventh year of incarceration (Clark, 1993). I am an incarcerated mother serving a life sentence. I have been in prison for 14 years; my daughter is 15 years old. Our separation has been a source of sorrow and guilt—by far the greatest pain of my imprisonment. And yet our relationship is also the source of my greatest sense of future—a motivation for change. We have worked hard to build an active, meaningful relationship, supported by family and friends. And yet there are days when I sink into a sense of loss and inadequacy. A story:

My daughter is visiting me. One of her pleasures when she comes to see me is being able to eat junk food and candy from the machines in the visiting room. But on her third trip to the machines, I put my foot down and say, "That's enough." She balks, teasingly testing my limits. "Mommy, when I have my own child, I'm going to remember this and I'm going to let her eat all the candy she wants! Children should keep lists of all the terrible things their parents do so we don't forget when we have our children. Yes, I'm keeping my list!" I laugh, loving her playful stubbornness and this almost normal, oh-so-typical mother-daughter tug of war. "Oh, well, what else will you put on your list?" I ask. She looks me straight in the eye and says, "Well, for starters, I won't go to prison!" OUCH! Two thoughts flash simultaneously through my mind: "I have failed her as a mother" and "I must be doing something right."

I undertook a study of mothers in prison out of my struggle to build a relationship with my child, to better understand myself and my peers and the needs of our children. Beyond my personal needs, I wanted to reach out, to render comprehensible to others, the rich, complicated, often ambivalent relationships between mothers in prison and our children. I hoped to illuminate both our unique realities as incarcerated mothers and the issues and dilemmas we share with other mothers and parents outside these walls.

My only way out was in

I spent most of my adult life active in social and political movements. My tools for understanding the world and myself were primarily structural and political. But I reached a point when these tools were no longer adequate to help me understand my crimes or to face my problems as a mother in prison. I found myself at the age of 35 locked in a small, isolated prison cell, my choices limited, quite literally, by four walls. My only



Marilyn Nolt

way out was to go inward. I discovered, as others have, that I had been imprisoned within myself long before I entered prison and that "getting out" had to start with unlocking some of those inner doors. Thus began my interest in psychology and psychoanalytic theory.

As my interest in psychology deepened, I found that examining the prison environment and myself and others within it provided me with new insights and a powerful psychological edge with which to sustain my individuality and perspective in the face of the degradation of prison life. My approach to living and working in prison draws on a long tradition of survivors of concentration camps and other prisons.

To observe and try to make sense out of what I saw was a way of convincing myself that my own life was still of some value, that I had not yet lost all the interests that had once given me self-respect . . . (This) helped me to endure life in the camps . . . (Bettelheim, 1960, p. 111).

I have kept a journal for most of my years in prison. Drawing on my initial readings on qualitative research (Whyte, 1984; Lofland & Lofland, 1971), I became more disciplined and self-conscious in my journal keeping, focusing on observations of daily life and culture and on conversations that related to parenting issues.

When I began my work, I operated somewhat intuitively, following my natural inclination toward observing—listening to and observing and talking with the people around me—in order to gain insight into my subject. Reading *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986), I became more aware of issues and debates over alternative research approaches and the values implicit in my methods:

We adopted an intensive interview/case study approach because we wanted to hear what the women had to say in their own terms rather than test our own preconceived hypotheses, particularly since we included a number of disadvantaged and forgotten women whose ways of knowing and learning, identity transformations, and moral outlook have seldom been examined by academic researchers. We proceeded inductively, opening our ears to the voices and perspectives of women so that we might begin to hear the unheard and unimagined (Belenky, et al., 1986, 11).

In order to "hear the unheard and unimagined," I turned to six women I knew well and with whom I had shared many years in Bedford. All were long-termer mothers who had been at Bedford for at least six years. While they were women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds—African-American, Puerto Rican, and white women—they were not a representative sample of this prison's population. They were in many ways the survivors: women who have achieved significant accomplishments in prison—earning high school equivalency and college degrees, working in jobs and programs serving the prison population, and committed to personal change. As mothers, they had sustained meaningful relationships with their children. They were articulate, opinionated women, who read and thought about themselves and the world.

Most of these women mentioned two reasons for participating in these discussions. They identified with my struggle to overcome obstacles to pursue my Master's degree and wanted to help me. And they saw this project as an opportunity to reflect on and share their thoughts and feelings about their children. As one woman said, "These re the things I've been carrying around in me for a long time—that I needed to say—and this gave me the chance to do that."

I spent from 6 to 12 hours with each woman over three to six sessions. While essentially these were semi-structured interviews, I chose to describe them as "our long talks." We are not allowed tape recorders, so I took notes as we talked and afterward wrote from my notes and memory, taking care to capture each woman's unique voice. I tried to listen to the nuances of the women's voices, to draw out common concerns and perspectives raised by the mothers, which I then examined in light of psychodynamic theory and case study methods. Throughout my work, I self-consciously drew on my own experiences, feelings, and insights as an incarcerated mother, while also being conscious of issues of diversity and differences between myself and many of the other women in my study.

"Talk about what it was really like"

My discussions with these women not only provided a treasure trove of anecdotal data, but broadened the focus of my research. For example, my initial focus was on the mothers' experience of separation and their relationships with their children over the years of their imprisonment. But in our talks, the women kept bringing us back to their lives before prison, often giving strikingly different pictures—at times portraying a sense of intimacy and normalcy in their relationships with their children and at other times highlighting the chaos, stress, and senses of powerlessness. I grew to appreciate the mothers' need to come to terms with their pre-prison relationships with their children in order to more fully engage with their children in the present.

Several of the women remarked on the tendency of

women inside to idealize their family relationships before prison:

If you had asked me back then, when I was first here, I'd have said, "Yes, I miss my child." But let me say this. We don't come to jail because we've been taking care of our children. But that's how people talk. I guess it's to save face, to justify ourselves. But the truth is harder. Don't get me wrong. I loved my child. But sometimes love isn't enough.

. . . It's crazy, right? That way we can love someone, yet turn away from them, without even knowing we're doing that . . . So Judy, you have to talk about what it was really like, not just what we want to remember it being like.

This article addresses that urgent command by looking at the pre-incarceration period and the mothers' feelings of ambivalence and conflict over loving and caring about their babies, yet feeling driven by other forces in their lives that were in contradiction to their mothering roles and responsibilities.

New mothers, new conflicts

Some of the women describe consciously choosing to have a child; some describe how their pregnancies precipitated crises or exacerbated existing conflicts and problems with their families or partners. Sometimes, their ambivalence focused on the demands of caring for young babies and their willingness or adequacy to mother.

Gloria:

I got pregnant when I was 16. I felt hysteria. My father threw me out of the house, and my mother, an old-fashioned Puerto Rican woman who believes that the man runs the house, wouldn't challenge him. I slept in abandoned buildings. I shot drugs. I was desperate. I told my mother I was going to use a hanger on myself. I thought about an abortion, but I really said that to get her to help me. During the day when my father wasn't there, I'd go home to eat. When I got bigger, my father allowed me to sleep there . . .

But it was all worth it when my daughter was born. It was the most beautiful feeling. When I had her, I'd been playing outside, so my feet were dirty and they stayed that way while I had her. I was like a kid. When she was born, it was incredible. I was in love. I counted her fingers and toes. I was upset she wouldn't play. I didn't know. She was a little thing, five pounds, 15 ounces. After I had her, I got off drugs. She was the flower of my life. She became everything to me instantly .

There was cooperation between me and mom, but then I didn't see it. I felt jealousy coming from her, saying that my daughter was hers . . . But then, too, I felt dependent on her. The feeling of it was that the two of us—my daughter and me—were the kids and Mom was mom. I had my own place upstairs from her. But I never cooked or anything. Mom cooked everything and I ate there. I didn't take any responsibility. I took it for granted. That's normal: she's Mommy.

Ann:

I was around 30 when I made an unambivalent decision to have a baby. Even so, I was not prepared for the kind of interaction of those early months. I guess I expected a toddler-type interaction, not infantile. So I had this sense of having to give and give and give, of adjusting to what a baby was like. He wouldn't ever be put down. He would cry and cry until I picked him up and then he'd be fine and happy. He just needed to be held all the time. Then later, when he started to sit and crawl, he needed to always have me there with him. So that was rough for me. It was hard not to do anything but hold him. When he started with a baby sitter at about four months, it was a relief. But don't misunderstand. He was a happy, active, expressive baby, and I enjoyed him. I breast fed him, and I loved that. I loved the intimacy of that. So I felt both things. I felt I was a slave to this eentsy beentsy thing, but I loved who I was a slave to.

Tony:

I decided to get pregnant when I was fourteen. I know that sounds strange. How can you hold anyone that young responsible? But I really decided. And then I didn't tell anyone for six months. I barely showed, and I still played football and baseball. Finally, my godmother, who lived downstairs, kept saying to my mother that I looked pregnant, and she took me to get tested. The doctor told us I was 7 months. My mother was shocked, and I tried to act surprised too. But she dealt with it; she was great about it and with me.

Right zfter he was born, I was sorry. I suffered post partum depression. I was always crying. My mother really played an important role then. Then when he was five weeks old, he was hospitalized with a stomach condition—a syndrome that affects black male children of young mothers. He spent 8 days in the hospital; we stayed with him around the clock. That's what snapped me out of my post partum. . . . But there were times, after that, when I'd say to myself, "So what am I going to do now?" I'd drink beer and smoke reefer. Drive around. We'd have crab parties on the block, but now I couldn't do as much as before, and I felt it. But afterward, I just got into him and spent all my time with him. When he was six or seven months, I started working to help my mother out, and we'd take turns with the baby.

Danielle:

My daughter was premature and underweight when she was born and had to stay in the hospital for a month. I couldn't breast feed because of that. We would come see her every day. I don't know why she was premature. I wasn't doing drugs. Maybe just the stress. I mean, I didn't want to be there. Her father was much older and had put me to work on the streets. And I had tried to get out of that life and couldn't, so I was pretty stressed out.

Kiesha:

My life seemed stable and enduring when I had my son. I come from a large, functioning extended family, and he and I were part of that. I took care of him. but was I a parent? I was his mother, like I had a mother. I took care of his essential needs, but I didn't give him the nurturing a parent gives a child. I don't think I can blame myself. I didn't have it to give. No one ever taught me or gave me that. In my family, it was always about money and control. Without money, there was no attachment. . . . I wanted to be different, but sometimes, I'd see and hear my mother in me with him.

"I loved my child, but that's not what drove me"

To an extent, the ambivalences the women describe are common to many new mothers. But other aspects of their lives intensified the conflicts and made it more difficult to resolve them in the interests of their children. For however much they loved them, they were driven, not by their children's needs, but by drugs, relationships, "the streets," and other illegal or risky activities. Some describe feeling anxious and guilty. Often, they

frantically juggled the conflicting aspects of their lives, unable to acknowledge the contradictions between them, shifting between clinging to their children and turning away from them. Several describe times when the juggling act failed and they felt as if they were "cracking up":

Tony:

I was getting high. I was doing all sorts of drugs. It was only fear of needles that stopped me from doing heroin, good thing. My drug taking and running around hindered a lot of things in terms of my son: spending time with him and going places with him, because I would be so tired from getting high for days, and my temper was worsened by the drugs. . . . But back then, I had a carefree attitude. I didn't have a drug problem. I had money; I was working on and off, driving around in his father's Cadillac. But I also felt very tied to my son, like I couldn't let him go. Like when he was three, I put him in Head Start. But I got hives when he was away from me. I decided I could teach him as well as the school, so I took him out.

Ann:

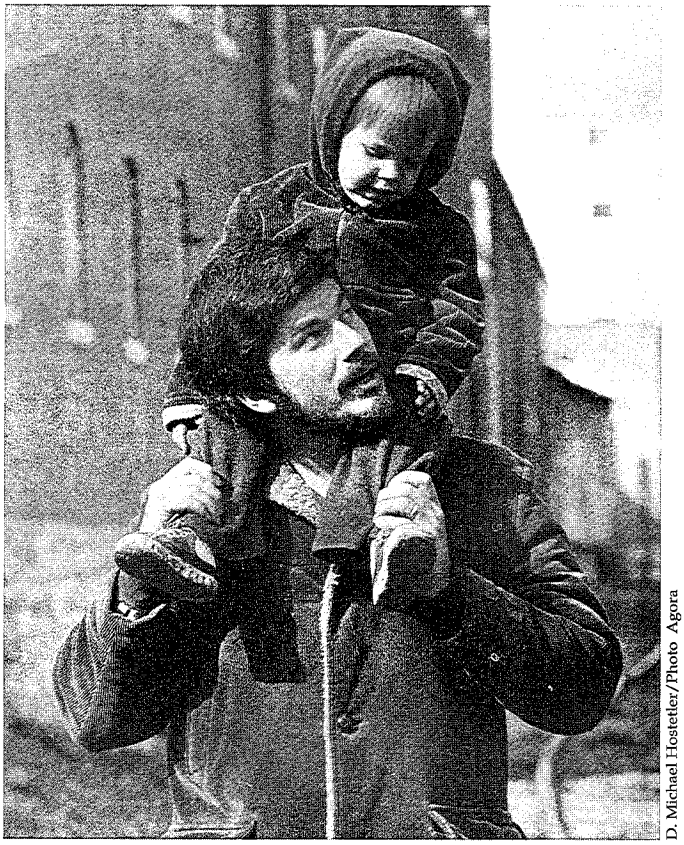
I decided to have a child because I wanted to change my life, to stop the illegal activities that had kept me on the margins of life. And after he was born, I lived a normal life as far was he was concerned. I got up, fed and bathed him, then took him to the park. When I worked, I took him to the baby sitter or his father's. Otherwise, I was with him all the time. But I kept on with my other activities. I felt torn between being responsible to him and continuing to do what I was doing, which put him and me at risk. I was living in a lot of anxiety and fear, such that I fell apart when he was five months old. One result was that I had to start using formula because I couldn't breast feed as much. I experienced myself as incapable of doing for him what I wanted because emotionally I was a wreck. Eventually, my stress eased off. I saw help. But I felt a lot of guilt in terms of him over that. I thought of my mother, who had a nervous breakdown when I was a child. All this didn't really bring about immediate change, though. I was in transition, but resisting transition.

Kiesha:

I was working every day, in terms of the "work" that got me here. Was he around it? It wasn't much hidden. He was probably around it a lot more than I care to remember. It probably had an impact on him. But then I'd think how he liked his Nikes and nice clothes. But now I don't kid myself; I wasn't doing all that for my child. I loved him. But I was doing that for myself. I ran around a lot. But then too, when it came time to go to his school and the PTA meeting, I'd put on my conservative suit and represent him well.

Gloria:

I went on a methadone program after my daughter was born. But I started using coke because I had a needle habit and needed to shoot up. . . . I ran the streets a lot. My mother was always there to take my daughter. It's not like she didn't mind what I was doing. It drove her crazy . . . me too, in a way. I'd come down at eleven at night with the baby, dressed like I was going to walk the streets, leave the baby with her, and not come back until the next morning. I was doing drugs a lot. And going from one abusive relationship to another. It was like, "the world owes me." That was my attitude. They fucked me, now you owe me. . . . But even with all that, I stayed with my baby. I needed to be with her. It was always just her and me, her and me. We dressed alike, even when she was very little. I slept with her. I made Easter baskets from scratch for her. Every-



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thing she had—a miniature pool, a table, a carriage . . . I spent my days with her and my nights on the streets.

While the women describe feelings of anxiety and guilt, they often underestimated or didn't think about the impact of their driven behaviors on their children. Ironically, their failure "to notice" replicated some of their complaints about their own parents and others.

Gloria:

My daughter was very accepting. She never gave me a fight. She adored me and was very loyal to me, almost from when she was a baby. When she got old enough to have friends, she showed me off to them, saying, "My Mommy isn't like the other mommies." . . . She was a happy-go-lucky kid. But maybe I just didn't notice. I was looking at it from my half-stoned point of view . . .

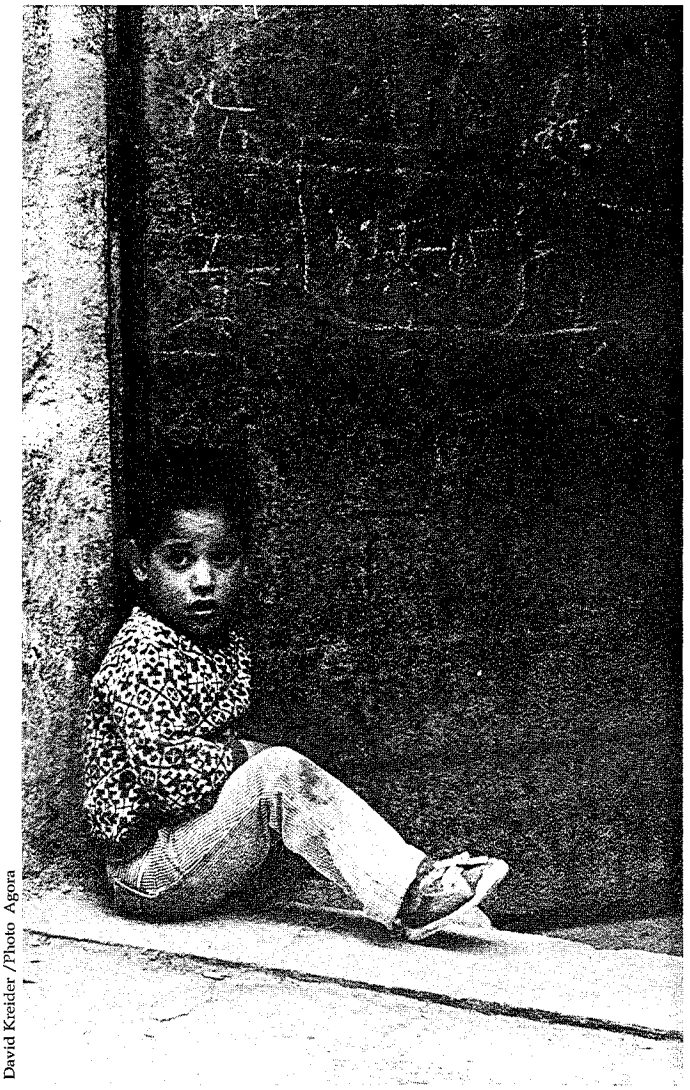
Danielle:

I was completely stressed out about my life. But I didn't really worry about it affecting my daughter. I guess because she was just a baby. I took care of her all the time, and she was very attached to me and such a good baby. I didn't want to imagine that any of my fears and stress, any of the bad stuff, could reach her . . .

. . . No, no one really took notice of my problems. But who ever does, when you're dealing with the system? Listen, I know this girl who went through Rikers (New York City's detention jail) at least 200 times from the age of 14 to 16, and not a single lawyer, judge, nurse, jailer bothered to take notice. Sure, she was a kid, but she wasn't theirs!

Kiesha:

All day, my son would play with his cousins at Gran's, and I hung in the bar, which was like a club on the corner. He knew where I was



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and could run down there. When they were babies, it was all there on the street: the strollers, beach chairs. That was the tradition, being in the back yard without a back yard. . . . It was no secret in the neighborhood what his family did. You could see the cars pulling up. There was plenty happening on that street. But we had a sense of security about the children. We had the regular addicts—that's what they'd be called—but they're the regulars, the neighborhood folks. And they'd watch out for the kids, and if one of them fell or hurt themselves, they'd come and get us at the bar. . . . Then too, I can remember grabbing my child and ducking behind cars to dodge a bullet. I've seen people die, and so has he. . . . Did I think he was in danger? I didn't think he was in danger!

Tony:

When I was in trouble as a child, I'd think that my mom had to know. But she was often oblivious and passive. When someone can't cope with an issue, they tend to ignore it. But I never thought of myself like that. I'm more aggressive and take charge. But I guess there were things I didn't want to notice or think about.

How could the women "not notice" the dangers to themselves and their children? Even in our discussions, when they would spin out their stories, I was struck often by the contradictory quality of their portraits. It was as though they had two compartments in their consciousness: drugs, violence, and trauma were in one compartment, and their children were in another. Often I would ask, "How did this affect your child?," and the woman would blink, look as though she were switching into a different mode, and then reflect back more analytically and critically.

Thinking about this, I remembered my own experience before prison, of feeling as if I were different people in different situations, unable to acknowledge the conflicts between the different personas. The women spoke repeatedly of their feeling that they were "more than one person," of "having different sides," or leading "split lives."

Gloria:

I played many roles. I was a student. I was a dope fiend. I was a mother. It drove me crazy. I got my GED. That worked. Then I went to college and stayed for two months. Then I left. I did drugs. All day I'd be with my daughter. Those were her hours. But then at night, I'd turn into a vampire. It was more than different roles. It was different "me's."

Tony:

Even though I ran the streets, I wasn't really a street person. That wasn't me. I was a homebody, a mother. But then I'd go off and drug for days. And sometimes, my temper, I'd get high and go off. . . . In a sense, there were two aspects of me. I wasn't in control, especially in terms of my temper.

It is not uncommon for a person to feel split or conflicted about different aspects of their lives. But the sense of fragmented selves that the women described went deeper—a way of living and relating seen often in the face of early experiences of abuse, trauma, and overwhelming life circumstances. I turned to the clinical literature on "splitting" to make sense of this one piece of the puzzle of the mothers' lives. Splitting, as a means to defend against the anxiety of feeling strong, conflicting emotions, or avoiding disappointing and enraging others, robs one of wholeness and emotional integrity, and leaves one feeling fragmented and empty (Ogden, 1986). In addition to other social stresses and emotional factors, the need to fill that void led the women to resort to drugs, risky relationships, and illegal activities.

Failed attempts to change

Without a consolidated, whole self, the women had no foundation from which to exert control over their lives. Thus, even when they tried to change for the sake of their children—and they did—, their efforts were filled with ambivalence and proved ineffective.

Ann:

My breakdown really marked the beginning of my saying that I had to deal with my own survival. But then when I started to feel better, I'd retreat from that. Finally, I resolved to change my situation. That brought a real sense of relief. But it was such an intense period of work that the reality of that decision evaporated. I felt like I was going to get out, which brought relief, but also ambivalence. Because I felt I was ending that life, I did it more than ever . . .

Kiesha:

One day, I brought my son to school and went and spent all my money on drugs. When he came home and asked me for some money, I didn't have a dollar to give him. That's what finally got to me. I said to myself, "This is it." I locked myself in my room and quit, cold turkey. It was rough. Finally, after five days, I came out and rode my bike and began to recover. From that point on, I promised myself and my son I'd never suck on another pipe. I'm proud to say I didn't. But it's probably what got me here, because that meant I had it to sell. I was still dipping and dabbing in other ways. But I was getting better, taking my life back. But I felt such an urge to accumulate, like I needed everything. So I did some crazy things.

For most of these mothers, the obstacles to change were not solely emotional and psychological, given their social-economic realities. They and their communities lacked the resources and support they needed. At times, when they tried to change their lives, the social and legal institutions they encountered failed them.

When I had my daughter, I left the man I was living with because I didn't want to keep living like that. I wanted something better for her and me. First I went to a home for homeless mothers, but they wouldn't take us because I was under age. So I went to live with my sister in another state. But she was on welfare, with a kid and no money. So I ended up getting busted for stealing all these baby items. They took me to juvenile hall and they separated us, putting my baby in a foster home. I went hysterical, left and went to the agency steps, waiting all night for them to open up to demand to see my baby. Apparently she had cried the whole night and wouldn't sleep or eat. So they figured they'd better put us together with the same foster family, and that was better.

But then my baby's father found me because I had contacted his grandmother, and she had told him. He kept calling to get me to go back with him. I had to see the judge for my probation report. He asked me would I steal again if I was faced with the same situation, and I said yes. Why did I say that? They took me to jail and then a shelter two hours away from my daughter and told me I couldn't see her for two years. So I contacted her father, who swore he'd given up that life and promised he'd get back our daughter. So I went back to New York with him. Don't you know that within one week, I was back working!

Prison: Loss and relief

Caught in the vise of intolerable conflicts, unable to change despite their children's needs, each of these women experienced in motherhood a sense of profound dissonance, from which she could find no relief. Ironically, their arrests, despite the awesome consequences, brought some relief.

When I was arrested, I was angry. I felt defeated, very guilty because of my child, and I felt a sense of loss. Sad, scared, confused, and yes, sad to say, a sense of relief.

I was relieved to be arrested, but depressed about being separated from my son. I felt so tied to him. I had only stopped breast feeding him a month before. I felt like I had done a terrible thing, that I had almost made it out but hadn't. I wanted to raise him so much, and now it was over. I had blown it. And yet, I also felt relieved. Finally, I was truly out.

It's horrible, knowing my son needs me and I'm not there. That's a loss I can never make up. The thing that stops me from really beating myself up is realizing that if I wasn't inside, what kind of parent would I have been anyway? This may sound strange, but I didn't really start being his parent until I was inside long enough for the drugs to wear off. . . .

Sometimes I think that my mother is grateful I came here, because my temper scared her . . .

When did I realize I hadn't been all that I needed to be for my daughter? When I was arrested and had to explain it to her. That's the first thing I thought about . . . Sometimes I wonder about that. Did it have to get to this extreme, this disaster, for me to be able to think first about my child?

Here then is the tragic paradox of imprisonment, which tears women from their children and their mothering roles, yet bringing some sense of relief in its terrible wake. Deprived of their children's daily presence, but also free of much of what distracted them, the mothers can finally think first about their children. Deprived of their mothering roles, they can nonetheless more unequivocally claim their mothering identities. In the face of this paradox, we might ponder Gloria's question. Could there have been another resolution? Could others have noticed and intervened? Did it have to come to this?

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