

The Huffington Post



Peggy Drexler

Lost and Found: Mothers, Daughters and Different Worlds

Posted April 14, 2009 | 06:15 PM (EST)

The last in the Lost and Found Series about the changing relationship between daughters and fathers.

The book I am developing centers on changing relationship between a new generation of daughters and their fathers. But one 35-year old woman said something during an interview that captured how the new world of daughters and fathers is also impacting daughters and mothers.

"It's not how mom spent all those years tied to the house like a second class citizen," she said. "It's why? She could have been anything she wanted to be. But she chose to stay home and raise us. She's obviously happy with her decisions. Sometimes I feel like we stole her life."

She captures two sides of a changing relationship between mothers and daughters.

On one side is a powerful emotional bond that endures through the ages. Recent research shows that 80 to 90 percent of women at mid-life say they have a good relationship with their mothers - although many wish it were better. These relationships tend to be complicated by a daughter's guilt over the amount of time they spend together and the inevitable disagreements over a daughter's life choices - particularly the ones that establish autonomy.

One the other side is a new ingredient in the rich stew of emotional connection between mother and daughter. For the first time, a new generation of daughters may have more in common with the world of their fathers than they do with the world of their mothers.

As these daughters are pulled into the orbit of their father's world, they may be missing - possibly ignoring - a mother's contributions to a family and, ironically, to her own success. In selling short the fact that mothers remain the gears and wiring of family dynamics, they can diminish an important component of their own lives and possibilities.

This can be a particular problem for the older end of a generation raised, schooled and encouraged to compete in a world of men. While pioneers of their mothers' generation were feminism's first wave, most women remained locked in archetype of women past: homemaker, nurturer, giver of unconditional love. If they worked, it was likely to be "women's work"; family-friendly in time demands, transportable, where you can leave and re-enter with ease.

They made their choices - to the extent they were choices - before Title IX democratized the playing fields; before a flood of women into advanced degrees flowed in record numbers into management and the professions; before women were encouraged to fight their way up the same food chain as men.

Some women found themselves, in spite of themselves, silently critical of life decisions made by the women who raised them. Maryanne, a top executive in her father's plastics business, said she is like her father: a confident decision-maker, with a raging sense of urgency. Her mother, by contrast, was always passive in family matters. "Growing up," she said, "dad was making money, the kids were making grades. I was never quite sure what mom did. She took good care of us. But as we got older and more self-sufficient, it's like she was along for the ride. Creating a life in the confines of one's home like she did is a world that is alien to me."

Maryanne is also, however, an example of some of the most interesting - and clearly instructive - situations I encountered: daughters who saw their mothers, later in life, become something different than they were when the daughter was growing up. She dismissed her mother as a sweet, but ineffectual, help mate. Once the children were raised, however, she watched her mother create a new company division, turning it into one of the company's strongest profit centers.

"It amazed me," she said. "She was always the caretaker. And now she was out there working with suppliers and getting customers. It's like she was a different person. But when you look at what she has accomplished, it's obviously who she is."

**The data I compiled and the patterns I've observed are presented as collective experiences. I have honored the confidentiality I promised, by changing names and disguising identities.*