
Hope Edelman

Motherless Mothers
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Q: With the publication of your first book, *Motherless Daughters*, you shared your experiences with mother loss and brought the topic to the nation's consciousness. Can you describe how *Motherless Mothers* first came into being?

A: I definitely didn't expect to write another book about mother loss. But when I was pregnant with my second daughter, I was put on partial bed rest for the last month. I had a four-year-old to care for, a house to run, and a job—how was I supposed to add bed rest to that list? Yet I had no choice. Most of my friends who'd been in this situation had mothers who came to care for their other children, but I had to figure this out on my own. I spent the first few days lying around feeling very sorry for myself, which went nowhere pretty fast. So I got on the phone with some friends who were also motherless and asked them how they'd coped. They all had stories of how difficult their pregnancies and postpartum periods had been, and how they'd also had to come up with creative solutions to figure it out on their own. I started taking notes during those conversations, which is how the book began. A few months after my daughter was born, I started interviewing women around Los Angeles about their experiences. I'd bring the baby along and push her to sleep in her stroller while the women spoke into my tape recorder. It didn't take long to realize there was easily enough material here for another book.

Q: You've arrived at eight major themes that you found kept emerging in your interviews with motherless mothers. Why do you think the early loss of a parent generates such similar concerns and issues for mothers and mothers-to-be?

A: Every culture has prescribed roles for maternal grandmothers, whether it's as information source, birthing companion, baby nurse, or emotional support for the new mother. When a grandmother isn't there to fill one or more of those roles, a mother feels the loss profoundly, no matter what her racial, ethnic, or cultural background. In addition, when a motherless woman has a child she reactivates the mother-child relationship and rediscovers that deep, unique kind of love. She is able to see her mother through a new set of eyes, and for the first time may really understand not just what she lost, but what her mother lost as well. This can send her back into a grieving cycle where she's grieving from three directions: for her mother, for herself as a child, and for herself as an adult woman without a mother.

Q: In your introduction, you write that *Motherless Mothers* is intended as "a parenting book rather than a bereavement book." For motherless mothers, and in your personal experience, what stages of parenting necessarily involve some elements of bereavement?

A: All of them, really, right from the moment a daughter discovers she's pregnant and wishes she could share the news with her mother all the way up to sitting at her child's high school graduation and feeling that her mother should be sharing that moment, too. Also, watching a child go through various developmental stages triggers our memories of having gone through those stages, and if those moments were sad or lonely for us after a mother died, or if we had to go through them without adequate emotional support, we may find ourselves reliving those painful moments and grieving for the children we were. At the same time, the opportunity to relive those moments and "re-do" them by giving our children what we didn't have can be an enormously healing and gratifying part of motherhood, so not every aspect of bereavement has to be painful or negative.

Q: In your book, you note that many motherless mothers undergo a surge of grief when their own children reach the ages at which they lost their mothers. Can you discuss this phenomenon?

A: Psychologists call this an "age-correspondence event" and it's a very profound transitional moment for motherless women. Let's say a daughter is eleven when her mother dies and is thrust into premature independence as a result. When her own child—especially a firstborn daughter—reaches that age, she's likely to look at her and think, *My god. She's still so young.* She may find herself grieving for a younger version of herself who lost part of her childhood, and also for the mother who didn't get the chance to see that child grow up. It's also common for motherless mothers to fear that they'll also die when their child reaches the age they did and repeat history, or worry that they won't know how to mother a child beyond that age because they didn't receive mothering themselves from that point forward. That's more of a projection than a reality, though. The majority of mothers who bring their children beyond that point do just fine.

Q: Do you have any recommendations for motherless mothers who are looking to connect with each other in their local communities?

A: Several online sites can help women find each other. The address www.motherlessmothers.com links to a page on my web site with a fairly comprehensive list of motherless mothers and motherless daughters groups in the U.S. and overseas. There are also numerous social groups organizing through www.meetup.com. Women who want to start a support group should look for a therapist or trained workshop leader who's interested in facilitating one. Sometimes very sensitive material comes up in these groups, and it's beneficial to have someone who knows how to handle that in charge.