

**GENTLE WARRIORS:  
STRESSES AND SOLUTIONS OF FEMALE,  
LONE-PARENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE**

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## DEDICATION

This project is for the Warrior Women: Past. Present and Future

My grandmothers: May Whelan and Nellie Smith

My mother Maisie Smith

My aunts: Kay Whelan, June Oronoski, Marg Dillon, Ida Whelan

The Friends:

Margie & Wally Tennant, Theresa & Randy Joblonkay, Nadia & Bob Campbell, Carolyn

Sutton, Mary Gillespie

Don Buckley, Tony Whelan

My Advisors

Cynthia Chambers, David Smith, Richard Butt

Heartfelt thanks for your ongoing support, love advice and friendship.

The cups of tea, shoulders to cry on and stamina it took to support me through this  
endeavor.

JORDEN MARY ANDREA SMITH

MY DAUGHTER

MY LIFE

A single mother by choice  
A new title  
A new slot

I am woman hear me roar  
I am single mother hear me snore  
Is there a balance?

Baby Noises - Loud and Small  
Mummy Noises - Silent screams and belly laughs

New paraphernalia - cribs and mobiles, now Barney,  
Now Barney, Jordanese

Mummy props – computers, telephones, bells and whistles

About identity – Huh!  
You know identity holding on to the old ideal, that wasn't then but is now

Good?? Old days  
Gypsy – once perhaps, Andrew says so  
Mummy? Never, not me  
Fit, healthy ... happy? Perhaps

Today, a mummy – so proud, so alive  
Today, a student – so unsure, so alive

Combining the two Superwomen? Nuts? Both?  
Learning to combine, learning to become gentle with the new me

- walking more . . o.k.
- loving more . . better yet
- and school . . oh yah school
- evolving ideas
  - rewarding friendships
  - remembering capabilities

An honor, or is that horror?

Staying in the process, letting go of success  
Keeping in the swim . . haven't gotten wet yet

I am alive . . a coup  
I am happy . . a bonus

I am finished.

Journal, March, 1996

## Abstract

Gentle Warriors is a collection of interviews from six, female, lone-parents attending the University of Lethbridge. The interviews span three years. The interview questions discuss the history of becoming a single parent and the reasons for returning to school. The stress factors experienced in this role and the women's coping mechanisms are explored.

The personal process experienced by the author is included. The decisions to change the project from a quantitative research project to a narrative, qualitative work is explained

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## **Leap of Faith**

A character in Jean-Paul Sarte's *Nausea* says that the only way one can make sense of one's life is "to tell as story about it" (in Greene, 1987, p. 9). This project has been a catalyst for me to explore my own story. The process involved in writing this paper about female, lone-parent students has given me the opportunity to reflect on my own ideals and decisions as a parent, a woman, and as a student.

I had many opinions and misconceptions about writing a research paper about female, lone-parent students. The process of rethinking and opening up to new ideas as I shed my preconceived notions about valid research and developed a new view of female, lone-parents are included.

The greatest reward in writing this paper was the opportunity to develop relationships with other lone-parent students. In the process of collecting data I found friendship, courage and motivation. The initial invisible wall of myself as researcher and the women as interviewees came tumbling down as the common threads within our lives began to intertwine.

I began the project by writing about the stresses and coping mechanisms of female, lone-parents. The paper took on a life of its own and began to capture the experiences and the stories of the women. The women's themes emerged in a manner that expressed how their lives appeared to them. As the project gave me insight into the lives of other female, lone-parents I began contemplating, understanding and validating my own life decisions.

"Gentle Warriors: Stresses and Solutions Of Female, Lone-Parents At The University of Lethbridge" is the study of a collective of female, lone-parent students attending The University of Lethbridge. I am part of this collective group.

The process involved in the creation of this project is as meaningful as the project itself. As the project took shape and ideas were born I began to address my own issues and to make some startling, revealing and uncomfortable conclusions about who I was, where I came from and the life path I had chosen.

At times this has been a labor of love but I would be cant if I didn't speak about the times when it was experienced as labor. As I walked through the process on paper there were many times when it would have been easier to sell out. I could have refined my initial fifty drafts with their academically correct statistics and data, thrown in a few quotes and been done with it. I could have avoided those gut-wrenching times when the thirty or so pages made absolutely no sense and quitting was a real option. Instead I am going to share my story.

### **Coming to the Question**

In the summer of 1994 I was at a crossroads. My job at Athabasca University was redundant. It was time to move on. I decided to return to Lethbridge. I had done my undergraduate work in Lethbridge and had a group of good friends there. The university setting was familiar and I had heard very good things about the M.Ed. Program. It was pliable enough to fit the unusual situation of a nurse in an education program and the professors were used to adult learners.

My decision to return to school was based on three needs. Professionally, it was a way of testing my capabilities and learning my limits. I had completed several classes in the Masters of Nursing courses at the University of Edmonton subsequent to being pregnant with my daughter and prior to experiencing a severe clinical depression. I had experienced success and personal satisfaction in earlier academic endeavors before depression (BD).

The combined experiences of depression and pregnancy had left me unsure of my capabilities on all levels.

Emotionally, I wanted to meet other lone-parents and develop a network of like-minded people for support and validation. Finally, I wanted a career that would encourage economical security and career flexibility to accommodate family life. The completion of a M.Ed. would open new career opportunities.

The idea of returning to school was exciting, frightening and overwhelming. The experiences involved in completing the M.Ed. would test my personal capabilities. I did not know what other challenges would incur, I was about to find out.

Combining the role of parent with that of a student held exclusive frustrations, teachings and rewards. I learned to adapt my scheduling to fit into class time and Jordan's (daughter, two years old) sleeping pattern. I had to become used to the 'interruptions' of parenting when I was trying to be a student and the guilt of being a student when I thought should be a better parent. Kathie, the individual, was totally lost in this initial shuffle. I was awakened to the many dimensions of my role and the margins that it had placed me while participating in the classroom setting. I recall my first experience with single parent stereotyping. Fellow students (teachers and nurses) were discussing the 'troubled kids from single parent families!'

*Tonight in class P. made a general statement about "Well, he does come from a single parent home." I nearly dropped my lowers. I reacted mildly in class, then gave him supreme hell in the break. P. is gay for Christ sakes. As if he doesn't know the dangers of generalizations. I guess this will be my first of many...go figure. (Journal, February, 1996)*



Many of the other students in my classes were conservative, married individuals who were employed as teachers or nurses. Our life contexts were very different. The experiences in the classrooms led me to seek out other lone-parents for support and validation. During coffee breaks and after classes we would share spirited conversations about careers, men, kids, spirituality, sex and everything in between. The common threads within our lives were our children, academic life, and stress of juggling the two roles and the reasons behind the life choices that had made us lone- parents and students. The uncommon threads of our lives were how we coped with our situations, the characteristics of our families and our support networks. Something that was so similar from the outside - the single parent family - was not uniform in any way, shape or form. We were widowed, unmarried, divorced, with one child and five children. The children may have had the same fathers or different fathers. The fathers were deadbeat or terrific. The boundaries within this group were wide and diverse.

Through this group of students I was introduced to a national Single Mother's by Choice (SMC) organization. By definition a SMC is a woman who made the decision to take on the responsibility of raising her baby knowing that, at least at the onset, there would be no primary paternal caregiver. The child might be conceived or adopted. The group membership is made up of women from the USA, Canada, UK and China. We were in contact through a newsletter and a chat-line on the Internet. Daily, I would race to my computer to be a part of this community. The conversations varied, but generally would follow a theme for a week or two. The topics included sperm banks, international adoption answering daddy questions, financial issues, coping with stereotypes and "what to do if" questions. The group was made up of a very diverse bag of professional women. A Harvar

professor, an advisor to President Clinton, a nurse, a lawyer and doctor could be participating at the same time. The women were at different stages of parenting and the advice was based on professional knowledge and personal experience. For me it was like having a family. These women were my advisors, my confidants and morale boosters. When one woman in New York had to spend time in a Pediatric Intensive Care Unit with her adopted son the members of the group rallied to her support. Local women came to sit with her at the hospital or take care of the housekeeping. Those of us far away kept in contact through telephone, letters and e-mail. The woman and her son experienced love and support from a virtual group of strangers. Strangers with the common bond of being single mothers by choice.

Closer to home, the experiences occurring during graduate classes were beginning to formulate the path and decisions that I would make in writing the project. I was involved in a group research project involving the perceived stress of mature, graduate students in condensed curricula. My job was the literature review. This literature review led me to research mature students, graduate students and stress. There were volumes on stress and a very small amount of information on mature students. There was no information on single parent students. *Were we an invisible minority?*

I was living the life of a student/lone-parent, socializing with friends at the university whom were also lone-parents. I was a member of an international group of lone-parents via Internet. I was searching for a project that would hold my interest. I recall the discussion about having a project topic that I was passionate about, a project that I would not get bored with. I was researching about stress and student life. I was on the track to my project topic.

Groping through the process of finding a clear, concise research question was a process unto itself. Who would I write about? There are many lone-parents: male, female, young, old, divorced and parents by choice. Would they be students in upgrading, college or university? Do they study full time or part time? Would I have an age restriction? What would I write about and how would I get my information? I began writing about lone-parents, then I limited my research to female, lone-parents. I would write about students in post-secondary education, then restricted my inquiry to only university students. The final group I focused upon was female, lone-parents at The University of Lethbridge.

My first idea was to start a weekly support group and write about the process. I soon realized this could become a logistical nightmare. I thought about doing a survey. However, I decided a survey would barely touch the surface of the issues. Another idea I had was to stay on the topic of stress and coping mechanisms but do the research through interviews. I would write about the experiences of female, lone-parents as students and identify their stresses and coping mechanisms. I wanted to capture the experiences, the stories of the group. The women's themes would emerge in a manner that would express how their lives appeared to them. I viewed the project as a vehicle for voicing the needs and experiences of female lone-parents in the academic world.

After much trial and error the research question became:

What are the perceived stress factors and coping mechanisms of female, lone-parents at The University of Lethbridge?

### **Methodology**

In the early planning stages of the project it was important for me to stay within the safe confines of quantitative research. My previous academic experience as a nurse and a health

care administrator had brain washed me about the academically correct ways of doing research. Quantitative methodology was the tried and true, scientifically correct method while qualitative research was being accepted more and more in nursing research. It was still an area of research that was not totally respected in my previous, science based, academic experiences.

I planned to use a survey as the methodology. The survey is a method within the accepted standards of quantitative research. Yet a survey was going to give me a few numbers to crunch and perhaps a peep into the lives of single parents. I was in turmoil. In the same classrooms where I was taught the 'art and science' of nursing, that to be a good nurse you must combine the scientific fact about things like hygiene and anatomy with the artful side of caring, respect and emotional support, I was also told that these were not tangible, measurable results. They could not be measured scientifically and therefore were not serious research.

*I got my results back from my AIDS Research Project. I can't believe it. I lost marks for including the dietary and housekeeping staff as participants. I also lost marks for including feelings in the questions. I hate doing this stuff by distance and I hate this course. Why are all nursing instructors so anal-retentive? (Journal, December, 1984)*

I have read many research reports and articles in my twenty years as a nurse and as a student. I have seen qualitative research trickle its way into medical research. Yet, for me the use of quantitative research seemed to be written in stone. These internalized definitions of legitimate academic research and writing held me rigid in my decisions about the process involved in doing the project.

Earlier experience with the survey method had provided a large amount of solid data and it also brought to light important questions for future research. The experience in my research class gave me the idea of using a survey in the project for data collection, then follow with interviews.

This was a method that would involve looking at human experiences. The study had the potential to provide increased insight into the lives of female, lone-parent students. It could clarify the characteristics and origins of stress as perceived by the interview group.

I gave a sample of the survey to three of my classmates for a test run. At this time it became apparent that the survey was not going to give me the depth of information that I wanted. I chose to bypass the survey and go directly to the interview process.

My goal was to interview ten female, lone-parent students enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions. The participants were selected by using a snowball-sampling technique. The snowball technique is when a researcher finds one person who will agree to participate in the research. This person helps the researcher locate others who would be interested in participating and these participants will help locate others in a snowball fashion (Ray & Ravizza, 1985). In this case I asked three women friends from the university if they would be interested in participating. They all expressed surprise, then delight when I told them about my topic. They were eager to participate. In turn, they talked about the project to other friends who called and requested to be a part of the group. I had ten women on my list to interview. They were from all levels of university and college. I thought that I was set. Four of the women withdrew from the project. One moved, the other could not find the time for the interview, one was not comfortable within the interview process and asked me to withdraw her interview and one did not return my calls. These

withdrawals left me surprised and frustrated. I was under the impression that more was better. I thought that I needed to do at least ten interviews to make the project worthwhile. In the end I interviewed six women and had enough data to fill volumes.

The study is based on the interviews of six women who are lone-parents and enrolled at The University of Lethbridge. The women are in graduate and undergraduate programs in the faculties of social work, physical education, education and journalism. The women range in age from 22-45. Four of the women are divorced, one separated from a common-law relationship and one describes herself as a 'Single Mother by Choice.' Three of the mothers have one child, one mother has two children, one mother has three children and one mother has four children. The children's ages range from 9 months to 15 years. There are six girls and six boys.

The prepared interview questions were open-ended. Open-ended questions have no fixed answers. The question is flexible and allows the participant to answer in any manner. It does not impose the researcher's point of view on the respondent. The person being interviewed may give information that was not considered previously. This information may show a new way of understanding the issues being discussed (Ray & Ravizza, 1985).

The following prompts were asked of each participant:

*How did you become a lone parent?* I asked this question to help me understand the women's story. Had she decided to end the relationship or was she 'the last to know'? Was she empowered by this life change? Were there any historical factors that would affect the woman she is today and her ability to succeed as a lone parent and as a student? I also picked this question from a personal context of curiosity. In my own life I had been pushed far enough into the corner to break away and go on my own. It was some of the

circumstances within this breakaway that made me decide to return to school. Was I alone in this decision?

*Why did you return to school?* My own reasons for returning to university were for financial security, to build a support network and to test myself and see how well I could cope PD (post-depression) in a new and challenging environment. Some of the women I knew at the university were financially secure (from my perspective) yet, here we were extending ourselves to return to school while working and raising our children. Some of the women had been on welfare and had made a leap from government dependency to multi-stressed independence. Did the reasons behind the decision to return to school effect the commitment and adaptability necessary to succeed? Were the reasons financial, personal, emotional or something else? I wanted to know why the others had returned.

*Describe the stresses experienced as a lone-parent/student.* In the earlier research project I looked at the stresses of graduate students in condensed curricula. I spoke with people who appeared to have it easy. They were on their own and living in the dormitories. Their beds were made and their meals were prepared. Some went home to loving spouses where they received physical and emotional support. This was summer and they were not working at other jobs. Yet, these students still experienced stress. What were the stresses of female, lone-parents juggling the demands of a home life, work, social obligations and the demands of their educational pursuit? Students experience stress from a variety of sources. As mature students, the women in the study required different services and support than traditionally younger aged students. These women may have been out of school for an extended period of time. They experience obstacles to learning in such dimensions as test

anxiety, time management, role shifts, family and job commitments (Schmidt 1989 in Nedleman 1991).

While researching stress and graduate students in condensed curricula I was living the role. That summer the stress crept up on me and influenced Jordan and I.

*I've decided to drop my last summer class. Jordan is stringing me out. She is acting like a pip, has cradle cap and is a real cling on. Jesus! How am I ever going to get finished if this is what happens when I get stressed? She is reading me better than I am reading myself. Yesterday after class I started to cry and had to hide in the bathroom...over a fucking mark on my stats test no less. God I need help... (Journal, July, 1995)*

A student may face developmental tasks and transitions that serve as an extra burden on their already demanding lifestyle. Stress associated with the academic experience can negatively affect a student's academic performance, mental or physical health, levels of *satisfaction and attitude changes* (Wan, 1992).

*How do you cope?* "Stress refers to a condition of perceived tension between demands and resources, and depends on ongoing appraisals of both elements as they present themselves in concrete events" (Koeske, 1991, p. 416). How were the women sustaining themselves and their families? How did they take care of themselves? How did they juggle the demands of a home life, work, social obligations and the demands of their educational pursuit? Have they adjusted to their role as parent/student? I knew how I was (or was not) coping in this role. I knew how the students in the earlier research were coping. I wanted to know how the other women were coping. I wanted to bottle it and sell it.



Engber and Klungness (1995) believe that what is unique to single mothers is that their stress seems so built in, so inherent to their lifestyle, that the thought of taking time to learn how to reduce stress can cause more stressful worry. Lone-parents perceive their stress as coming at them from every direction. The sources of stress seem endless. The more the sources of stress the less possible it seems to begin to grapple with this fundamental life issue. I hoped for some new ideas that I could use in my own life.

*Describe your support system.* An individual's support network plays an important part in a person's well being. In my roles as a student, nurse, teacher and parent I have seen and read the documentation on the importance of a support network. My own support network has changed drastically since I became a parent. In the process of developing a strong network I have experienced the loss of some friendships, the strengthening of others, the use of cyberspace and the delight in making new friends that have evolved through my role as a parent/student. What did their networks look like? Did they feel supported by their educational instructors or the institution, friends, family, society? It is apparent by the questions that I had a personal vested interest in this project. I was going to explore people with a similar social structure and needs base to my own. I had assumed that the usual distance between researcher and researched would be less due to my personal similarities to the group. In my past work and research experiences, the perceived distance between the two participants in the interview had made a significant difference in the quality of the information shared. As a nurse in a nurse/patient relationship and the researched in an interview I knew that the differences in social standing and power were relevant to the research. My goal was to get close enough to the participant so they would explore the

topic, yet, as an interviewer I wanted to be coddled in the safe, non-emotional cloak of research.

With this approach in mind I began the interview process. I visited the homes of the women and amongst children, animals and general family living I began the interviews. For some of the interviews I would bring my daughter and we would have the interview as part of a family evening where the children would play, dogs would bark and televisions would blare. Some of the women preferred to come to my home and have a quiet one-on-one and on another occasion the interview was combined with a walk around Henderson Park. All of the interviews were audio taped.

### **The Shift**

The initial plan of this project was to explore the stresses and coping mechanisms of OTHER female, lone-parents. I perceived the women that I was writing about as “they.” These were women who were invisible. They had no voice and no power. They were women who were not taken account of or taken seriously. At some level I knew that I was a part of this group, yet I tried to keep myself separate as the researcher.

I met with each participant three times. In most cases it was the second interview when a transition occurred. The interviews became conversations and the conversations weave themselves into stories. My relationship with the interviewees deepened and strengthened as we shared experiences and emotions. In the process of participating in the interviews and exploring my own reaction to the process I awakened to the fact that I had come to these interviews cum conversations with my own preconceived judgments and political beliefs and understandings. My personal ideas on child raising, discipline, family

beds, social assistance and other topics were challenged, confirmed or blown apart as I spent time with the group.

These women were not only coping with being lone parents but also growing and learning in the process. They battled with time constraints, rigorous academic expectations, financial commitments and personal self-doubt. They spoke of lost children and lost loves. My relationship with the interviewees deepened and strengthened. We became women exchanging, uniting, and connecting. My role as researcher and the project was forgotten as we shared experiences, feelings, laughter, vulnerabilities and understandings.

*Tonight at Jan's place we were talking so long that I forgot to check the tape machine and turn the tape. I felt good when she said that it didn't feel like an interview but just like good old jab session. (Journal December, 1995)*

In the process of collecting and absorbing the different elements and treasured fragments of the women's experiences and emotions I experienced a new awakening to my own beliefs and needs. The reading, listening and interacting involved in the project began to grow within me in a visceral and intuitive way. While collecting and absorbing the women's different experience and emotions, my own stories and ideas would come to mind and flow out of my lips. My sharing with these women became a method of understanding and validating my own life choices.

The conversations with the women, the story telling combined with warm coffee, wiping noses and kissing it better were told in what Ursula LeGuin (1989) describes as the mother tongue. "The mother tongue is language, not as mere communication but as relation, relationship. It connects. It goes two ways, many ways, an exchange, a network"

(p. 149). These messages were about life, children, love and pain. These stories were also my story.

The idea of sharing my own experience within the context of the project had not been an issue. It had not occurred to me. I had unconsciously protected myself in the cloak of unbiased, objective research. My experiences with interviewing had been as a nurse, potential employer or paid researcher. In these capacities there had been safe and clear boundaries of roles and expectations. I was not ready or interested in putting myself in the same category as my interviewees. I initially saw myself as the same as them, only different.

As the process continued I found myself at a major crossroads. I tried to maintain my initial, scientifically correct outline and write about female, lone-parents as the 'Invisible Minority.' The literature review was an acceptable piece of work. But every once in a while my own story or the story of one of the women would render me dysfunctional. My writing would sway from the traditional, objective, third-person expository style to heart-felt stories and observations. I slowly began to realize that these women were more warriors than an invisible minority. "Strong as ropes of steel and soft as sighs"(Greer, 1970 p. 4). With much duress I finally accepted in my head what my heart had known for some time. The project was going to be reborn as a narrative account. It would be written from a place of power and include my own story. Whether I liked it or not, the project had become a catalyst for my personal life exploration and a leap of faith in the way the stories were being written and presented.

Where was I going to get the courage to write my own story? Where was I going to get the courage to explore my own reasons for my life choices? How was I going to present

these stories to the world in a manner that would honor the women who had shared with me?

The answers came. As I discussed these transitions and with my academic advisor she advised me to read about other warriors. This led me to the writings of Carlos Castenenda (1974) and Alice Walker (1995). I discovered that the warrior characteristics about which I was reading were the same characteristics that I was seeing in the group members and in my own mirror. Don Juan, a character in The Power of Silence, talks about the pain and resistance experienced by a warrior as he arrives at the totality of oneself. I recall my own experiences of pain and resistance while in the role of parent/student.

*God, I am such a shitty mother. Who do I think I am, superwoman? Jorden needed me tonight and I kept blowing her off so I could finish...There is no way in hell I can finish this paper. Maybe I should just quit. (Journal, March, 1995)*

The struggle between Kathie the perfect mom, Kathie the honor student and Kathie the provider was ongoing and relentless.

The process of writing the project was about to make a great change. I experienced huge frustration as I attempted to write the project in a manner that would represent the feelings, longings and stories of this group of warrior women. At the same time I was delving inward to answer some personal questions about my life choices. I wanted the project to be something that other people could read and feel and understand the experiences of the women. I wanted it to be available for other students who found themselves in a similar situation so that they could know that they were not alone. I wanted to cut through my own preconceived notion of acceptable academic writing. I wanted to feel safe in telling my own story and I wanted to tell the stories of the women in the study.

When I told the women that I had decided to include my own story they were surprised and supportive. Some were surprised as they had assumed that this was the case all along. The others were encouraging and understanding. They appreciated that I was going public and they were anonymous.

I did not explore the relationship with my decision to have my daughter, return to school or write this project with my life story until it came to light through discussion with the women in the group and my Advisor. The idea of reviewing my life story and identifying any connections was met with hesitancy, fear and a slight glimmer of excitement. My experience with exploring life history had been a part of my therapy while pregnant and in the throws of a severe clinical depression. Through this process I discovered my difficulty in letting the world see the weaker, vulnerable side of myself and how I had turned an imaginary, fantasy family into my own truth. It had been a painful, albeit necessary part of my healing. To revisit the process would mean opening up to new vulnerabilities, pain and more personal discoveries. I explored the idea with caution. I decided to begin slowly. I knew the process and the personal control that I would have. I believed foolishly that I could stop or start as I wanted. I started with a relatively safe question for the participants and myself. Where did the strength, the determination come to begin the journey as mother, parent, and student? My life experiences became intertwined with my academic quest.

On a personal dimension, I was a lone-parent with a toddler. I had made a geographical change to be close to supportive friends. On a social level, I was searching for like-minded women with whom I could share my experiences and develop friendships and from whom learn. On an academic level, I was in a M.Ed. program that promoted self-

exploration. I was able to explore my topic while in the process of being a student. At times I was not aware that this is what was happening. It would be days or weeks later that a personal `aha' would occur. It was during the process of the interviews, my academic exploration, and my personal growth and development that this project began to take on a life of its own.

### **Kathie**

I found out that I was pregnant nine days before my thirty-ninth birthday. At that time I was in the clutches of a severe clinical depression. My relationship with the father was terminal and I was unsure how stable my job was. When my doctor phoned me with the news, I had one brief New York minute of shock and terror. Then a feeling began in my toes and worked its way up throughout my whole body and soul. I was ecstatic. I sat on my bed with a feeling of glowing warmth and calm. Suddenly everything made sense and I knew that I was going to get well and become a mother.

The decision to have my daughter was not really a decision at all; it simply was. With time and reflection I am discovering that the determination to have my daughter came from family history, personal experience and the fact that the universe thought that it could save me through her. I believe this with all my heart.

Daphne Patai (1988) talks of the relationship between the telling of one's life story and its relationship to the past: "Telling one's life story involves a rationalization of the past as it is projected and leads into an inevitable present. And, indeed a particular version of one's story may become an essential component of one's identity"(p. 147). The clarity I gleaned from exploring my past is an important part of the process within the project.

I was the youngest of three daughters, my parent's last attempt for 'their son.' We lived in a blue-collar, row-housing complex with my aunt and maternal grandmother. My dad was the only male in this female-dominated environment. We were raised Catholic. My Irish Nana said her rosary daily. However, my aunt had declared herself an agnostic at age eight. Dad would faithfully drive us to church, then return home to the only hour of the week where the house was truly his. In hindsight I imagine him sitting on the crapper with the door open wearing a big smile. His lone chance of true privacy without the echo of his three young daughters pounding at the door lamenting "Dad, hurry up I gotta go." When we got home from church there would be a feast of bacon, eggs, fried garlic sausage and buttered toast waiting for us. During breakfast my mother would talk about the other families and my aunt would be shaking her head mumbling about "the crap that asshole had belched out during the sermon."

Sunday afternoons would be taken up with outdoor activities if the weather permitted or we would curl up with a favorite book. Female heroines in novels formed a large portion of my imaginary life. They rode their horses with strength and determination, solved mysteries with cunning and integrity, and lived happily ever after. The women in my real drama of life and in my fantasy life with books were instrumental in molding me into the woman I became.

My family was quite traditional with the mom, pop, sisters, dog and a rash of aunts, uncles, cousins and grandmothers. Within this collection are a group of strong and decisive women.

My maternal grandmother traveled alone from Dublin, Ireland to Moose Jaw, Sask. in 1911. She was the youngest daughter of six children and her mother had died when she



was 5 years old. After fifteen years of marriage, nine pregnancies and seven children my grandfather began a pattern of leaving my grandmother for months on end, then reappearing as if nothing had happened. It was 1936, the height of the Great Depression. By 1945 they had lost their home. In this time span one of my uncles had died, my grandmother suffered a nervous breakdown, my other uncle had joined the air force and my aunt had gotten a job. My mother had been pulled out of school in grade seven to help at home.

My paternal grandmother traveled from Poland to Brandon, Manitoba. She was twelve years old and traveled alone. My maternal aunt (born 1913) was a career woman, political activist and chose to never marry. My paternal aunt (born 1932) left home at eighteen, joined the armed services and traveled the world. She did not marry.

My mother married a man from the wrong side of the tracks. Her father refused to attend the wedding. My mom and dad were happily married for over forty years until my dad passed over. I believe that the certainty in the decision to have my daughter was rooted in the life choices of these women I grew up knowing as family.

Becoming pregnant changed my outlook on the world. I had to get well for my baby. There was something to live for. I began a rigorous group therapy program that was for five months, five days a week, four hours a day. I could not take any medication. My immediate family was not available for support. The group members became my family, as did the third and fourth cousins that lived in the area. My relationship with Jordan's father continued to dissolve. I was in denial and wanted it to work. I wore blinders. I used every argument, strategy and trick I knew to try and make him a willing participant in this child's life. I failed. By the time my daughter was born I knew that I was going to be a lone parent. I call myself a Single Mother by Choice, as I knew at the time of birth that there would not

be a traditional father figure in my daughter's life. Giving up the battle of trying to build a relationship with my daughter's father was gut wrenching. I finally accepted the fact that he was not interested in participating in the role of father. I was not willing to stay in a relationship where the people involved were not committed 110%. In my decision to become a lone-parent I gave up the myth of the perfect, traditional mom and pop family. That typical Cleaver lifestyle of the fifties had somehow passed me by. The white picket fence was not to be. There is no dad in the picture. While sad, it also meant there would be no weekend visits, no lawyers and no hassles. However, I did not anticipate all the tearful questions about "where is daddy?" or the stigma my daughter would experience at a very young age.

*Today I was a helper at my daughter's pre school. The kids are preparing for Father's Day. As Jorden is called over by one of the teachers to work on her card I overhear the conversation:*

*T: Jorden do you want to make a card?*

*J: I don't have a dad.*

*T: You can make it for your grandpa.*

*J: I don't have a grandpa.*

*T: Uncle?*

*At this point I step in and tell Jorden that she can give it to her good friend Randy.*

*Jesus, where is the sensitivity of these so-called educators? Surely Jorden is not the only kid without a dad. Rip my heart out. (Journal, June, 1997)*

Jorden was born at home in Edmonton. In attendance were good friends, great midwives, my mom and my dog. When Jorden was nine-months old I returned to work at

Athabasca University. I worked on site three days a week. This gave me a lot of time with my daughter. Together we figured out how the family unit was going to work and how it would succeed.

Being a lone parent to an infant is the greatest and most terrifying job there is. There is a raw loneliness at 04:30 when you are trying to quiet your screaming child and you notice that you have used the last clean facecloth. There is no one to call, no one to send down to the dryer for the clean linen, no one to hold the baby so you can pee or eat or cry.

By the time Jorden was eighteen months old I had decided to relocate to Lethbridge. Athabasca University was going through a major transition and I accepted a buy-out. This was an opportunity to relocate closer to supportive friends and family. It was at this time I decided to return to school.

My decision to return to school was based on three needs. Professionally, it was a way of testing my capabilities and learning my limits. I had experienced success and personal satisfaction in earlier academic endeavors BD (before depression). Some days the experience of being severely depressed had left me unable to brush my teeth. I could not make a decision. Answering the phone or opening mail would leave me fearful and in tears. A year after completing therapy and having my daughter I was still unsure of my capabilities. I did not know if I could cope with a responsible job. I was unsure of my critical thinking abilities. I did not know if I was safe to work as a nurse or smart enough to hold down any other type of job.

Emotionally, I wanted to meet other lone-parents and develop a network of other like-minded people for support and validation. My network of friends in Lethbridge had changed. Old friends had remarried, gotten divorced or moved away. My role as a mother

changed the characteristics of the friendships that I had known and the friendships that I was looking for. I wanted to meet other families who were parenting in the same way I was. I wanted to meet women who were also in the combined roles of parent/student. If they were single parents and around my age group, well better yet.

Finally, I wanted a career that would give me economic security, a dental plan and a flexible work schedule to accommodate family life. I felt sadness and guilt that Jordan did not have a typical family. I did not want her to become a latchkey kid who was brought up by baby-sitters. I wanted to enjoy my role as a mummy. I saw the Master's of Education Program as a venue to fulfill the criteria.

The first months in the role of student/parent were full of learning and adaptation. Returning to the role of student made me feel vulnerable and nervous. I was a nurse in an education program. The jargon, expectations and methods of teaching were different. I was not used to the freedom and flexibility in choosing and completing certain assignments. In the nursing programs the protocol was very rigid and the nursing mentality is like no other. I had been a nursing student or a nursing instructor for the last fifteen years. This was a strange, new world.

Accommodating the needs of my child with the expectations of school was a balancing act. I would schedule my schoolwork around Jordan's sleep times. If she was irritable, sick or just needing a cuddle I would panic as I longingly looked at the unread books and unfinished assignments.

*Well yet again I haven't finished my paper. Jordy needed her mama tonight and I was so tired I couldn't see straight. I'll set the alarm early tomorrow and hope for the best. (Journal, February 1995)*

Finding appropriate childcare was a nightmare. I was very lucky when a family with children moved in next door. Theresa, the mother, became a great friend and also did the majority of child minding for me. Jorden became another member of their family. In the evenings I would hire another university student. I would get very uptight when an instructor would keep us late after a class. My sitter was great but demanded me home at a certain time. I was always afraid that she would quit on me. There were times when the stress of finding appropriate childcare would make me miss a class or not finish an assignment.

The academic arena was indifferent to the needs of a lone-parent. The day cares are closed. Summer classes start before day cares are open. There are no scholarships or financial considerations given to lone parents. Money was always an issue.

My emotional well being was questionable while being a student. In the second year I began to experience terrible migraines. I was on a fist name basis with the staff at the hospital emergency department. I was a regular visitor for I.V. medication to break the migraine cycle. Being ill was one more brick on my guilt wall. I hated leaving Jorden to be in school, yet I could rationalize that it was a short-term situation. She would come into the office and cry for attention while I was working on an assignment. I would either “shoo” her away or begrudgingly turn off the computer. One day I totally lost it:

*I got up at 0500 this morning to work on my project. This seems to be the only time when I can have uninterrupted access to my brain. After working for a couple of hours I decided to go down for a shower before Jords woke up. When I came up from the shower she was sitting at the desk and the work was gone. I freaked, I started to scream and cry. I could not find it. Two hours of work down the tubes.*

*Am I ever going to finish? These are the times when I resent my family, Bill and the world. I hate having to do this alone. I'm not strong enough. Help!* (Journal, June, 1997)

That night I had a neighbor come over and look for the document. He is a computer whiz. He did not find it. I was pissed at myself. I should not have assumed that Jorden would sleep in and I should have closed down the computer. Why it did not automatic save I will never know.

I was not coping very well. My stress level was over the moon. I did not feel that I had the time or money to do those stress relieving things that had worked in earlier years. I began to eat compulsively. My reward for a hard day would be to rent a movie. After Jorden was in bed I would load up with food and plop my self down in front of the television. This did wonders for my guilt and for my clothing size. The migraines were getting worse and my relationship with my daughter was on a very tight wire. I realized that I had to change something or I would end up in a depression again. I was familiar with the symptoms and they were staring me in the face. I withdrew from one of my courses and began to attend a Single Parent Support Group. The group was not that beneficial for me. The people attending talked about their spouses and court problems. I could not relate to this but I really enjoyed sitting quietly for a couple of hours with no responsibilities.

I also joined a woman's reading group. This group was discussing the Celestine Prophecy. The group was a breath of fresh air. These were critical thinking women. Some had pulled away from traditional religions and relationships. They were exploring new territories in spirituality, self-care and the universe at large. Through this group I found a safe place to explore and express myself.

*Tonight the group rented a small gym at Gilbert Patterson School. We shut off most of the lights and began to play music. Nadia had brought a bunch of scarves and flowing pieces of material. I spent the night in movement. I felt very sexual and sensual as I allowed my body to move and flow anyway it felt. It was so freeing. I rolled along the walls, imagined myself as Isadora and felt very beautiful. The lumpy forty-year old mother was transformed into a beautiful, lithe woman. It was magic. (Journal, February, 1996)*

My support network is a diverse group of people. On one hand are my neighbors and old friends. These people have become my family. Nana Margie could always be called upon for a cup of tea and a listening ear. As the ultimate garage sale woman she would often supply Jorden with clothing and toys. I met Margie ten years ago when I nursed her husband. She took me under her wing and I became like a daughter to her. She sees Jorden more than my mother and is a true grandmother to her. She is Jorden's biggest fan. Theresa and Randy, the neighbors, are also like family. Jorden calls Randy 'daddy' and he quite likes it. Theresa is Jorden's babysitter and loves her as her own. Jessy and Michael, the two brothers are like my sons. They play and fight with Jorden like siblings. Even the two dogs get along.

My women's group help me remember who I am, me, Kathie. I can explore my spirituality and my humanness. I can meditate, read alternative books, receive and give massages and other nurturing expressions of caring. Margie and the Joblonkay family let me be a part of a true family environment. I am accepted as I am, warts and all.

My biological family support me with phone calls, letters and money. My mom was there when Jorden was born. They have a special bond. My mother is in her mid -eighties

and visits us at least four times a year. My aunt is one of my favorite people in the world. She has always been a huge support. It is important to me that Jorden gets to know her.

My family history and the women in my family are strong influences of the woman I am and the decisions I have made. They are in my mind and heart at all times.

### **Maureen**

Maureen is an attractive, statuesque mother of a six- year old son. She is the only female in a family of four and was brought up in a traditional European manner. Maureen married at a very young age. She attributes this decision to the fact that her father died in front of her when she was very young. During her growing up years she recalls her mother saying “Hey, you know, don’t bother getting an education, you are going to get married anyway and your role in life is to create a home environment that is happy and healthy for your husband and children.” After ten years in an emotionally abusive relationship Maureen decided to leave when her husband ‘got physical’ with her in front of her son. At thirty years of age, with her three-year-old son under her arm, Maureen left. She relocated 3,000 miles away to be near her mother and brothers.

In the three years following the break up Maureen was on welfare. She hated the stigma and the stereotyping of being the typical ‘welfare mom.’ During the time on welfare she had to sort through her own grief of the marriage break up. She went through a depression and worked very hard to pull herself together. She took counseling and made some life decisions.

Because she took her son away from his father Maureen was committed to stay at home with him until he went to school.



*I was willing to do anything, jump through their hoops and put up with all the crap to stay home with my son. I knew I had done the right thing by leaving, but man that guilt can really kill ya. (Smith Transcripts, 1996, p. 6)*

The year Matthew, her son, went into grade one Maureen decided to go to university. She recalls:

*What prompted me to return to school was the fact that I was extremely determined to be financially secure and be proud of myself. Up until that point I had been a very, good daughter, good wife and then I was a good mother, and I had never tested my wings...I didn't know if I had any smarts, any brains to rub together and some of the choices, like my marriage, were made born out of fear. I did not want to find myself in that position ever again. (Smith Transcripts, 1996, p. 3)*

The first year of full-time school for Maureen and Matthew was very difficult. Matthew is a very quiet, sensitive little boy. He did not adapt to being away from his mother full time. At the same time Maureen was trying to fit into her role as a university student. Maureen recalls putting her family on the back burner as she made her way in the role of student/single mother.

*I had to learn to make very deliberate efforts to make time for my child. If I don't he will get lost in the shuffle.... So I really, like I said earlier, I am very much at odds with my parenting role and my student role. I really have to juggle them.*

*Well...there were at least three occasions in my five years at university in which I have actually withdrawn from summer courses. (Smith Transcripts, 1996, p. 22)*

As Maureen began to balance her school commitments with her family time Matthew began to improve in his school. His grades went up and he began to make friends. Maureen recalls:

*I was so excited one day when Matthew brought a friend home to play. Before he would come home with this hang dog expression and I would have to cuddle him and literally drag out of him what was wrong. Man, I was so guilty. It was a continual struggle to find that balance where you didn't feel like you were ripping your child off...So guilt was a predominating scene in many of my endeavors during that time I would say. (Smith Transcripts, 1996, p. 22)*

Maureen also juggles the role as the main support for her aging mother. Although there are three other children in Maureen's family she has always been the main support for her mother. Maureen and her mom have a very loving relationship. Maureen's mother is an emotional support to Maureen and Matthew and is available for some childcare.

By the time Maureen had begun university her ex-husband had relocated to Lethbridge to be closer to their son. Maureen had mixed emotions about this. On one hand she wanted Matthew to know his father and on the other hand, the time and energy involved in maintaining the relationship is strenuous. Matthew was to stay with his dad every second weekend and Dan was known to cancel at the last minute. Maureen was left holding the bag. She would have to cancel her plans and comfort Matthew. As time went on the relationship between Maureen and her ex-husband improved. On weekends when Maureen wanted to go out Dan would take Matthew for an overnight visit.

Maureen also experienced stress in her role as a student. She remembers the first few weeks at the university:

*I was so intimidated. I had a very limited skill base. I was really unfamiliar with all these demands coming from all different areas. I didn't know how to juggle it, I didn't know where I fit into the scheme of things and how I should manage it. Here were these young kids, you know, I mean I was ten years older than them, and they seemed to have the ropes all figured out. They knew the student loan routine and the "how to get an extension on a paper game." I felt like a gawky kid from the sticks. Hey, I guess that's what I was. (Laughter) (Smith Transcripts, 1996, p. 25)*

Maureen also recollects the nights when she would be up until 0400 completing a paper for the next day.

*After I would get Matthew settled I would settle down with my coffee and smokes in front of the typewriter and blitz. The deadlines for papers were always killers for me. I would get them done at the absolute last second. God, I remember one winter night when I ran out of smokes. Yep, I put my coat on over my nightie and walked to the 7/11...in a snowstorm! Hey, a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do. I was so lucky that my mom had stayed over that night. I was a zombie in the morning anyway, imagine what I would have been like without my smokes. (Smith Transcripts, 1996, p. 31)*

Finances were another stress for Maureen and her family. She had applied for student loans and bursaries. In the beginning of the school year the funds were late. Maureen had to turn to her brothers and mom for financial support. There were times when she had to refuse Matthew participation in school activities because the money was not available for the necessary uniform or equipment. Matthew's father gave a minimal amount of child support. This money could not be depended upon. Maureen was not willing to take

a part-time job during the school year, as she knew that this would take even more time away from her son.

Maureen's methods of coping were her social life and her spirituality "Prayers and partying." On her free weekends Maureen would plan to go out with her friends, go away, or just spend some time alone relaxing.

*I really needed those weekends for myself. Most days I felt pulled in a dozen different directions; school, mom, Matthew, my brothers. I mean where did I fit in to all this? It was so cool to get dressed up and go out to a club with my girlfriends. You know we would start the evening at one of our houses and yak over a few drinks, then we would go to a few clubs. It was such a good time. (Smith Transcripts, 1997, p. 33)*

Participation in her church is a very integral part of Maureen's life. Every Sunday she attends church service with her son and mother. This is followed with a shared meal. Maureen believes that her relationship with the Lord is very instrumental in getting through every day. At home she and Matthew pray together daily. Matthew attends a Christian school and Maureen is a participatory parent.

*Sending Matthew to a Christian school is not cheap. It's like I know they are teaching him the morals I teach him at home and I know the morals of the kids he is playing with. That is a real load off for me. I just wish it were free. (Smith Transcripts, 1997, p. 31)*

Maureen recognizes her experience at university as a way to increase her self-esteem and self-assurance.

*This year has been a real growth process for me in addition to my academic learning. I gained more confidence, I thought wow, you know I can do a lot of things. I came from a place of very low self-esteem to a place of slowly recognizing my personal excellence and the skills and talents that I possessed. Because I became tuned into my individual excellence and appreciation of others, I think it has made me a better parent. (Smith Transcripts, 1997, p .30)*

Maureen finds that her relationship with Matthew has taken on some new characteristics. As she looks at him as her child and as an individual she can see the potential and the growth. She believes that she is sending him the message that if you are determined to do anything, you can do it. Don't be afraid.

At the end of her third year, Maureen is on the Dean's List. Matthew has passed into grade three. They plan on taking a couple of weeks off to go camping with her mother. She will work part-time and take one summer course.

### **Theresa**

Theresa is a full-time teacher, a full-time mother of four and a part-time graduate student. Her children are between the ages of nine and sixteen. She is recently divorced from a well-known man within the community, and as a result she has experienced a change in status and a drop in income. Theresa has lost one child to terminal illness and two of her children have chronic medical problems.

As we sit in the kitchen at Theresa's home preparing for an interview my eyes wander over the walls and counter. Theresa's home is full of creativity and color. The house is warm and welcoming. When I comment on this she offers a tour of her home.

As we walk from room to room Theresa talks about how strictly her husband controlled her behavior. She tells me her husband had a set protocol for everything from cleaning house to making coffee. Any change from his protocol or any creative venture by Theresa was met with ridicule.

Theresa walks me through her sunroom. She has designed and built this addition to her home with the help of her father. Her office is full of half-completed projects ranging from a huge female bust made with Plaster of Paris to a humorous novel on divorce. Her children's room explodes with color and design. We enter the bathroom and I burst with laughter. The medicine cabinet is open. Theresa has painted in large colorful bottles of cough medicine, aspirin and a very large bottle of anti-stress pills. The walls are painted with stencils of vine and flowers. As I look into the mirror I read an affirmation that she has painstakingly painted (Backwards) on the wall behind me. We return to the kitchen and Theresa explains her rationale for returning to graduate school:

*I was afraid of living my life in fear and I had to test the waters on some level...in school I will have to have to test my own strength...I didn't know if I had any smarts, any brains to rub together. I was in an emotionally abusive marriage where I was told that I was stupid for twenty years...I needed to get out and prove to myself, and maybe even to him that "Hey, I am not just stupid.*

(Smith Transcripts, 1997, p. 45)

Theresa also returned to school to meet new people and to have a social outlet. In the process of "proving something to herself" Theresa found the social network that she developed with her co-students a "life-saver." The socializing during and after classes gave Theresa a whole new opinion about herself. She was initially astonished that people found

her bright, funny and valued her opinion. Theresa feels that the peripheral friendships and activities strengthen her ability to parent and her self-esteem. She explains:

*Well, I think in a way it could have often strengthened my parenting, having that night out, meeting other people, getting a strong support network has obviously made a more solid foundation, to be a parent. I feel good about myself because I have had a lot of unexpected, and first I totally disregarded, the compliments about my writing and um, you know I am getting two things published now. You know I never would have dreamed that I would be doing that... I was married to someone who felt that he was more intelligent, better looking, just everything, and therefore I was just left. It is nice to go out on your own and find out that hey, I have some attributes that some people admire. Because that is a first for me and I am forty years old.*(Smith Transcripts, 1997, p. 48)

Theresa has found her time at the university as time to explore her own worth, a place to create strong relationships and discover her own strengths. In her marriage Theresa found her role was clearly defined as wife and mother. She was the last to know when he approached her for a separation and divorce.

*I was going along with my head in the clouds, dutiful wife and mother. Wow, I didn't see it coming for miles. When I found out he was leaving me for a young, skinny cutie pie I nearly died. But now I couldn't be happier, well I would be happier if I didn't have to go to court for child support. But overall I think my kids and I are doing fine.*(Smith Transcripts, 1997, p. 49)

The marriage break-up and Theresa's decision to return to school has put her in a new frame of reference. On one hand the financial picture has changed drastically. She makes

regular visits to the courts to get her child support, children's glasses paid for and other financial issues cleared up that are related to the divorce. As a student she is now on the other side of the desk and vulnerable to the decisions of the professors and the institution. These perceived or real losses of control over personal and professional decisions can potentiate stress. Theresa is employed full time and attends university on a part-time basis. She looks forward to her night class. It is a time to see everybody. "A treat to get out of the house, I think that sometimes it has been a life saver." Theresa meets with her friends after class at a local pub. This time for herself is one of the ways she has found to cope with stress. With only twenty-four hours in a day Theresa has found ways to control the stress in her life. Once a self-identified martyr she reflects on the humor she now brings into her life situation. At night instead of crying she gets into bed and yells "Is everyone in the world happy now, can I go to bed?" Through time and practice Theresa has learned to define her own limits. She is saying "no" more often with less guilt. She is giving time to herself and her friends and she takes a catnap every night after supper.

*I cope by cutting out a lot of things that are not necessary. Like there have been Christmases where four different kids have four different plays or whatever. I'm like; there is no way that I can go...This year it would have been at three different schools. It is just too much. So I don't make apologies and I don't feel guilty...I have too much on my plate. I go on doing as much as I can every day. So I have just learned to say "no" and let it go...I figure as long as the kids are relatively well fed and clothed, you know, we don't have cockroaches so we are O.K. and that is good enough. (Smith Transcripts, 1997, p. 51)*



Theresa has a strong support network: her parents and her ex in-laws. They help her with finances, house upkeep and the children. Theresa also has a strong network of female friends. These women remind Theresa that she needs to take care of herself. She speaks to them frequently on the telephone and they have a “night out” once a week.

*I go out once a week. This could be to the pub or for a video. Basically we meet for a good yak. The standing joke is every week someone checks my eczema. For my other friend we check how many chocolate bar wrappers there are in her car. These are our stress barometers. Sometimes we meet to actually do something. Last week we painted my girlfriend's kitchen. It was fun you know, good music, and junk food. We had it done in an afternoon. This group keeps me going. They hold my hand or give me a kick in the pants, whichever I need. (Smith Transcripts, 1997, p. 61)*

As the interview comes to a close Theresa reflects on her first months after the separation and divorce and how far she has come:

*It's like I'm another person or in another world. I let my husband pick my friends and our brand of coffee. I had no idea about my abilities or talents. Between losing my child and losing my marriage I felt hopeless. I went into therapy and slowly picked up my life. At the time I was doing it for my kids. I don't think I cared if I lived or died at some points. Now I've shed a layer, kind of a rebirth...not religious, you know what I mean. (Smith Transcript, 1998, p. 60)*

Stress is nothing more than too many demands on too few resources. It is a fact of everyday life. Coping with stress involves not so much isolating its sources but, more importantly, by increasing the resources available to cope with its inevitability (Engber & Klungness, 1995).

*Today my interview with Theresa brought me to my knees. Here is a woman with four children, two of whom had chronic illnesses. She goes out, she laughs, she has parties and she let her dust bunnies pro create. I feel like a whiner. I'm also grateful as she made some observations about my situation and how difficult it was to go to school with a baby and how first children are always the most work. She's right, single parenthood is not a uniform situation. (Journal, August 1996)*

Theresa has taken the role of student as a catalyst for personal growth and exploration. She takes life one day at a time and has found humor and hope in her role as lone-parent/student.

### **Warrior Connection**

The final interviews with the group took place three years after the first interview. I asked the women to describe the experience of participating in the project. All the women felt that having the chance to tell their stories gave them an opportunity to reflect on their life decisions, something they would not normally do. One woman found the time to reflect helped her decide to stay in school.

*At the time of the interview I was really feeling shitty. My marks in school were in the toilet and I felt like this was going to be yet another failure. My son was in trouble again and his teacher had called me for an interview. I was feeling pretty worthless. After the interview I realized how far I had come. I felt pretty good about myself. Instead of quitting I went to my professor and arranged an extension. It worked out pretty well. (Helen, Transcripts, 1998, p. 81)*

The women enjoyed the opportunity to be a part of the project. They found the interviews helpful in clarifying where they had come from and where they are going.

Reflecting back on the past several years of being a lone-parent /student the women voiced their resentment. They resented the time they had had to spend away from their children, the difficulty of not having enough money and the challenge of balancing being a good parent with the rigorous demands of school.

Most of the women declared themselves to be high achievers. Very early in the academic game each came to realize that the extra time needed to maintain the high grades was time away from their children.

*You know, when we talk like this, I realize how big it all is. Normally, I just carry on and put out each fire as it comes along, you know. Seeing it as a big picture makes me think I'm out of my mind.* (Maya, Transcripts, 1998, p. 61)

Taking the time to reflect on their lives enabled them to see the big picture. The experience of lone-parent is not uniform. Every woman has a different story, a different path to the role of lone-parent/student. Yet every story, every interview had similar themes.

The largest stress factor identified by the women in the study was guilt. The mothers felt guilt for a variety of reasons. Some of the mothers were felt guilty for raising their children in a one-parent family. The fact that this situation was not their decision did not lessen the guilt. Being a student meant more time away from their children. Although the women knew intellectually that this was a temporary situation balancing the conflicting roles of parent and student was very difficult at times. The role of student demanded a certain amount of commitment and work. Many of the women found themselves to be high achievers and they struggle to either maintain their marks or to let go of their high academic expectations.

*I have always been an A student. When I discovered that the time it took to keep an A average at the Master's level was time away from my kids I made the choice to be with my kids. But I didn't like it, logical or not, I didn't like it one bit. I kinda felt ripped off you know. (Maya, Transcript, 1998, p. 77)*

There were worries about not having enough money, not spending time with family or friends, too many dust bunnies and self-neglect.

Another significant theme was the importance of a support network. The women were very clear about what helped them to maintain a level of sanity and structure, and for all of the women it was their friends. Some of the friends were new, from their classes at school, and others were older, long-term, from their church or from their previous life as a married woman. Some of the most supportive friends were family members. For each woman the friends provided a safe place to vent, an extra pair of hands, or an extra five dollars. Spending time with their friends at the pub, on a walk or painting a room was a method of survival for the women. Their friends were there to remind them of who they were beyond their role as parent or student. Through these friendships the women were finding out about their own identities. They were accepting taking new challenges and succeeding, and for some of them this was the first time.

As the women became more adept at coping they found their parenting skills and their self-concept improved.

There were three main themes identified as reasons for returning to school. Firstly, the women wanted to prove to themselves, their families and their ex-spouses that they were capable and smart. Secondly, they wanted to provide a safe and financially secure home for their kids. This security would make them independent. It was very important for them to

never have to depend on another person for money or security. Finally, they wanted to discover who they were. What are their skills? Could they make new friends? Did they have something that the rest of society would find useful? Could they learn self-respect and self-acceptance?

In taking a large step out of their familiar comfort zone the women believe themselves to be better people. They perceive themselves as better parents and role models. They are able to accept and even welcome new experiences and changes in their lives. They are no longer scared. In the process of being a student and a parent they have discovered their own strength and talents. They are delighted with the new friendships and relationships that are a part of their lives.

In the ongoing process of the project, the women discussed and discovered their own needs and identified strengths. The transition in mind set was tangible. In each interview we would share personal observations. I would also share the common threads within the group. Through the conversations and my own self-exploration I found my image of how I identified female, lone-parent, students change. My initial image of the women as an invisible minority had evolved into an image of the women as gentle warriors, women with substance and strength.

In Alice Walker's Warrior Marks (1993) she affirms "The world is something that that is made by human beings and it can be remade by each and every one of us. Let us remake it with tenderness and love" (p. 235). In my relationship with the women in the interview group, my Advisor and in my own mirror I saw women combining the strength and integrity of a warrior with the love and commitment to their children and their lives.

We shared tears of joy and tears of frustration. We laughed at ourselves and with each other. I saw that we are Gentle Warriors.

### **Down the Road**

I am very grateful to the women who participated in my project. They have shown me strength, courage and humor. Their stories and experiences assisted me in the transition of seeing female, lone-parents as a victimized group ignored by society to a group of strong, active women.

It has been three years since the beginning of this project. The interviews have continued as formally taped meetings and informal telephone calls. The lives of these women, who have become my friends, have all moved forward.

Maureen has completed her degree and is teaching at a community college. She also offers workshops on empowerment and self-esteem for women. Her son lives with his dad. It is a very amicable situation and Maureen sees her son frequently. She is in a different, comfortable relationship and has just purchased her first home.

Theresa continues to work toward her Master's degree. She has taken the summer off and spends more time with her children. She is busy with home renovations, laying tiles in her bathroom. Theresa wrote a satire on divorce as a catharsis during the early stages of her marriage break up. It is going to be published.

I am living in Vancouver, rediscovering a city I left over ten years ago. I am also becoming reacquainted with old friends and family members. I am employed as a nurse educator. My spare time is filled with cultural events and walks along the beach. Jordan is now five years old, making new friends in her new home. She is attending a multicultural Montessori Pre-school. The move to Vancouver has been both difficult and wonderful.

With all of my life and risks I look back and wonder how I made those decisions and how did they turn out the way they did. My decision to do a Masters Degree is one of those decisions. Overall, I do not regret my time as a lone-parent/student. It was a time for me to reestablish my capabilities and strengths. I had to take this journey to resume a life course of personal choice and confidence. I doubt that I would have started had I been aware of the pain, anguish, fear and frustration it involved, much like my pregnancy, labor and delivery. With both of these experiences behind me I take my daughter in one hand and my degree in another and move forward. Around the corner are more questions, adventures and challenges, more life.

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