



Trauma Mama: Little Girl Riding Shotgun in My Psyche

by Christine Cissy White

“I love you,” I say to my daughter.

“Of course you do,” she says, “I’m awesome.”

She was twelve. The mother in me smiled. The girl I was shook her head inside and wondered how would it have been to feel both loved and lovable while a child?

I do not know. I will never know.

It does not matter how wonderful my present.

It does not matter who I will become.

I can’t change the past.

The past is a country I never want my daughter to travel near or in. I am an exile, from my past, my child self. There are no photo albums I want to share with my daughter. No traditions I want to pass on or teach.

My cultural pride is shame.

My native tongue is a memory I try to scrape clean so mud doesn’t cake out of my mouth. My greatest gift of maternal love is to insist she get no heirloom.

My gift is to break the cycle and attempt to give something I didn’t own as a child.

Safety.

Comfort.

Responsiveness.

Attachment.

I am not a child-girl-victim anymore. I’m a mother-woman-adult. Except, I will always be both.

No one gets to choose whether they are victimized or not which is why the past is never completely done. I can’t unknow that uncertainty.

We are not only the present but who and where we came from.

I know my parents, her grandparents, did the best they could. And I know it was lacking.

I know my parents had no more for themselves than they had for me and it was not enough.

Because of that, I am raising my actual daughter as well as my emotional self....

She is the foundation of the life I now live in. She is not where I live now.

I weathered storms without coast guards or police to warn me, evacuate or take me to safety.

I endured extreme conditions like countless others.

I tried to “pass” for normal and pretend we had not just been through tsunami weekends and pretending was often the hardest part.

I went to school wet, hungry, shivering without homework or lunch bags or confidence. My 11-year-old self was a bed-wetting girl who also got her period. She didn't have access to sanitary supplies or clean sheets.

She went to school sitting on her hands, hoping blood wouldn't mark school chairs. She held her breath, hoping it would keep others from smelling her. She didn't know the words abuse or neglect. She just thought she was dirty, smelly, and life was hard.

The little girl I was was not as confident as my own child is now.

Sometimes I watch my daughter and marvel. I celebrate when she asks for more food and affection, without worry, apology, hesitation, or shame.

It feels victorious at times.

Sometimes I worry I am parenting to my voids rather than her gifts. How can I keep my distorted beliefs from seeping through my floorboards where my daughter's bare feet cross?

I know now that I was a scrappy and innocent warrior doing the best I could, but that is not what I grew up believing. I “knew” I was damaged and that something in me caused people to act bad.

I can't go back and give accuracy or truth to the child me I was during development. I can't go back and inhabit my body or the world as a child who felt safe. I can't know in my bones that felt experience.

Instead, I inhabited faulty beliefs, a less empowered view of reality and marinated in fear.

How do I shed my former self while honoring all she went through to be this mother and adult?

I know the world offers beauty, love, and health. I'm eager, giddy and surprised.

Can I teach my daughter to count on plenty and to pace herself? Can I teach her she need not hoard and grab for fear of going without? Can I

teach her that she has enough and is enough?

Sometimes, my daughter doesn't even finish a cupcake. It astounds me every time and I stare at the plate.

“I'm not hungry,” she says as she pushes it away.

I don't even understand how that is possible. Who leaves a half-eaten cupcake on a plate? Who, in childhood knows how to listen to her belly and lets go of the worry about what might come next? She's not afraid someone will take what's hers.

How can I model for her something I do not believe? How can I show her something she already knows better than I do?

How will I ever tell my daughter how sorry I am I was not whole from the beginning of her precious life? She deserved more. It's not my fault I wasn't whole but it's even less hers. It is me who is responsible for her even if my parents couldn't be responsible for me.

And I'm responsible for myself as well. Sometimes my hands and head have been too full tending to the child I was.

Will I apologize for not being more present for barbeques and picnics on the porch or swinging in the hammock?

Will I tell her why I sometimes need to go down into the basement to open up windows and let sunlight into the darkest, deepest and oldest crevices?

Being a survivor does not start or end with pregnancy, breastfeeding, hugging, bathing, or ever.

It does not start or end when our kids sleep through the night or have their first sleepovers.

It shapes who we are and how we do or do not come to know and share love, intimacy, partnership, and parenting.

It's not just that survivor parents sometimes relive the past as our kids grow. It's not just flashbacks that rock us.

It's the way clarity and perspective cause grief and confusion when we realize, reconcile and finally believe we were blameless, innocent and young.

Sometimes the work of parenting is monumentally hard, lonely and daunting. Other times, it is staggeringly beautiful and fortifying and healing.

Few people say childhood, trauma, and parenting in one sentence.

Fewer says, "It feels like this," or "Here's what I need," or "Here's how I figured out trust, love, boundaries or what relationships are supposed to be like."

Few ask those who were raised to normalize trauma how we navigated adolescence, sex, or childbearing and rearing.

Or didn't.

What we tried and discovered worked. Or did not.

Few get how unfamiliar we might be with calm, quiet or our own bodies.

Zora Neale Hurston wrote: "There are years that ask questions and years that answer."

My questioning is not yet done.

I am not looking for answers but companions. We need sacred and safe places for open and honest conversation. We need each other more than we need fixing because we also have gifts to give and share.

Once, my daughter heard another mom say to me, "You're such a good mom."

Later, my daughter said, "I'm the only one who can say if you are a good mom because I'm the only one you're the mother of."

I smiled.

I don't disagree with her reasoning.

I am raising two girls still. My own and the child I was. Will good enough truly be good enough?

I can only speak for me.

[Christine Cissy White](#) writes about child abuse, trauma, and resilience at the [ACES website](#). You can read the full entry [here](#). She maintains a [Facebook page called Heal Write Now](#) encouraging people to "Write Heavy, Live Light." Reposted with permission.

JPA

