

CARRYING ON: HOW POETRY HELPED A JEWISH DAUGHTER
MOURN THE LOSS OF HER MOTHER

by Lesléa Newman

Description: Lesléa Newman and her mother shared a love of literature, particularly poetry. Lesléa found that writing poems both during her mother's illness and after she died was a great comfort and a way to both mourn her mother's death and to celebrate her life. During this presentation, Lesléa will read brief selections from her poetry collection, *I Carry My Mother*, and discuss the writing process.

Lesléa Newman is the author of seventy books for readers of all ages including the children's books, *Ketzel*, *The Cat Who Composed* (2016 Sydney Taylor Award), *My Name Is Avivia*, and *Here Is the World: A Year of Jewish Holidays*; the short story collection, *A Letter to Harvey Milk*; and the poetry collection, *I Carry My Mother*. She has received poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. From 2008 - 2010, she served as the poet laureate of Northampton, MA.

Slide 1: Title of presentation

Slide 2: My mother was born in 1928.

Slide 3: When she was a teenager, she published a short story called "M is for" in her high school literary magazine.

Slide 4: The story is about a teenager named Florence who doesn't get along with her mother. My mother's name is Florence. She was often at odds with her mother.

Slide 5: My grandmother found the story. She was not pleased.

My mother never published another story again. When I asked her why, she said, "I didn't see the need to pursue it."

Slide 6: When my mother was 18 she met my father.

Slide 7: When my mother was 21 she and my father married.

Slide 8: When my mother was 28, she gave birth to me.

Slides 9 & 10: When I was a teenager, I had a poem published in *Seventeen Magazine*.

Slide 11: When I was 30, my first novel, *Good Enough to Eat* was published. The book is about a young Jewish woman struggling with issues of body image and sexuality. I was a young Jewish woman struggling with issues of body image and sexuality. The mother in the book is not portrayed very favorably.

I told my mother about the book. I said, "It may hurt your feelings."
She said, "So, my feelings will be hurt. I'll get over it"

Slide 12: I wrote many more books, many of them about angst-ridden mother/daughter relationships including one entitled, *The Reluctant Daughter*. Again I told my mother her feelings might be hurt. She said, "As long as you tell the truth, that's all that matters." My mother made a deliberate choice not to thwart my writing career, as her mother had done to her writing career.

Slide 13: When I was 48 and my mother was 75 she got sick.

And then she got sicker with COPD and cancer.

Right before she died, she called me over to her hospital bed. "I'm giving you permission to write about all this under one condition."

"What's the condition?"

"Promise me I'll never have to read it."

Slide 14: Writing the poems that became the collection, *I Carry My Mother* held me together the first year after my mother's death. She knew that writing about her would help me mourn her, celebrate her, remember her, appreciate her, and learn to carry on without her. Having her permission to do so meant the world to me. I felt her presence very closely as I sat and wrote.

I chose to write the poems in formal verse. Concentrating on rhythm, rhyme, repetition, alliteration, line breaks, syllable count, and other poetic techniques did two things simultaneously:

it distanced me from my emotions because I had to step back and think about the writing and how the words fit together to create the poems;

It brought me closer to my emotions because I had to relive the experiences over and over and over again as I struggled to get the words exactly right

When I finished writing *I Carry My Mother* it was like losing my mom all over again. Reading the poems aloud brings her back to me, and so I would like to share some poems with you.

THE DEAL

My mother's doctor tells me, *here's the deal*
She's got six months to live, a year at most
His words lodge in my gut, a heavy meal
My mother's doctor tells me, *here's the deal*
I'm very sorry I know how you feel
But keep your chin up, don't give up the ghost
My mother's doctor tells me, *here's the deal*
She's got six months to live, a year at most

Slide 15

A DAUGHTER'S A DAUGHTER

My mother declares in her hospital room
That my fate was decided deep down in her womb.
*A son is a son until he takes a wife,
A daughter's a daughter for all of her life.*

She's telling me I am in charge of her fate,
While both of my brothers are deemed second rate.
As she's borne unto death, I will be her midwife
A daughter's a daughter for all of her life.

I argue, I reason, I try as I might,
I learned from the best how to put up a fight.
My mother and I are no strangers to strife,
A daughter's a daughter for all of her life.

The papers are signed, I'm to do as she's said,
If she cannot be cured, she would rather be dead.
Can I cut the cord of her life with a knife?
A daughter's a daughter for all of her life.

Slide 16

MY MOTHER KNITS

My mother knits a fuzzy pair
Of woolen socks for me to wear
The rocker creaking as she rocks
Her knitting needles tick like clocks
She doesn't have much time to spare

Her body in such disrepair
She's grown as thin and light as air
Death sniffing round her like a fox
My mother knits

She claims the root of her despair
Is simply that my feet are bare.
And so she knits and purls and blocks
Determined to cast off these socks
Before Death drags her to His lair,
My mother knits

IT'S TIME

My mother pale and frail and old
Her hands and feet so blue and cold
She looks at me with one dark eye
“It’s time,” she says, “for me to die.”

I know her life’s a bitter pill.
I know this has been coming. Still,
how on earth to say goodbye?
“It’s time,” she says, “for me to die.”

“It’s time,” she says, “for you to live.
You’ve given all you’ve got to give.
Just promise me that you won’t cry.
It’s time,” she says, “for me to die.”

She lays her hand upon my face.
My shattered heart begins to race.
My cheeks are anything but dry.
“It’s time,” she says, “for me to die.”

She turns from me and whispers, “Go,”
Her breath as soft and still as snow.
Her final words a whispered sigh.
“It’s time” she says, “for me to die.”

SHE WAS JUST HERE

She was just here and now she’s just gone
In a New York minute I lost my mother
How can the rest of the world carry on?
She was just here and now she’s just gone
On whose loving breast will I rest my head on?
I’ll search all my life but I won’t find another
She was just here and now she’s just gone
In a New York minute I lost my mother

Slide 17

HOW TO BURY YOUR MOTHER

Slip out of the dark limo
into the bright light of day
the way you once slipped
out of your mother:
blinking, surprised, teary-eyed.
Turn to your father
and let him take the crook of your arm
like the crooked old man
you never thought he'd become.
Feel your heels sink into the earth
with every sorry step you take.
Weave your way through the graves
of strangers who will keep your mother
company forever: the Greenblatts,
the Goldbergs, the Shapiros, the Steins.
Stop at a small mountain of dirt
next to a hole that holds the plain pine box
that holds what's left of your mother.
Listen to the rabbi mumble
prayers you've heard a hundred times
but this time offer no comfort.
Smell the sweet honeysuckle breeze
that is making your stomach buckle.
Feel the sun bake your little black dress.
Wait for the rabbi to close
his little black book.
Bring your father close to the earth
that is waiting to blanket your mother.
Watch him shove the shovel
into the mound upside down
showing the world how distasteful
this last task is.
See him dump clumps of soil
onto your mother's casket.
Hear the dull thuds
of your heart hammering your chest.
Watch how your father plants the shovel
into the silent pile of dirt
and then walks off
slumped over like a man
who finally admits defeat.
Step up to the mound.
Grasp the shovel firmly.
Lift it up and feel the warm wood

between your two damp hands.
Jab the shovel into the soil.
Toss the hard brown lumps
into that dark gaping hole.
Hear the dirt rain down upon your mother.
Surrender
the shovel to your brother.
Drag yourself away.
Do not look back.

Slide 18

MY MOTHER HAS MY HEART

My mother has my heart and I have hers,
We traded on the day that she gave birth.
Each passing year the line between us blurs,
Until the day I lay her in the earth.
My heart in her now cracked and split in two,
Her heart in me now wound down like a clock,
As she and I turn into something new,
The love between us hardens into rock.
My heart in her a newborn mourning dove,
Still safely tucked inside its sheltered nest.
Her heart in me a letter signed with love,
A treasure I keep deep within my chest.
From this day forth whatever else occurs,
My mother has my heart and I have hers.

Slide 19
SITTING SHIVA

Mirrors are covered
Wooden benches are set out
Have a good mourning

Where's the coffee pot?
I ask my father, who knows
my mother would know

Welcome. Please come in.
Sit anywhere. Except there!
That's my mother's chair

Ancient Hebrew prayers
cannot bring my mother back,
so what good are they?

My aunt spills her tea
when I speak to her softly
in my mother's voice

White coffee cup smeared
with my mother's red lipstick.
Don't you dare wash it.

Chocolate rugelach
my mother and I both love
clog my throat like mud

My mother's old friend
cups my face with both her hands
Fingers wet with tears

My aunt stands to leave.
"Call if you need anything."
I need my mother.

Slide 20
Yahrzeit

Golden autumn leaves
drift lazily through the air
onto Mother's grave

White winter snowflakes
fall all over themselves to
blanket Mother's grave

Gentle spring raindrops
are sent down from the heavens
to wash Mother's grave

Warm summer breezes
chase pale yellow butterflies
around Mother's grave

Today marks a year
endless tears soak one small stone
placed on Mother's grave

Slide 21

I CARRY MY MOTHER

I carry my mother wherever I go
Her belly, her thighs, her plentiful hips
Her milky white skin she called this side of snow
The crease of her brow and the plump of her lips

Her belly, her thighs, her plentiful hips
The curl of her hair and her sharp widow's peak
The crease of her brow and the plump of her lips
The hook of her nose and the curve of her cheek

The curl of her hair and her sharp widow's peak
The dark beauty mark to the left of her chin
The hook of her nose and the curve of her cheek
Her delicate wrist so impossibly thin

The dark beauty mark to the left of her chin
Her deep set brown eyes that at times appeared black
Her delicate wrist so impossibly thin
I stare at the mirror, my mother stares back

Her deep set brown eyes that at times appeared black
Her milky white skin she called this side of snow
I stare at the mirror, my mother stares back
I carry my mother wherever I go

"The Deal," "A Daughter's a Daughter," "My Mother Knits," "It's Time," "She Was Just Here," "How to Bury Your Mother," "My Mother Has My Heart," "Sitting Shiva," "Yahrtzeit," "I Carry My Mother" copyright © 2015 Lesléa Newman from *I Carry My Mother* (Headmistress Press, Sequim, WA). Used by permission of the author.