
The Anne Sexton Complex

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Abstract

From Sylvia Plath to Virginia Woolf and Anne Sexton, artists have identified with the downward pull of the creative unconscious toward death. Death appears in images of a sexual, mystical, or ecstatic union with the ghostly lover or mother. This paper explores an alternative creative model for women that does not lead to death, by documenting the case history of a woman artist who attempted suicide, but who lived to tell her story. The case history is written as a narrative voice in the words of the author and in the words of the client.

Maria walked in one day crying: "My mother died when she was forth-five years old, my stepmother did not live pasty forty-five, Anne Sexton committed suicide when she was forty-five and I, being forth-five, am afraid that I will not make forty-sixth birthday." That week, Maria took an overdose of sleeping pills in combination with drinking.

What was the mystery of her identification with Anne Sexton? How was Maria part of a tradition of women, from Anne Sexton to Sylvia Plath to Marilyn Monroe, who identified with a tragic heroine figure whose creativity led to death? These women wrestled with the ultimate existential concerns of death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980, pp. 8-11), but in a way which was unique to their particular roles as women.

The high incidence of my women clients who struggled to express their creativity and who were alone was of deep concern for me. Being alone, perhaps never having children, balancing the needs for autonomy with the needs for relationship, feeling vulnerable and facing aging alone was special significance for these women. Additionally, their creativity was not in service of work and consciousness, but in service of the unconscious; they immersed themselves in journal writing, doomed love affairs and dreams. Like many women, they know how to swoon, and their form of surrender was sexual, mystical, and ecstatic. Darkness speaks of the archetype of this combination of death, blood, and bliss. Instead of denying death, as is so common in our culture, these women experienced death as a morbid fascination, an obsession, and addition, a denial of living. Finally, in defining themselves as women-selves in a repressive society, these women often experienced conflicts between sexuality and spirituality, between images of whore and virgin, between being wild and ladylike. Their difficulty freeing themselves from creative blocks, from death, and from constricted sexuality seemed to be related to difficulty separating from their mothers and standing alone.

The more I became concerned with these issues, the more I felt that women needed alternative role models to these romantic, tragic heroines. Can a woman be creative, alone, separate, loving, and still thrive?

What can we learn about this complex in women, the conjunction of creativity, spirituality, sexuality and darkness, so that other women can be helped? In an obituary written for Anne Sexton, the poet Denise Levertov wrote:

We who are alive must make clear, as she could not, the distinction
Between creativity and self-destruction. The tendency to confuse the
Two has claimed too many victims . . .
(in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 397)

How do we begin to differentiate self-destruction from creativity, providing hopeful role models and roadmaps for women?

I have called the pattern of romanticizing and identifying creativity with darkness and death the “Anne Sexton” complex. The investigation of how women might have this complex yet still live is the subject of this chapter. This investigation will take the form of a case history, where I will present Maria’s case in as much as possible her own words, and connect her major themes with related themes of Anne Sexton. In closing, I will present her own words on how she was able to create a different end to her story than Anne Sexton. Finally, I will draw some conclusion about how the Anne Sexton complex is a particular way of living out fundamental existential themes for some women, and how it may be possible to re-write the story without a tragic ending.

Case History

When Maria came for her first session, I was impressed with her grace and intelligence. She was petite, blond hair pulled back, artfully dressed and groomed. She spoke about her life with clarity and insight, and seemed serious about helping herself in therapy.

Born in the Southwest, she had three sisters and a stepbrother and stepsister. Although she described her mother as “...like Anne Sexton. She never really wanted children and was restless”, Maria’s mother still played out the role of the 1950’s convention American housewife. Her mother and sisters “...were all dependent women, not able to stand on their own feet, not able to make a stand for themselves.” Her mother died when she was 19, and the father left them at that time. Sent away to live with an uncle, Maria had recurring images of being an orphan. At age 30 or 31, she was raped, and said that life never came back together after that time. She went to live with her sister, to try to find family, but found that it did not work. Instead, she came to San Francisco, where she has been trying to create a new life for the past one and a half years. She works in a corporate office with mostly men, still had not made friends, and is very lonely.

Freedom

While acknowledging that she did manage to break out of the role of stereotype and convention of her mother’s expectation, Maria was still not enjoying her freedom. Ironically, she imagined that the housewives might envy her life and independence, and

fantasize that she was spending her time partying and romancing. Instead, she worked hard, and came home to her single apartment, where lovely objects were arranged tastefully. Nothing messed up her life, no one interrupted, and she had everything just as she wanted. What was missing? Other people, mess, life, and a meaningful focus. When I asked her how she was using her creativity, she said she had no outlet. She called herself a “closet artist”, and knew that she had to “dig down” and find out what her life’s calling was supposed to be about. Writing in her journal and being solitary, she was becoming increasingly isolated. Sadly, she said she was “getting scared, was working all day and crying all night, and that life was getting out of control.” Drinking was effort for her to find “spirits,” or courage to connect and create. Her freedom was a “false freedom,” where she actually stayed in her apartment all weekend. The poignant picture for me was of a beautiful woman torn between fearful independence and a longing for connection. She was too fascinated with darkness, inwardness, and needed stability, connection, and earth.

Ghostly Lover

The first dream Maria told me was a powerful one for her, in which her boyfriend from when she was seventeen appeared, saying, “Call me.” They were the “first” for each other, and seemed destined for marriage. They then both married others, and lost touch. After the dream, Maria did call Dennis, who said that he had been thinking about her during his travels, and how beautiful she was. Maria said “I never thought I was beautiful: I am possessed.” She had never been talked to like that by a man, and felt that she could not marry another. She felt abandoned by him, as she had been abandoned by her father and mother. He married someone else... “safe, I had too much passion.” He stayed with her as a fantasy, but she felt that she lived more in fantasy than in reality. She said: “I’ve never really been on earth...ethereal...never owned property.” The theme of being attached to fantasy, to what has been called the Ghostly Lover, and therefore having not lived life fully haunted Maria and was a continuing theme of our work.

Witch

She told me of a significant dream: “A man and a woman are traveling together. He is from a Latin American country...she carries with her a little creature – it might be a bird – it seems small and fits in between her hands. They enter a forest and come upon a community of people living in the forest... to honor (the man), they take the woman and tie her to a cross... they set the cross on fire and she is burned to death. Upon awakening, I kept trying to make it come out better, to convince myself that she didn’t die, but reasoned that she had to have died. She could not have survived the burning cross.”

Maria called this her first sacrifice dream. Her associations were that she gave an animal, her symbolic self, to the man before she was sacrificed. She did have a black cat, was close to animals, but “women were burned at the stake for living alone and talking to animals.” This meant to Maria that they were close to their instincts, which we are too. She said: “I always said I’d be burned as a witch... I am a threat – to whom? To the established order; I’ve always been self-sufficient.” Her early memories were of being called “the single type”, taking care of herself and living alone. When I asked her what might be her quality that threatened others, she cried, saying: “I’m out of touch with my power, I have no idea what it would be.” On the other hand, Maria described herself as

very competent at work, often threatening others, with a strong intuitive sense of people's innate character and dynamics. She long to use this capacity constructively, to be a healer, but did not know how. Tearful, she described this dream as about "transformation"; the ability to find inherent power in a dangerous or pathological situation.

Virgin/Whore

In another dream, Maria was drinking and dressed like a gypsy. Images of the "whore" came up as Maria described how her mother wanted her to be "wholesome" and "ladylike", and disapproved of her being a dancer. Maria was fascinated with the image of the whore, danced topless once, and had a friendship with a woman who was a prostitute.

As she described this image to me, I was struck with Maria's blond beauty. She was impeccably dressed all in white, said she was called "Madonna" at work, but was afraid of the whore image. Maria had been raped, and was afraid that after the rape people would accuse her of inviting it. She tried to "not look as if she was inviting trouble", and was afraid that her past would create problems in relationships with men. As she talked, she normally sat in a composed and ladylike way. Yet when she laughed, and when she drank, a whole different, bawdy and life-affirming side emerged. She had a wonderful sense of humor, which she credits with having saved her often in the past.

Sleeping Beauty

For the last thirteen years, Maria has been celibate. Her sense about herself is that she needed to purify herself, to let something die and be read for something new.

Just before her suicide attempt, Maria had a dream of crashing cars. She was surrounded by "paramedics, and a woman in white standing over me. I asked her whether I would live or die." "I know now that it was my unconscious breaking through, read for a big change."

When Maria took the sleeping pills, she had been drinking. She later described the sensation while drinking as one of drifting off. Pills, for her, intensified the speed of drifting, until the point of blackout. Later, Maria discovered in a journal entry she had scrawled during that time. In it was the telephone number of her Ghostly Lover; she remembers of reconstructs that she was dreaming about him. She describes the feeling as being "in another grip... like another force had given over... I was compelled... and fearless in it too. I was willing to go." Going into a state of suspended animation while in perfect physical condition and awakening to the Ghostly Lover is like Sleeping Beauty. Death, oblivion, dreams and the Ghostly Lover are all intertwined.

Ironically, Maria awoke from her swoon to see paramedics in white standing over her, who took her to the hospital. Among the few possessions she packed was the biography of Anne Sexton, which she continued to read while in the hospital.

Transformation

The following is an account of her treatment, and what contributed to her cure. In the hospital, Maria asked me if it were possible to reverse the trend. I said: "yes, if you're willing to give birth to yourself over and over again, to rediscover your innocence." I asked her who I was to her, and she said "The figure in the dream to whom

she asked ‘Will I live or die?’” I felt myself to be a nurturing mother figure, one who would lend her strength as she weighed life and death, or found her own strength to create her own life. Later she said that the figure in her dream that held her small animal or her “self” made her feel safe. I also made her feel safe; I “validated” her. As she said:

You carried me along until I could do it for myself... ‘cause it’s a long Journey back (laughs). Something got set in motion... the idea of risk. I remember writing it in my journal: “Be willing to risk your own life - even death itself.” I have gained something, but only because I was willing to lose it, lose my life. It reminds me of the New Testament scripture: “He who shall lose his life shall find it” ... My mother chose to die. She had a chronic medical condition, but I don’t think she wanted to live in her relationship with my father. She was trapped, couldn’t go forward or backward, like the young girl (in the film version of *The Last Mohicans*) who jumped off the rock.

Being willing to risk her own life, like the image of sacrifice in her dream, allowed Maria to later really choose life.

Groups were an important part of the treatment structure, and Maria discovered that she liked living with people: “What turned it around was having people around, I’ve not been alone since.” She enjoyed attention from the men, and began to experience herself as a woman. She began to consider calling Dennis and ending the relationship, sensing that she needed to do this in order to be available for a real man. She saw him both as having been sent with a “higher purpose,” to come back into her life to save her; “I wasn’t in touch with my body,” but also to keep her from an opportunity to do her “housecleaning” with Dennis, something she couldn’t do herself. The “walls came down,” and she felt open to something new.

She understood that it had been only eight months since her contact with him, but since then she had lost twenty pounds and gone into a deep depression. Thinking of his message a “call”, we talked of all the times in life when one may hear a call to the forbidden, to mystery and danger. For Maria, the call was to the underworld, and Dennis was an imaginary guide: “He played a part in my hitting bottom.” Her task, however, was not to remain in the underworld, but to disintegrate and reintegrate into real life in community and creativity.

Talking with me about Anne Sexton, Maria expressed a hope that a life could be turned around, and a willingness to create something real in her own life. After standing her ground in a group session, she said: “I got me back, I got my life back. What they gave me was a sense that I’m likeable, they think highly of me.”

Maria began to have a series of dreams in which the recurring theme was of ritual sacrifice and phallic symbols. In one dream, she was with a “bunch of men and we were captured by a tribe... we were going to be sacrificed. We could only survive if they could swim to shore. But the water was too cold and they would die. I had a relationship with them.” She had a sense that she could no longer isolate herself, and needed relationship.

When I asked her what changed for her, she said: “It took a near-death experience to give me life. It was like being reborn, starting from scratch.” When I asked what it felt like to have life come back, she said: “It feels rather amazing... wonderful... just to feel. I didn’t know I was cut off from my feelings. Now I know. The only access was through

my dreams.” “I feel younger. I was getting ready to grow old and die. I’d been doing that for a long time, no sex in my life. I was like a little old lady.” At this point, she expressed a willingness to “dare to connect. Instead of reading, I’d rather be out doing it. I’d rather be living life than reading about it.” Boundaries seemed clearer; she might get irritated with an incident at work, but would not experience her overly intense ‘witch’ energy.

Later that month, Maria came dressed in gold, with gold earrings and a suntan. Expressing a new interest in diet and healing herself, she noticed the transition from lunar to solar imagery. She said: “We’re so at the mercy of nature – that moon dream a few years ago – moon and

MISSING PAGES 332 and 333

Anne Sexton, Maria had a strong sense of being close to her father. Their drinking bonded them, and she once noted in a journal that she was “daddy’s girl.”

Maria’s effort to break away from her home and individuate herself parallels the hero’s journey. The hero must confront challenges, learn to be alone, overcome darkness, and bring his newfound wisdom back to his home and community. Missing are comparable stories for the heroine’s journey, which could have provided a road map or sense of hope for Maria. She said: “I felt that while I was in the middle of it, I didn’t understand all those dreams. I felt everything that happened was absolutely necessary. You know how some people say: ‘You got me on the rebound’? I say: ‘You got me on the rebirth.’ Parts of me literally died – my brain, I lost words, lost weight, needed a whole new wardrobe. I’m really enjoying being sexually alive, being sexy, buying sexy underwear, buying clothes for him. We have a lot of fun, we laugh a lot. It was sad, a tremendous sense of loss, of what I lost those 13 years (celibate). A big chunk I lost. I just have to deal with that.”

She then had a dream about a house burning down to ashes. However, in the dream was an image of a “...phoenix rising from the ashes.” What was burning? “All my preconceptions of security. I tried to move back to my home state, to my sister’s house and have her family be my family, but that blew up. There is nothing left to hold onto. It is the “Alchemical Negrito, a blackening, getting to the essence.’ ” It is now time to “get to the essence of the spark of life, to find my own voice, my own spirituality.” Although Maria feels strong religious and spiritual pulls, she “... can’t stand the Church” and “...her sister’s religiosity.” After a discussion about the sense of humor shared by Maria and her irreverent alcoholic father, she concluded that she always had insider her a “mischievous teen-age boy,” and that her spirituality would have to have a sense of humor and tricksterish quality.

Two months later, the relationship has gone through many ups and downs, but was still active. Maria reported: “I’ve not been able to watch TV since last April. Life is more interesting now than watching TV. I’m busier, my days are shorter. I’ve given up more control.”

The next month Maria had a dream in which she was living with a man who doesn’t really love her. But she has a baby, which was mostly “all hers.” It is “... mostly a good feeling, she can have her own life, feel filled with life again.” Even though there are problems in the relationship she doesn’t want to be alone again. She says she has “...lived her life selfishly, but didn’t really want to.” It is “...good to share that.” She

experiences "... a sense of calm, serenity, grace." She says she "... did her homework, needed to all those years. When things get tight, I want to return to my fantasy life, and I think of calling Dennis. We both have our fantasy life, but we can tell the difference between a fantasy and everyday life."

Since then, they have been talking of marriage. It's "...very scary". But they are "...saying affirmations to each other. Creating rituals together. Helping to each other with the soul losses" they had experienced. She had tried "...feminist, spiritual" paths alone, and now needed to do her soul and spirit work with another person.

In a new dream, she "...was choosing a bird for a pet." There were "...lots of white birds. A yellow bird, peering down, asking to be picked. Expectant attitude. A spiritual dream. The bird is the "soul." White birds are a purity of soul. A yellow bird is some sort of divine being. So many white birds, just one yellow bird. I want to actually buy a yellow canary, a bird that sings. Brings beauty again."

Recently, Maria came in reporting that the relationship was stable, and a source of comfort for both of them. She had just survived her 46th birthday. Maria had had a dream in which she remembers one line: "you will not live beyond the 9's." Upon reflection, she understood that 45 was 5 X 9, and that 4 + 5 = 9. The number "9" was also symbolic of pregnancy, the period of gestation before something comes to fruition. She called it her period of "dormancy": "like I just went to sleep, turned it all off, Sleeping Beauty, a butterfly in a cocoon." There was not "...so much willingness to co-mingle, to share our lives. I was attracted to men who where wrong. I just made the decision to stop. The change was imperceptible, unconscious. If I had intended to do it, I couldn' t have." When I asked her what difference it made that she understood her journey in these terms, she said: "Some people have a need (to study metapsychiatry). I think I'm one. My sisters are not. I've been on this quest, the need to know, to understand." Commenting on the descent necessary for her rebirth, she said: "Other people don't really descend. I had to kill part of myself." The image of an animal with its foot in a trap came up, an animal which had to gnaw off its foot in order to survive. By descending thoroughly, by being celibate and mostly containing the psychic process in journals rather than acting it out self-destructively (as did Anne Sexton), Maria was able to find the path to ascend.

Maria just finished reading Anne Sexton's biography by Diane Middlebrook. Like the picture of Dorian Gray, her own life paralleled art. At the end of the reading, she felt "really sad," but also found "something sweet, something reclaiming" in it.

What were her similarities with Anne Sexton? Both were fascinated with death and darkness, both were very close with their mothers and the women in the family, yet were too attached and were condemned to live out their mothers and the women's unfinished business. Both experienced split images of the whore and the Madonna. Both struggled with the prescribed role model of a woman as housewife, and with the conflict between their needs for independence and for security, attachment and belonging. Both exhibited strong intuitive abilities, uncanny powers, healing abilities, and felt close to images of the witch. But unable to integrate the spirituality of the witch with patriarchal religion, both turned away from religion and felt cursed. Yet inevitably both turned and returned to spirituality as salvation, looking for grace and redemption. Both were hungry for spirit, but spirit, impregnated with the matter of the tribe, of culture, and the body. And both were heroines without adequate role models and with incomplete journeys of return.

Maria expressed her differences by saying that she was not as obsessed with suicide, that she was close to her father, and that she wants to be married, to care for another person, and to be interdependent.

Let us now turn to Diane Middlebrook's biography of Anne Sexton, to see how Anne Sexton's life exemplified the themes of the heroine's journey as a descent (see Perera, 1981).

Anne Sexton

Anne Sexton, the first described "confessional poet," died in 1974 at the age of 45. She came from a conventional middle class background and worked as a fashion model, but went on to win professorships, international recognition, and a Pulitzer Prize.

Sexton's mother was described as an inconsistent nurturer, a heavy drinker and a poet. Sexton begged for her love and admiration, competed with her, and both wished for and dreaded her death. Both parents were conventional role models. Although Sexton tried to live a conventional life, she understood that: "But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out." The combination of a puritanical New England climate and a feverish sexuality ran through her family, causing eruptions and conflicts. Maria, too, experienced conflict between conventional values and heightened, almost hysterical sexuality, with a lack of a healthy sensual outlet.

Raised with strict ideas of propriety, Sexton expressed a guilty rage toward mothers in her poem "The Double Image." At least Sexton's mother, as a poet, provided a creative role model, whereas Maria's mother did not. Anne Sexton, with Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath, was preoccupied with and wrote about the conflicts between motherhood and writing.

Anne Sexton was extremely close to her great-aunt, Nana, whom she called a "twin" and who suffered a breakdown. Later, Anne came to understand one aspect of her illness as a form of loyalty to Nana, much as Maria understood her virginity as a form of loyalty to her mother. The eruption of repressed and intense sexuality took the image, as it did in Maria's dreams, in witch imagery. Sexton wrote:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

(in Middlebrook, 1991, p 114)

In Sexton's poems, the housewife becomes an adulteress and witch, while the poet is a magic maker. These are all a consequence of breaking out of the conventional women's role. The witch image, however, is polarized into good witch and bad witch. Like Maria, Sexton had, "good witch energy; she was empathetic, intuitive, and had ways of "knowing." The bad witch was destructive, hysterical and selfish. *The Radcliffe Quarterly* called Sexton "a contemporary witch" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.365). Hysteria,

in Freud's Victorian women or in these women, was a form of resistance to social repression. The images it often took, as it did with Maria and Sexton, were split personalities of the vamp or the little girl.

Given the double bind of convention and impulse, breakdown could be seen as the logical response. For Sexton, her breakdowns allowed her to express herself authentically, in a way that would not be acceptable or understood in ordinary society. Being crazy, in the R.D. Laing sense was mean-making response to crazy binds:

...the mental hospital as a metaphorical space in
which to articulate the crazy-making pressure of
middle-class life, particularly for women. The home,
the mental hospital, the body: these are women's places
in the social order that apportions different roles to
the sexes; and woman herself is the very scene of
mutilation...

(Middlebrook, 1991, p. 274)

Both Sexton and Maria were strongly connected through the body to the women in the family. Sexton re-imagined God as a woman, and associated female grace with the breast. Her own mother was named Mary. In "O Ye Tongues," Sexton's poetry is described: "like nursing mother's face, God's face bends over the world; and as the infant's tongue connects with the mother's breast, the poet's tongue connects with the uninterrupted attention of this Other, the milk of the skies" (p. 355). Sexton imagined death as reconnecting with the mother as the source of all: "I wish to enter her like a dream, (...) sink into the great mother arms I never had" (p. 395). To die mean to come home to mother.

Sexton had what she described as a "lust" for suicide, and identified with Sylvia Plath, the poet who did commit suicide. Sexton was somewhat envious of Plath's suicide, of the theatricality, of the attention, and the end of suffering. She said, "I'm so fascinated with Sylvia's death: the idea of dying perfect, certainly not mutilated...to lose your virginity is to be mutilated; virginity is unopened, not yet spoiled...Sleeping Beauty remained perfect" (p.216). Taking pills preserved her perfection while "...destroying a part of me, squashing it ? I've killed a part of me" (pp. 216-217). The part of me that she wanted to kill off was a split-off part that she described as an evil "rat." Being Sleeping Beauty also expressed her desire to remain a child, an object of fantasy, dependent.

Both Anne Sexton and Maria came from conventional American families with strong norms of proper ladylike behavior. Both rebelled and in different ways refused to be domestic. The rage they felt was expressed in a pull toward independence, but primarily expressed killing parts of themselves. Both experienced a strong split between their "Little Girl, Madonna, and Virgin" sides and their "Whore and Vamp" sexuality, and expressed the frustrated combination of sexuality, knowing power and anger in the image of the "Witch." They both were very attached to their mothers, and searched for a form of feminine spirituality which would

embody nurturance and grace. Both were beautiful and need beauty in their lives, but preferred to die as “ Sleeping Beauty” than risk imperfection. Both sought to balance freedom and security, meaning and emptiness, loneliness and relationship. Both saw death as warm arms, as a release from the struggle of living.

At Sexton’s funeral, her friend and fellow poet Adrienne Rich observed:

We have enough suicidal women poets,
 enough suicidal women, enough self-
 destructiveness as a sole form of violence
 permitted to women (p. 397).

How did Maria escape death? What did we learn from her heroine’s journey and descent into the underworld that might help other suicidal women? The following is a description in her own words of her journey, and what were, for her, its major turning points.

I am only beginning to understand the relationship between Ilene and myself. If it had just been the benefit with just anyone, it wouldn’t have made a difference who I was talking to. But I had tried to talk to several people...And basically I was faced with a total lack of understanding. ? either not wanting to understand what I was talking about because it was too personal and painful, or unable to understand the experience because it was too foreign to their experience, or because they were totally unable to listen to another hear what he/she is saying. In any event, the world offered me nothing to care or concern for my experience or my feelings. It was unable and unprepared to give me anything to help me in my suffering. I just suffered, and by asking them to listen, and getting no response, my suffering increased. So not anyone will do. With Ilene, she did listen, but I think also she more. She was a witness to my suffering, she felt what I was feeling, and felt for me. She didn’t intervene or try to change my feelings or thoughts. She allowed me to process my dreams and my experiences as they arose. At times, there are moments where I have nothing to say, and we just sit in the quiet. These moments can be so uncomfortable ? time almost seems to stop. It is difficult to put the experience into words. Once, I referred to as a “holy moment” ? such peace and quiet, and closeness. Just letting the moment be. Sometimes I have just sat quietly weeping, and Ilene was there. I have always known, somehow, that she sincerely cares ? perhaps seeing tears in her eyes while I was telling my dream, or my feelings. I was even concerned when I was in the middle of the suicide attempt(s), to mention in my “note” that her bill should be paid. This work requires, I believe, a degree of selflessness. I am very grateful to Ilene. Her witnessing my suffering has made a difference. Just being seen and heard by another. And her listening and sharing in my deep mourning. I remember sitting and telling her of some experience or dream, and watching her eyes fill with tears. It had an impact on me. I still remember the sense of that moment. My suffering moved another. She had no agenda of her own. Not trying

to change me, or teach me, or show me. She just listened, and quietly mourned with me. The ability to listen is rare quality, born of love. The ability to sit in silence is even more rare ? a hold moment when two people sit as one. The feeling has not need for explanation ? indeed cannot be explained. It is a wordless experience that occurs in the silence. Once a week, for an hour, I was listened to.

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