



LOVE HURTS,
LOVE HEALS

DIANA RABB, PH.D.

LOVE HURTS, LOVE HEALS

Diana Raab, Ph.D.

My mother wanted a parakeet instead of me. It's not that she loved parakeets, but she really didn't like kids, and she thought a bird would be more suitable for her sensibilities. Looking back, my mother, or Eva, as she had me call her, probably shouldn't have had me because she spent the next six decades emotionally abusing me. While I learned how to deal with this through the creative expression of writing, my journey was definitely challenging.

My father didn't like the idea of not having a child because he'd lost most of his relatives during the Holocaust, and he wanted to replace them by creating a new family for himself. After being married for two years and partaking in numerous conversations and umpteen bottles of wine, my dad charmingly convinced my mother that a child would be much more gratifying than a parakeet. Surely, one child would be better than none. She agreed, but insisted that there would be only one—me.

After months of unprotected sex, and just after their summer holiday, my mother learned that she was pregnant. Early in the morning on Mother's Day the following year, exactly nine months later, she found herself the mother of a crying five-pound baby girl instead of a half-pound chirping bird.

Even before my entry into the world, my mother made it perfectly clear that she was *not* happy about being a mom, and most certainly would not stay at home to look after me. With a bachelor's degree in English literature and a minor in psychology, she felt it would be beneath her to waste her education on changing diapers and making perfect peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches. She chose to delegate my upbringing to *her* mother, my adoring grandmother, orphaned during World War I, who was already living with us (along with my grandfather). We became very close, and I felt blessed to have her in my life. In fact, my first memoir,

Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal, is all about her life and our special relationship.

Ever since I was a little girl, I remember feeling as if my mother didn't want me, and although it wasn't called that at the time, she verbally abused me and ridiculed me in public. My mom was happiest when she was either riding her horse or working as a medical assistant in an internist's office. For my mother, Dr. Shuster was the father figure she never had because he was always there when she needed to talk to someone. Dr. Shuster became her long-term confidant, and the neighborhood rumor was that he had a troubled marriage—as well as an affair with my mother—twenty-five years his junior. She denied the allegations.

When I was born, my mother asked for three months off work. However, she refused to breast-feed me because she believed that was the way of the poor folk. She stayed home, but my grandmother took care of me and attended to the house. I'm not sure what my mother did all day long. I know she loved horseback riding and taking ski trips by herself, but I never remember her cleaning. In fact, she was very sloppy.

After a few months, my mother returned to work. Each morning, at the crack of dawn, she left for Dr. Shuster's office while my grandmother stayed home to take care of me.

Once I got through the infant years and survived the terrible twos, it was time to begin nursery school. My father, who always showed his deep love for me, usually left very early in the morning to manage his retail store. My grandmother was the one who got me ready for the day. After her morning shower, she'd descend the carpeted stairs leading to the kitchen and prepare a homemade breakfast of bacon and French toast, stacked two inches high, which she would dust with powdered sugar and drizzle with warm maple syrup.

Then, on Labor Day 1964, when my parents were at work, something very traumatic occurred that turned out to be a transformative moment in my life.

I had just celebrated my tenth birthday, and in their habitual

fashion, my parents had left for work at the crack of dawn. My grandparents shared the room beside mine. My grandfather was a gambler and had gone to Atlantic City for a few days.

Cindy, the girl around the corner with the bowl haircut, called to see if I could come over and play. Holding the pink dial phone with the cord that I used to love wrapping around my body, I glanced up at the kitchen clock. It was 10:00 a.m., way past the time when my grandmother usually woke up. My gray alley cat, Pixie, ambled into the family room, meowed, and brushed her spine against my shin.

“I don’t know, Cindy, I have to ask my grandmother. Can I call you back?”

“Sure,” she replied.

I ran up the wooden stairwell leading to my grandmother’s room and knocked on her door. She didn’t answer. I knocked again. Still no answer. I gently turned the round brass doorknob to take a peek inside. My grandfather’s bed, the one near the door, was made up with their maroon electric blanket and two pillows, which he used because he said it helped him breathe at night. I called my grandmother’s name, but she didn’t budge.

I slowly walked over to her single bed near the window as the sheer white curtains swayed with the morning wind. I gently nudged her shoulder. “Grandma, can I go to Cindy’s?” There was no answer. I prodded her again, but the second time I asked, I sensed that there was something seriously wrong. My grandmother was a deep sleeper, but she usually responded when I repeated her name. I felt a breeze on my back and noticed that the window on the other side of the room was completely open. I wondered how she could sleep in such a cold room.

I glanced up at the wooden headboard behind her bed. On one side was an open bottle of pills; on the other, a glass half-full of water. With a child’s instinct, I knew that something was wrong, and a strange chill made its way up my spine. I got scared and dashed out of the room to the phone in my parents’ room on the other side of the hallway.

Within half an hour, an ambulance had pulled into our driveway, a stretcher had ascended the stairs to the bedroom; and moments later, my grandmother, who had taken her own life, was carted away in the back of an ambulance.

That night, mom sat me down on the yellow velour sofa in our living room to tell me that my grandmother would never come back. The following morning, my parents dressed all in black and dropped me off at my aunt and uncle's house on the west side of New York City.

Death was not something I really understood, and being a childless couple, my aunt and uncle had no idea how to explain such a difficult subject to a child, so they didn't say anything at all. They just distracted me and made a lovely homemade meal, something I rarely got at home. I was one of those kids from the '60s raised on TV dinners of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and saucy peaches for dessert.

To help me heal from the loss of my grandmother, my mother went to the nearest bookstore and bought me a red-leather journal with sayings by Kahlil Gibran at the top of each page.

"This is for you," she said. "Write about your grandmother and anything else you want to write." I knew that she was dealing with her own grief, and given her background as a former English major, she intuitively knew that writing in a journal would help me cope with my first loss of a loved one. Since then, I have used writing to heal during many difficult times—such as a troubled adolescence, bed rest with three children, two cancer diagnoses, and the loss of loved ones.

My mother always seemed unhappy, but sometimes kids take their parents' behavior in stride. I had no idea that her behavior was abnormal until I visited friends' homes. I do know, though, that my mom always seemed jovial when she was with her own friends.

I don't remember my mother ever complimenting me or telling me she was proud of me. We were so very different. She loved the darkness and I loved the light. Maybe that was the case because of *her* propensity for darkness. Looking back, I realize why I spent so

much time at friends' homes: there was usually lightness there, and I was blessed to have that exposure.

After my grandmother died, my mother often curled up on the family-room sofa, crying. From an early age, I learned how to comfort others in pain. I suppose that's a bit of the silver lining of having depression in the family. My career path has been nursing, writing, and psychology, and now I teach people to share their own life stories through writing. I guess you can say I am a wounded healer.

My mother never yelled at me; she just didn't celebrate my wonder and my successes. She took every opportunity to put me down and would sometimes say hurtful things and make me cry. I'm sorry to say that even though she is eighty-seven years old, she still has that art down pat. However, my dad, and years of therapy, taught me that she was basically unhappy with *herself*, and I was merely the target of her anger. I have also come to realize that she'd always been jealous of my positive and jovial outlook on life. I got that from my father. People love being in our presence.

Although I used to feel shattered by my mother's words, through journaling and writing, I've slowly healed; and I've come to realize that she is who she is, and I am how I am... and people don't change. Their worst characteristics simply become more intense with age.

Now that my father is gone and my three children don't want much to do with their grandmother because she is so dark and narcissistic, I remind her that now that she's in her waning years, I'm the only one who cares about her and who will attend to her physical, financial, and emotional needs. On occasion, she thanks me, but that doesn't come easy for her. It's true that those who are grateful are happier, so I don't think my mother will ever be truly happy.

Through writing, I've come to realize just how different my mother and I are. I'm comfortable in my skin, and she's not. I've had many personal and professional successes that have fueled my self-esteem, something she shattered during my youth.

But regardless of everything that has transpired between us for more than our six decades of knowing each other, I forgive my mother, and I am forever grateful to her for having given me life and for buying me my very first journal. Although I don't believe she really knows how to love and, therefore, can't know what true joy feels like, I have healed myself enough to feel compassion, empathy, and yes—love—for her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Raab, PhD, MFA, is an award-winner memoirist, poet, speaker, and workshop facilitator. She is the author of nine books including, her latest, *Writing for Bliss: A Seven-Step Plan for Telling Your Story and Transforming Your Life*. Her two memoirs are: *Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal* and *Healing With Words: A Writers Cancer Journey*. She's also editor of two anthologies, *Writers and Their Notebooks* and *Writers on the Edge*, and four poetry collections.

Diana Has been writing since an early age. As an only child of two immigrants, she spent a lot of time crafting letters and chronicling her life in her journal. In her 40-year career, she's been as an advocate of personal writing. Dr. Raab facilitates workshops in writing for transformation and empowerment, focusing on journaling, poetry, and memoir writing. She believes in the importance of writing to achieve wholeness and interconnectedness, which encourages the ability to unleash the true voice of your inner self.

Raab blogs for numerous blogs, including: *Psychology Today*, *Elephant Journal*, *Om Times*, and *Thrive Global*, and is a guest blogger for numerous other blogs. Visit her at dianaraab.com.