

the motherhood myth

A Depth Therapist's
Guide to Redefine Parenting,
Reimagine Intimacy,
and Reclaim the Self

vanessa bennett, LMFT



contents

INTRODUCTION	1
PART 1: THE MYTHS OF MOTHERHOOD	27
CHAPTER 1: From Maiden to Mother	29
CHAPTER 2: The Loss of the Village . . . and Ourselves	51
CHAPTER 3: The Cult of Busy	75
CHAPTER 4: Martyrdom Is Not Mothering	99
PART 2: THE MYTHS OF SEX	117
CHAPTER 5: The Mother Wound	119
CHAPTER 6: The Father Wound	145
CHAPTER 7: Sex Was Never about Me	165
CHAPTER 8: The Wild Woman's Role in Our Evolving Feminism	187
PART 3: THE MYTHS OF RELATIONSHIPS	205
CHAPTER 9: Liberation through Responsibility	207

CHAPTER 10: Belonging to Ourselves	227
CHAPTER 11: Is It Love or Fear?	239
CHAPTER 12: The Trouble with Couples Therapy	257
CONCLUSION: THE JOURNEY CONTINUES	271
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	273
NOTES	275
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	287

introduction

The Motherhood Myth was born out of countless hours sitting with female clients and couples, and reflecting on my own journey through the many stages, twists, and turns of motherhood. It emerged from a pattern of the same aching questions: “What’s wrong with me?” “Why isn’t this easier?” “Why am I not happier?” Witnessing so much struggle, tears, anger, and confusion, I couldn’t help but begin a journey to seek answers. Have mothers always been this overwhelmed and disillusioned with parenting? Were couples always so dissatisfied with each other once they became parents? Was there always this much emotional and psychic turmoil? Why did some women and couples seem to experience more ease and happiness? What was the cause? The root? What was the collective psyche trying to reveal to us?

Every mother I’ve met has experienced a profound identity shift upon becoming a parent, yet many lack the language or support to process and integrate this change. This gap leaves them wondering how they can evolve while also relying on the wisdom of deeply intuitive ancestral knowledge. Many of the mothers I work with come to me seeking to make sense of their journey, to turn it over in their hands and inspect it from every angle.

The Motherhood Myth challenges the overarching myth—the deeply ingrained cultural belief—that motherhood, partnership, and relationships should be inherently easy and fulfilling. It explores the dissonance between societal expectations and lived reality and examines how these myths leave us feeling like we’re failing. This book delves into the challenges I observed in both my clients and myself

during our transitions from Maiden to Mother, from couple to family, and from an uninitiated, uncertain Self to one that questions why, listens to its own voice, and champions its wisdom—even if it ruffles feathers and disrupts the status quo. Throughout the book, I will provide context, solidarity, and strategies to help you navigate not just the initial shift into parenthood but also the continual evolution with more ease, authenticity, and self-compassion.

While I advocate for building a strong sense of Self, this does not mean disconnecting from others or abandoning community. Healthy community is only possible when we relate to others from a place of self-awareness and internal strength. Many people mistakenly equate personal accountability and self-trust with isolation or selfishness, but the reality is quite the opposite: by cultivating a grounded, sovereign sense of Self, we can participate in deeper, more authentic connections.

A codependent society, which I believe is what we have existed in for generations, where relationships are built on external validation, fosters shallow connections driven by fear, control, and the need to prove our worth and lovability. These dynamics fuel the epidemic of loneliness and disconnection we see today. Codependency is a relational pattern rooted in fear and externalized power, where self-worth hinges on others' approval. As feminist scholar and activist Silvia Federici noted, pre-capitalist societies relied more heavily on collective support, a stark contrast to the isolating individualism encouraged by capitalist structures. Similarly, bell hooks has written extensively on how true love and community thrive on mutual respect and self-determination rather than dependency or control.

In contrast, interdependence arises from an internalized sense of worth, where individuals engage in relationships from a place of security and autonomy. Interdependence allows for personal sovereignty while creating deep, meaningful connections built on true reciprocity, trust, and esteem. By clarifying this distinction early, we can dispel the myth that prioritizing a strong sense of Self means isolating from others. Instead, it means engaging in relationships that honor both individuality and connection, free from fear-driven behaviors.

As Harriet Lerner writes in *The Dance of Anger*, “The goal is not to end relationships but to end the dynamic of dependency and rescuing, so that true intimacy can grow.”¹ When we step out of codependent patterns, we open the door to relationships built on mutual care, not obligation—connections where love and respect are given freely, not earned through sacrifice. In these interdependent relationships, intimacy thrives and, with it, the healing of the widespread disconnection and loneliness that pervade our culture.

My hope is that this book speaks not only to mothers experiencing the shifts deep in their bones, but also to those hoping to better understand the women in their lives. This is not an exhaustive account of every issue that arises in motherhood; each chapter could have been its own book. Motherhood is a vast, evolving journey that varies across cultures and experiences, and no single work can capture it all. If you’re feeling overwhelmed by all of the change, please know you are not alone.

While my perspective as a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman shapes this narrative, I’ve included diverse viewpoints drawn from my work with clients from varied backgrounds and integrated varied research from multiple disciplines. This book cannot encompass every experience, but it aims to offer inclusive and insightful reflections for all. My hope is that each reader finds something within these pages that resonates, regardless of their unique background or journey.

THE LIE WE WERE SOLD

I want to shout from the rooftops that life is not meant to be simply “gotten through” or endured. Generations have passed down beliefs rooted in collective traumas: you work, you have kids, and you die. Most of my clients over the years have struggled to unpack the beliefs that have been passed down in the phrases they heard growing up:

- Suck it up.
- Life is pain.

- Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.
- I'll give you something to cry about.
- Boys don't cry.
- Stop being so dramatic.
- Children should be seen and not heard.
- If I wanted your opinion, I would have asked for it.
- Because I said so.
- You have no idea how easy/good you have it.
- After all I've done for you . . .

Many of us were taught we could “have it all” and “be anything,” but at the same time, we were raised to follow authority blindly and put our heads down and grind, and were then told that wavering from that path meant we were ungrateful. For women, “having it all” meant having a successful career, being a wife and a mother in a heterosexual marriage, and, although statistically working the same hours outside of the home as her partner, doing the majority of the domestic labor and child rearing inside the home. Meanwhile, men were taught “having it all” meant being a stoic and successful financial provider (also heterosexual) without the emotional or relational skills necessary for deeper connection. These expectations have left many of us feeling disconnected, unfulfilled, and unsure of our roles.

This book challenges the myths and norms that have dictated motherhood, bringing light to the unconscious beliefs that drive us and offering tools for reclaiming our voices and values. It is an

invitation to question, disrupt, and find a new way forward for mothers and their families. To see and use the tumult of the transitions themselves as a springboard for radical self-development, evolution, and acceptance. The journey of motherhood is not just about caring for our children; it's about rediscovering and redefining ourselves and the future for all.

This narrative isn't exclusive to one gender, cultural, or economic group. I've worked with many clients from diverse backgrounds, including those from the LGBTQIA+ community and immigrant families, who also feel the weight of these expectations. While the specifics might differ, the underlying messages remain strikingly similar: conform, don't question, and above all, perform your roles as defined by society.

Through exploring both personal and client stories, as well as historical and cultural contexts, I aim to provide a guide for understanding how we got here—and how we might begin to chart a new path. I have found time and again that pretending I am not a human with similar struggles to my clients does nothing more than make them feel more alone. So throughout this book, I will share personal anecdotes as well as stories from my clients (with permission and anonymity maintained) to illustrate the common struggles and triumphs that define the motherhood journey. It is through this shared vulnerability and honesty that we find connection and healing.

The human psyche requires an understanding of its place in the collective, to know that we are not alone in our struggles, to have a deep sense of context, and to feel that there is a larger purpose to it all. We are, by nature, meaning-making creatures, and it is by reconnecting with collective wisdom and stories that we can change our relationship to our suffering. We heal in community through seeing ourselves in others and in witnessing the trials, tribulations, and learnings others who have come before us have experienced. Motherhood is not a burden to be endured, but a transformative journey—a narrative we have the power to reshape.

WE DON'T KNOW WHO WE ARE

Many in modern Western cultures have lost touch with the stories and ancestral knowledge that once guided us through major identity shifts and ego explosions like motherhood. As a depth-oriented psychotherapist, I often use myth, metaphor, dream, and story in my work and personal journey. Mythic and archetypal forms and stories remind us of our place in the collective, and I found myself connecting to many on my journey into and through early motherhood. In this book, through sections I have called “Myths as Maps,” I will acquaint—or reacquaint—you with Baba Yaga, Circe, Cinderella, Kali, Lilith, Eros, Psyche, and many others. Their traits and stories empower and teach us to understand and reclaim aspects of ourselves that have been lost, suppressed, or left dormant. These myths also reveal how society devalues the feminine—not only in people of all gender identities, but in the Earth herself.

This book also explores techniques to help you identify which beliefs and values are truly yours and which have been handed down to you. From this strengthened inner discernment, you can work toward crafting a life that feels aligned with your truth. I combine depth psychological approaches, feminist perspectives on outdated cultural structures, and embodied practices to provide strategies for navigating the very real conflict, vulnerability, and discomfort that show up on this journey of rediscovering the Self (capital *S*) and in our attempts to strengthen and deepen connection with others.

Finding and acting on inner discernment isn't easy. It requires a commitment to leaning into discomfort and sometimes facing intense inner challenges. It takes a commitment to leaning into what feels uncomfortable *at best* and what feels acutely painful and like you might actually die *at worst*. I felt, and still feel, immensely challenged to listen to that inner voice.

SEXPECTATIONS: THE STRUGGLE TO CONNECT TO MY DISCERNMENT

I was so lost in my head, trying to rationalize my choice, that I barely noticed he finished.

I was staring down at myself from the ceiling, my body going through the motions but my heart shaking its proverbial head at me, disappointed that I had once again said yes when I wanted to say no. And my mind? It was screaming obscenities at me. It was the ultimate mind/body/soul disconnection.

I hadn't seen him in a week, since he was on a business trip. We were at a hotel after a romantic dinner. "I should *want* to have sex with my partner," my mind kept telling me all throughout dinner. But I didn't.

I showed up to the evening anxious, knowing there was an expectation that sex would happen at the end of it. That because we hadn't seen each other in a week and he had planned a nice night, I would fuck him . . . not just fuck him, but do so with enthusiasm.

Truthfully? I was annoyed that he had planned the night at all. I wished he had come home from the trip after I was sleeping and just slipped into bed without any expectation of fanfare. I had enjoyed the week without the pressure, without the constant lingering feeling that I was letting him down, hurting his feelings, not meeting his needs, being a disappointment of a partner. The week had been so smooth. My daughter and I had gotten along better, I was less stressed, I had yelled less and laughed more. I had been able to read half a book in four days because I had three to four hours of glorious alone time each evening after she had gone to bed.

My mind was reeling as my body went through the motions. I couldn't believe he didn't even notice or care that I didn't seem to want to do this. Maybe I didn't want to be in this relationship. Maybe he wasn't my person. Maybe I was meant to parent alone. Maybe, maybe, maybe . . .

When all was said and done, I was angry. At him but mostly at myself. Over ten years of working on my codependent bullshit and the ways I self-abandon, and there I was. Again.

SHAME IS ALWAYS THE THROUGH LINE

If I had a dollar for every story a female client shared that felt similar to mine, I'd be rich. I share this one with you to remind you, as I will over and over, that you are not alone in your experiences and feelings. While the details might differ between the stories I've heard from women, the emotional through line is always the same: *shame*.

Shame around feeling:

- that they don't want their partner to touch them
- like they don't want their children to touch them
- like it might be easier to do if they were alone
- that their partner is just another child to take care of
- like they don't recognize themselves anymore
- short-tempered and burnt out
- like they are letting everyone down
- like they made a mistake in having children
- that they made a mistake in their choice of partner
- on the verge of tears or yelling
- like they sometimes want to rip their skin off
- a strong urge to pack a bag and disappear in the night

Here's the thing about shame. Most of us can agree that it is a horrible feeling, and yet it serves a psychological purpose. Shame encourages

us to adhere to social norms and values and maintain social cohesion. It can motivate us toward more ethical and prosocial behavior, including triggering us to learn from our mistakes and change our behavior toward others. Shame encourages apologies and making amends. Plus, it prods us to look inward at areas we need to focus on for inner growth. From an evolutionary perspective, shame's purpose is to ensure we are not ostracized from the group or community, since, as social creatures, ostracization essentially meant death for our ancestors.

One of the biggest problems with shame, however, is that while we feel shame when we violate the social norms we *believe* in or *want* to adhere to, we also feel shame for violating the social norms we have been *conditioned* to believe in or adhere to. Because of this, shame is used as a weapon to control and manipulate people into compliance. It's wielded against us to ensure we don't rock the boat, question social norms we disagree with or find troublesome, stray too far from the group through exploration, gain new knowledge and inner growth, or challenge the pecking order in a society. Shame is used against us to make us feel that something is wrong with us. Because if we feel we are flawed, we will work extra hard to hide that part of ourselves, to prove we are "good." We will start the habit of hiding our true selves, our needs, and our desires, performing for our belonging and love. And once this codependent way of relating to others is formed, it's really hard to change.

Most of us are raised to believe in a very shame-based and conditional way of loving others and ourselves. This shame-based, codependent approach pervades all our relationships, not just romantic ones. This way of relating says, "I need to look and act a certain way to be loved, and so do you." We learn early to believe that our safety, value, and lovability depend on conforming to expectations—both ours and others'. This mindset drives us to preserve connections at any cost, even if they are unhealthy or unfulfilling, leading to manipulation, control, and self-contortion in pursuit of approval and a sense of safety. Part 3 of this book delves deeply into understanding and unpacking these dynamics of codependency.

Mothers, in particular, are told from all sides what good mothering and good mothers should look and act like—from family, friends, places of worship, social media, advertising, and experts. Almost none of it is realistic. And almost all of it is by design. Being *in* our shame maintains the status quo of patriarchal, economic, racial, gendered, cultural, political, educational, and healthcare systems that have been designed to benefit only a select few. When women are consumed with shame, they are too busy performing for their belonging to ask questions about why things are the way they are or challenge what doesn't feel right. They are too busy performing for their belonging to explore and follow what gives them a feeling of aliveness. They are too consumed with everything they “should” be doing to find time to nurture their Soul and question their larger purpose. Their energy is too overwhelmed by the feelings of not being enough to be channeled into changing what feels off-balance in their relationships or the broader systems that impact them.

I am going to make a bold statement here: Keeping women overwhelmed and feeling as though they are failing is how the current paradigm sustains itself. If a group as large in numbers as mothers collectively woke up and began questioning the patriarchal ideals of motherhood, challenged the social structures that keep them exhausted and feeling like they're drowning, and prioritized their own alignment and fulfillment, the entire structure of society would begin to shift.

The good news is it's already shifting. We are in an unbelievable moment in history right now. Never before in the upward of seven thousand years of living in a patriarchal society have there been so many people, not just women, questioning and challenging it all. We see this in the growing focus on mental health, community, and environmental care. It's reflected in the global women's marches of 2017; the rise of young people, women, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ individuals taking political office; the “escape the corset” and 4B movements in South Korea; and the 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising in Iran. Yet this shift also faces fierce resistance from those threatened by change, evident in actions like the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the