



**Grand Valley State University**

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# Nature of Nurturing

Kim Ranger



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# The Nature of Nurturing

by: Kim Ranger

I wish for a mother who would write me ordinary letters. Instead, I have one who phones in a panic, near desperation, her security gone, nerves breaking. I wait until our silences are long enough to say goodbye and I'm glad she won't phone again, the long-distance too expensive. I want to send a check and say, "This is a gift, not a loan. But I don't want to talk about it." I don't want her acknowledgment that I feel a debt. I don't want her desperate gratefulness. I don't want her rejection of the only kind of help I can offer. Before I write the check, I do the laundry, work in the yard, wish my dad would call and tell me he loves me.

My mama too often held her arms toward me, as if to be picked up, kisses and a plea of "I love you" trembling on her lips. In those days, "I love you too" was wrung from me, but finally it is simply a social noise instead of a twist in my gut.

As a child, I never remember waking my mom up because I had had a nightmare. I don't remember telling her that I was sad. Instead, I comforted her with hugs or backrubs as I grew toward adulthood. Once I dreamt that she flew down out of a tree and landed on my baby sister, suffocating her. She sucked her breath out, a monstrous and sick vampire cat-bird, while Dad was unhearing in the garage.

But it was my breath which was sucked out. I took care of her, myself, and my youngest sister. I have no idea who took care of my middle sister. Maybe no one did. Perhaps she took care of herself. That could be why she is so different from us. My sister's husband takes care of her now, and she seems content. My mom has a partner who tries to take care of her now. I cannot; I will not. My sisters and I have created our own lives, separate and independent, caring for each other as grown sisters do, but refusing our mother.

A couple of years ago I asked my youngest sister if she still needed me to take care of her (she was 25) and she decided she was okay on her own. I let go of trying to mother my mom and my sister, and I nurture myself instead. I own a house and choose to live alone, having created a calm, quiet, safe space for myself. I tell myself often that I love myself, honor myself, and that I will respect my boundaries (which means protecting my boundaries in my interactions with other people). I kept many of my toys, and I play with them whenever I feel like it! I miss my grandmas—they gave me a lot of nurturing, but they are needy now, too, and our relationship has changed. I was always the "good girl," the helper. Sometimes I find myself falling back into that role, both inside and outside of my family, and I feel angry, frustrated, and annoyed with myself. I become resentful of being asked to do things for which I did not volunteer.

What is the nature of nurturing? As an adult, I seek friends who nurture me emotionally, intellectually, and physically. I am willing to give what I can, but I am all too impatient with those who do not also help themselves. It was (and still is) such a struggle for me to learn the skills of loving myself that I almost cannot bear to watch others go through the process.

As gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people, I think we don't get enough nurturing. Society and maybe family or friends reject us. Or maybe society asks too much of us. We give and give—artistically, intellectually, emotionally, almost all of it parenthetically—unacknowledged help that we did not volunteer for.

At GVSU, I have chosen gradually to be very “out.” I speak in the first person as a lesbian. Recently, I volunteered to be one of the contact persons for the LGBT faculty/staff group, and posted a message on the electronic bulletin boards to that effect. My friends call me brave, but little do they know that acting with this kind of courage is much easier for me than trying to be gentle with my colleagues who are so afraid that they will not be out even within this closed group. I am not always comfortable. In fact, I am often uncomfortable and have to deal with my own internalized homophobia. But I am willing to accept the nurturing of my LGBT family and friends. No, I don’t believe that every person has to be out of the closet, either at work, to family, or to friends. Each person has his or her own level of comfort and is at the place where he or she should be. But I worry that each of us, indeed many of us are not able to be comfortable inwardly. I wish that each person could learn self-nurturing, and eventually could experience the solace of knowing and recognizing others who have also gone through the process of acceptance unique to LGBT folk. We are not unaware, “unhearing in the garage.” Nor do we have to let society suffocate us. We can create our own lives, volunteering to nurture ourselves and others in ways we are happy with.

I don’t have a neat conclusion. My dad hasn’t called, my mom isn’t going to magically change, and I received some nasty email from a faculty member at GVSU about LGBT folk. But I try to be gentle with myself and I’m going to keep trying to be gentle with others. That, after all, seems to be the nature of nurturing.