

Two Essays on my Mother and a Critique of Feminism

By

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What are these Essays?

The first two essays in this collection are about my unhappy childhood experiences and my dysfunctional relationship with my mother. These experiences have helped to shape my personality and my worldview. They are in part responsible for my political outlook.

These essays were written for the company that I work for remotely, which is based in Beijing, China. It is a college counseling service—we help Chinese international students get into US universities. Our emphasis is on the personal statement of the Common Application, which is a 650-word essay about the student's personal qualities, values and experiences

Each year, we hold a training session for new and old counselors. As a part of training, counselors are asked to write a personal statement of their own, which is shared and discussed in a series of group meetings. The purpose is to simulate what it is like for students during the application season, though in reality it is a chance for the counselors to share their opinions and experiences with a captive audience. There is an element of theatricality in the training sessions which all of the counselors secretly enjoy. This year, I chose to write my personal statement about my mother.

Ellie, whom I reference at a few points in these essays, is a new counselor with the company. She is a pretty girl from China with long black hair. She also happened to write a personal statement about her abusive mother, and so we had a connection during the course of the training.

The third essay is a short critique of feminism that I wrote after the training in order to tie the themes of the first two essays together and to present them as a collection on my website. Anyone concerned exclusively with theory can go straight to the third essay, but the first two essays give the third one important context. As a rule, I do not think there is much distinction to be made between personal experience and general experience, beyond that the purely personal is what goes uncommunicated. The purpose of these essays is to divest myself of the purely personal, and with it the misery and isolation of keeping grievances like a secret to oneself.

Essay One

In the first group session, Mr. Shiao and I discussed work and the process of growing up in one's late 20s. I mentioned that I had applied for a position in direct marketing, and he

suggested that I write my next draft on that subject. It is an amusing story, and I think that it says a lot about work culture in America—this may be the subject of a later draft.

In this draft, I want to discuss my childhood experience, which was profoundly unhappy. For all of my life, I have kept it in like a terrible secret. I don't know why. In part, it is from a mixture of pain, shame and embarrassment. It is also because I have never had anyone to talk to about it. I am 28 years old now, and I am tired of holding it in. I need to move on—I have too much that I want to accomplish to be perpetually trapped in my childhood.

There is something very wrong with my mother. I am not a psychologist, and so I do not have the authority to pronounce what is wrong with her exactly. If I were a psychologist, I might say that she is a narcissist. She is cold and almost incapable of expressing genuine love or care, but she knows how to fake these things. She is cynical, cruel and unrelentingly negative. Above all, she is domineering and obsessed with control. She is also intelligent—she knows how to appear and how to behave appropriately in the right situations. But throughout my life, I have observed that her behavior always circles back to the compulsive need to control the people around her.

From my earliest childhood, I do not recall a single moment of spontaneous joy in my household. No warmth from my mother, no affection. This may be an exaggeration, but the tenor of day-to-day life was unremittingly tense and dour. My parents went through cycles of being at each other's throats before settling back into tense and silent mutual toleration. My father often claimed that they had fallen in love almost at first sight, but I never really saw that. I have no idea why they got married.

When I was eight, my mother decided that the teachers at the private school were incompetent, and that she could do better herself. She pulled me and my brother out of school. For seven years—from when I was eight to when I was fifteen—I was homeschooled. This in particular has set me apart from my peers, and it is also part of the reason why I have always been so embarrassed to talk about my childhood.

In fairness, my mother made an honest attempt at first. However, after a couple of years, the situation essentially degenerated into abuse. My brother would act out, and my mother would occasionally fly into terrifying fits of rage. She would scream at both of us before sulking off to her office for the rest of the day.

One of her fits in particular was very bad. To this day, I have difficulty remembering it properly. I don't recall exactly why it was so bad. She screamed and screamed, and I felt as though I were completely alone and the world was ending. We went to the mechanics shortly afterwards. I brought a book with me, and I remember wanting to do or say anything to make her cheer up and to stop being so angry with us.

That is how my personality developed at that stage of my childhood. My brother would act out, and my mother would have her tantrums. I felt that I *had* to be the responsible one and make sure that the situation didn't get out of hand. I learned to be quiet and to do whatever I

could to keep my mother from getting angry. I tried to make my brother behave, and I was often irritated at him myself—today we don't keep in contact with each other.

As for me, I tried to be as restrained and unobtrusive as possible in order not to annoy my mother. In the end, it really didn't matter what I did—she would still scream at us from time to time, but on most days she was icy and sullen. Even then, I sensed how arbitrary her moods were. I felt that she hated us, and I honestly think that she did.

I also had isolation to contend with. Because I was homeschooled, I didn't interact with my peers normally. In fact, I didn't want to—when I was five or six, I felt that they were noisy and stupid, and I was also afraid of them because I had been bullied while I was still in elementary school. My mother knew that I was afraid of going back to school—I saw it as a kind of godawful penitentiary where I would be broken and abused. She would often threaten to send us to public school when she was mad. It was completely paradoxical: although my mother was obviously unhappy, she did everything she could to keep a tight hold on us. The object, as I said, was complete control—never mind who was made unhappy in the process.

And I was bitterly, bitterly unhappy. I had no one to talk to. My father did honestly love me, but he has always been incapable of dealing with emotional matters of any kind. I sank deeper and deeper into anxiety and despair, and I had no idea what to do.

From time to time, my mother would suddenly come up with a project that she would pursue very energetically for a while before eventually losing interest or violently changing her mind. When I was 12 or 13, she decided that we *must* host an exchange student. Theresa, a girl from Germany, arrived a few months later. She was 16 at the time, and she was tall and pretty. I was immediately smitten with her in an innocent, boyish way. I felt protective of her, and I remember having an affectionate, brotherly feeling towards her. At the same time, I could not help but notice her figure, which seemed more and more appealing to me.

It felt good to have her in the house. She had a friendly, natural feminine presence. She would never condescend to me or my brother. She played with us, and I remember feeling warmth and comfort when she was around. Looking back, I realize that I was on the verge of an important step in my development—I was learning to form healthy, positive relationships with women outside of my family.

Naturally, my mother crushed this. It was as if she had an instinctual hatred for warmth and sensuality. She got it into her head that Theresa was trying to seduce my father, which I learned from overhearing conversations between my mother and a friend of hers. She was insane with jealousy. The word “misogynist” is thrown around a lot today, but I believe that my mother is an *actual* misogynist—she hates pretty, normal girls who threaten her control over the men around her.

My mother began filing complaints with the exchange agency, claiming that Theresa's attitude was bad, that she was ungrateful, and even that she had poor personal hygiene. I was absolutely mortified. It got to the point that I couldn't bear to see Theresa. My feelings turned to

confusion and shame: I knew that I had liked her, and yet my mother was now insisting that she was a bad, filthy person.

My mother eventually got what she wanted. Theresa was sent back to Germany before the school year was over. I remember the night when she left. We were in my brother's bedroom, and she came to tell us goodbye. Poor Theresa! Her face was red and wet with tears, she was still sobbing when she entered the room. I had no idea what to say or do. I wished I was some place far away, and not with my family.

My mother's presence was stifling. She filled me with shame and humiliation. She exposed me as my sexuality developed in ways that I would prefer not to detail here. I felt a crushing sense of guilt and shame, and I began to hate the human body with an almost religious fervor—although no one in my house was particularly religious. I felt that I was filthy and corrupt, and I have carried some fraction of that feeling to the present day.

Time went on. My mother always wanted more and more, but she was never satisfied with anything. One incident in particular sticks out in my mind. Once, my father secretly bought a horse for my mother a short time before her birthday—she had recently taken up horseback riding, and could think of nothing but horses. Not long afterwards, during a long car ride, my mother brought up the subject of horses. She announced that she was determined to buy one for herself. Not wanting to spoil the secret, my father protested, feigning that he was concerned about the cost, or this or that other thing. The more my father objected, the more insistent my mother became; at last they were on the verge of having a full-blown yelling match. My father had no choice but to reveal the secret. My mother was struck completely silent.

Well, she got her horse alright! She rode it for three or four months before selling it back to the stable owner. I don't remember her ever thanking my father or apologizing to him for the incident in the car.

She was always demanding something, and it never made her happy when she got it. One year it was diamond earrings; another year it was a kiln because she had taken up pottery.

My parents were divorced when I was 15 or 16. I don't remember precisely when, because my memory from that entire period is blurred. My father had got fed up and had an affair with one of his nurses. I have never blamed him for a single day. Rebecca—who is now his wife—is a very decent woman. She has a daughter whom she loves very much. She has always been kind to me.

My brother and I were divvied out to my mother like pieces of property. Not long after the divorce, my mother sat me and my brother down to explain the situation, with many slurs directed against my father. She then told me to my face that she didn't like me.

Meanwhile, I had returned to public high school, which wasn't as bad as I had imagined. The situation at home was much worse. My mother was always bitter, always angry, and she obviously resented having to look after us, despite the fact that she had fought ruthlessly for custody. I started drinking when I was 17, and I immediately fell in love with alcohol. It was the only way I felt relief from the constant, grinding dread. It was also fun. Of course, the drinking

made my mother mad, but what the fuck did it matter? She was mad and resentful towards me no matter what I did. She once came to my bedroom to yell at me while I was drunk. I laughed right in her face and slammed the door on her.

Shortly before the divorce, my mother had started taking classes at a local college with an ultimate view to obtaining a PhD in English literature. To her credit, she persisted with her plan after the divorce, and she now holds a doctorate. However, it wasn't long before she was steeped in feminist theory.

What a wonderful discovery for my mother! Now she could cloak her selfishness with the semblance of a moral imperative. Now her bitter little remarks were tinged with ideological vitriol. She could now blame her problems on men generally, whom she has come to view with a hint of partisan hostility. Her attempts to manipulate me now bore the insinuation that I deserved ill treatment simply because I was a man. She had acquired one more instrument for bringing her malice to bear on the world.

In 2018, I cut myself off from my mother entirely. Since then, my life has improved in every conceivable way. As I write this, I realize that I have become more like my mother as I have gotten older. I don't care. I never want to be in that woman's power again. Never.

My father was always the kind, gentle one. Whatever I inherited from him is my soul. In some part of my soul, I am still that scared, confused and lonely boy. There is a void inside of me. I am missing the caring, comforting, unconditional love of a mother. For a long time, I wanted to fill that void, but I am beginning to realize that this is not possible. Part of me longs for the stable, secure, loving family life that I never experienced as a child. I am sick and tired of the chaos and empty debauchery of liberal society—the selfish individualism of Western culture always puts me in mind of my parents' indifference.

This is not the place to air my critique of feminism. It goes without saying that I do not agree with every aspect of it. However, I will not pass up on the opportunity to remark on a strange superstition that we still hold onto today. From every appearance, we still cling to the 19th century notion that women are somehow pure and morally superior to men—that they are good, natural and kind in every instance without qualification. This rings hollow to me. It quite simply does not line up with my experience. I know that women have the potential to be every bit as cruel and depraved as men.

Essay Two

My last essay was full of bitterness and anger. As Scarlet said, it was charged—it was charged because all of the bitterness was real. When I look back at my childhood, I feel numbness and anger. It is a slow, smoldering, revengeful anger, gradual and subterranean like the ghost of Hamlet's father; slow hatred, “blasts from hell.”

I have already characterized my mother in my previous essay, but I believe that I can distill her behavior into a formula: she was intensely, compulsively possessive; she would pull

me in and keep me from developing autonomy, and yet at the same time she would push me away emotionally. She was and still is completely incapable of responding to the emotional needs of others. It often felt as though she wanted to dominate me completely and wipe out any trace of my personality: she wanted to break me down and incorporate me into her own dysfunctional person.

As I indicated in my last essay, these feelings are all coming to the surface now because I have reached an important point in my life. I am becoming an adult, and I want to get by on my own ability. I have to get everything out from my childhood as best I can. Absolutely everything—I want to empty it all out and be done with it as far as is possible.

Every word of what I have written is true. It is true in that it is what I feel, what I have felt. But the picture is not complete. In the last group session when I was counseled by Ellie, I mentioned that I had immense respect for my mother and that I love her very much. This is also true. I feel that I am more of my mother's child than my brother, and I see her in myself in many ways. I have a connection with her that goes beyond the way that she raised me.

What hurt the most about my relationship with her is that no matter how much love I showed her, no matter how much I strove to be a good, obedient son, she never, never returned any of my love in a normal, motherly way. She always leveraged it to gain one more advantage over me. My love was a weapon that she used against me.

I feel the need to complete the picture of our relationship. There were precisely three times when I felt close to my mother, and when she seemed close to me. "Close" in the sense that I felt love for her, and that she seemed to love and acknowledge me as I was.

My mother always made an effort to expose us to the arts. I can credit her with that. We had season tickets to the performing arts center in the nearby town of Fayetteville, and we would often go on weekends for plays, musicals, concerts and ballets. She always pushed me to read and write, and her pursuit of education gave me a unique insight into the academy. She even seemed to take pride in the fact that I showed an inclination for writing. I would not be so comfortable with the arts were it not for her influence.

Once, when we were on the way to a ballet, I was playing a game in the backseat of the car. The game played a certain tune over and over again; she asked me why.

What was it about the way she asked the question? She wasn't annoyed. Her voice was gentle. I felt that she was curious about what I was doing, and that she had taken an interest in me for no particular reason. It is one of the only times I recall feeling like this; she was usually dismissive or contemptuous of the things I liked.

The second time was while we were staying at a resort in Orlando. It was one of the most pleasant times of my childhood. The stars must have aligned in some special way—my mother and father were getting along and laughing together. My mother was calm and happy, and for once she was not in conflict with her circumstances. I felt secure and happy. I was energetic, and I felt like everything around me brought me a giddy, childlike happiness.

I happened to visit the same resort recently with my father, and I was flooded with associations from that one day. I realized with astonishment that what I felt for a single day is what most people must feel as a rule in childhood.

The third time was during my senior year of college. I remember this very distinctly. We were staying at my grandmother's house in Florida.

I was writing my honor's thesis at the time, and I was under a lot of stress. However, I also felt that I was doing something immensely important and significant to me. I was sitting on the balcony, and a strange realization dawned on me: I felt that I needed to let my mother know that I loved her because she was the one woman who was always there and whom I had always known; I was moving on to other things. I went to where she was in the guest room and thanked her for a time when I had called her to ask for her advice. She seemed to understand my meaning and hugged me close with real feeling.

I returned to the balcony in an almost indescribable mood. It was like a spiritual experience: wave after wave of relief and happiness washed over me. I looked out at the sea and felt at peace. I was letting go of years of bitterness and confusion. It was strange—I remember very clearly thinking to myself "I could die right now."

The next day I was leaving for college. She came down with me to the car. She put her hand on my cheek and held me tight. It was the only time she had done that. I loved her so much. I love her even now.

I don't know what to make of this. It is as if it happened to a different person.

She came to Georgia for my commencement ceremony, and she was back to her old self. Could I change her if I show her enough love? I wondered this to myself at the time. I was 21 then—I almost find myself wondering the same thing now. One day we had lunch in Atlanta, and she berated me about spending money until I broke down in tears at the table. I thought our relationship had changed. Another day as she was helping me to move out of my apartment, she made fun of how dirty my room was all day and all night. I sunk into despair.

That day in Florida was completely unaccountable. She has shown me time and time again that she will abuse any amount of trust that I place in her; she will exploit any vulnerability that I expose.

I went to London for film school, and it did not go well. I will not go into detail here. I returned to America, and I was in a bad way. She did not relent for a single moment. Within 24 hours of arriving at her house, she was screaming at me about getting a job. I quickly realized that I had to deal with my issues myself; this irate, childish woman was not going to be of much help.

The final straw was over a sum of money my grandfather had left me. Over the years, my mother had always told me that it was only for education, or that there were tax reasons that restricted any use of it. In 2018, I called my uncle—who was managing the account—and found out that I had always had access to the fund. The scales fell from my eyes: I realized that, if my

mother was able to lie to me so consistently and so deliberately for over 20 years, then she was capable of anything. I stopped talking to her soon after.

I feel like I finally have some clarity on my relationship with my mother. I do love her, and I feel that I am missing something since I stopped speaking to her. At the same time, I know from hard experience that I cannot depend on her and I cannot trust her. Adulthood is difficult, but at least now I can start to live my own life.

I am very grateful to have met Ellie, and to know that other people have gone a similar experience. It makes me feel less isolated and less unusual.

Critique of Feminism

Doubtless, these essays shed some light on what I call “tyrannical feminine culture.” My dissatisfaction with the spirit of the present day is not purely conceptual—nor, indeed, is it for any of us—it is rooted in my experience, how my social circumstances have impacted me, shaped my personality and made me unhappy.

Of course, there is nothing inherently “left-wing” or “feminist” in the way that my mother treated me. Other children have often been treated similarly in the name of Christianity or conservatism. I think of the memorable case of Rilke, for example, whose hyper-religious mother dressed him up like a girl and treated him like a little beast simply because he was a boy.

However, my childhood experience has colored the way I perceive relations between the sexes in our time. I cannot help but see parallels between the way my mother treated me and the way women are socialized to treat men today. This isn’t helped by the fact that my mother became more and more invested in feminist theory during my teenage years, which she “weaponized”—to borrow Ellie’s apt expression—as a way to gain one more advantage over others.

In the first essay, I wrote that “this is not the place to air my critique of feminism.” This was right in the context. I wanted to keep the essays focused on my experience and my feelings. However, after I wrote that essay, in the days following I wondered to myself: Well, what exactly *is* my critique of feminism? I have written this and that about feminism, but I have never attempted to formulate a comprehensive argument against it.

I realized that my critique of feminism is simple—it can fit into a few sentences: In the 19th and 20th centuries, feminism was a movement aimed at securing equal political rights for women in the name of equality and democracy. In the 21st century—and still in the name of equality and democracy—feminism idealizes female impulses and the female way of life; puts a moral premium on these things; and sets up a culture that gives explicit preference to the wants, needs, ambitions and the peculiar experience of women. There is a contradiction between the principle of equality and the explicit preference women are given in society. There is an attempt to justify the preference women are given with the argument that women were once oppressed—that they now deserve to be given preference—but this justification is tenuous in comparison to

the original aim of feminism, which in previous centuries sought to resolve the tension between the principle of equality and the political disenfranchisement of women.

Just when do we decide that all is fair and equal, and that adequate reparations have been made for historical injustices? I have asked this question elsewhere, and here I repeat the answer: This will never happen, so long as there is an advantage to be gained by pointing to past injuries. Humans are by nature selfish, warlike creatures, and we use anything at our disposal to make our way in the world.

That a moral or ideological principle is self-contradictory does not automatically invalidate it. For the greater part of history, people have claimed dominion over one another on the grounds of utter nonsense. It is usually the matter of collective psychological force that is decisive. What is at issue is the *social effect* that feminism has on our civilization, which is as much, if not more than, a problem as the logical integrity of the doctrine itself.

Feminism is massively destructive. To repeat what I argued in *Polemics*, it is one of the greatest spiritual issues that our society faces today. It drives a wedge between men and women, and places the wants and needs of women into a political faction separate from society as a whole. The wants and needs of men are excluded, sneered at or otherwise ignored. As one of the dominant political forces in society, feminism denies the validity of the innate inclinations of men, and forces us to regard them as morally undesirable and antisocial.

I say this is a spiritual issue. This is my meaning: A society is a kind of oneness. It is comprised of people who are joined together by a common language, culture and set of customs and conventions. It is also a balance of the wants and needs of the various elements of the whole.

In the case of feminism, language and culture are used to give preference to the wants and needs of one element of society, while suppressing the wants and needs of another element. This is done on a very large scale: fully one-half of society is advantaged, and the other half disadvantaged.

What's more, the total social usefulness of feminism is suspect—women certainly benefit, but it is unclear how feminism provides for the health and security of our civilization as a whole. Young women can wear tights and pretend to save the world by buying clothes. They can party and get attention on the weekends. Meanwhile, the world is plunging into instability, uncertainty and war. We are beginning to witness distress of a more conventional, Hobbesian sort. These problems are no longer matters of imagination and sentiment alone. No amount of social advocacy will stop a brigade of armor or heavy artillery.

I do not want to seem too harsh on women. The majority of these young women are good, kindhearted people, even if they are selfish—the number of the truly malicious is relatively small. *It is not necessarily their fault that they are expected to behave in these ways.* Society has its own force and momentum, and this is expressed through whatever ideas are available to it. The problem at hand is to correct the ideas that we have in order to accommodate the elements of society that are currently excluded. Yes, I include myself in this—I have never claimed not to be

selfish. The alternative to reconciliation is more social instability, which may well lead to unspeakable things.

The effects of this spiritual disturbance in our society cannot be ignored. We see hatred and animosity between the sexes. Bitterness and social isolation have become normal. Our notion of a single, consolidated society has broken down almost entirely, and we are now comprised of different groups that stare at one another with distrust. Feminism is not the sole cause of these things, but it is a major contributing factor.

Dissent against this arrangement is violent and inarticulate; reasons against the prevailing order are forcefully ignored or written off as aberrant thought. None of this is healthy. My aim as a writer is hopefully to lend some clarity and organization to this dissent, and to make the dissent an openly acknowledged part of the public discourse. My hope is for a more unified society—we will soon need one another more than we can now imagine.

But to return to where I began, I *do* see a parallel between the way my mother treated me and the way women treat men today. Many men give love willingly and want love and loyalty in return. Women remain proud and unwilling to commit themselves. They are like the Danaids of mythology. Sex has been perverted into a transaction, and no longer reinforces intimacy and connection. Our society is one great emotional stoppage—is it any wonder that today we see violent outbreaks of frustration and anger? Society will be healthier and happier when men and women can once again enjoy normal interactions in the open.