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Maternal Considerations on Mount Purgatory

Just as every step up Mount Purgatory takes Dante and Virgil one step closer to their separation, and as senior year creeps along, every day feels like one day closer to my departure from home. And no one is more aware of this than my mother. However, while Dante responds to his surrogate parents with affection, gratitude and vulnerability in their diminishing time, I have responded by closing myself off to my mother.

Dante begins his Purgatorial journey with a display of “impressive vulnerability” (Caroline Troy). When Virgil takes Dante to wash his face, Dante proactively lifts his face to Virgil when he “offered [his] tear-stained cheek to him” (*Purgatorio* I, 11). He affectionately opens up to Virgil and allows himself to be cared for in a way that I have struggled to do with my mom. Dante continues his fearless displays of affection towards Virgil through their journey, calling him by titles such as “sweet father,” “exalted teacher,” and “wise and trusted escort.” I, in contrast, struggle to say “I love you, too” to my mother.

As they ascend, Dante draws physically nearer to Virgil and even goes into “gratitude mode” at times. Soon after they pass through the gates of Purgatory, at Virgil’s encouragement “[Dante] edges past Virgil” (X, 93). This physical change represents a shift in Dante and Virgil’s relationship, in which Virgil helps Dante claim his independence. However, despite this shift, which actually begins to occur near the bottom of the mountain, Dante continues to desire and appreciate Virgil’s leadership more and more as they ascend. Following the terrace of anger, Dante implores Virgil to explain love to him, saying “Master, my vision becomes/so keen in your light...Therefore, sweet father dear, I beg you,/ explain to me love, to which you reduce/

every good action and its opposite” (Dante, 171). Dante knows that he and Virgil do not have much time left together, and truly values his lessons and words of wisdom. Furthermore, upon meeting Statius, Dante introduces Virgil, saying, “It is he who led me/ through the deep night of the truly dead/ in my flesh and blood body that follows him./ His encouragement has drawn me up from there,/ climbing and circling the rings of the mountain/ that make you straight whom the world has bent” (Dante, 227). Dante exudes gratitude and appreciation for all that Virgil has done for him on his journey. And, even though Dante “edged past Virgil” early on their ascent, he still knows when to take a step back and appreciate his guide. Close to the top of the mountain, Dante “turned and walked behind [his] teachers” (Dante, 237).

I, on the other hand, have responded to my mother’s affection and attempts to share words of wisdom with physical and emotional distance. Until this year, my parents gave me lots of space. They rarely made the hike up to my room, and I was able to come and go as I pleased without much questioning. Now, my mother seems to be constantly invading my privacy, and I tense up when I hear her footsteps coming up the stairs to my room. She pays me frequent visits as I do my homework and calls me on the phone multiple times most days to ask what I am doing. My mother has always been sentimental by nature, but this has been extremely heightened over the past few months. Upon hearing that I had to work over Labor Day weekend, her face dropped and she said she could not believe I was going to miss my “last Labor Day with the family,” a holiday we have barely ever even taken note of. Furthermore, my mother takes excessive photos of me whenever possible, sometimes following me around with her camera despite my objections. I can feel my mom pushing to connect with me. She frequently asks me to accompany her to plays and countless adult events, invitations which I mostly decline due to school work or not wanting to give up my Friday and Saturday nights. I have begun to dread our

car rides as she uses them as opportunities to lecture me on life lessons about going to college and being a woman in the world, capitalizing on the fact that I cannot escape the moving car. Overall, I have felt a bit smothered these past few months, causing me to distance myself subconsciously rather than appreciating the love my mother has been attempting to show me.

This past weekend, my attitude shifted unexpectedly during a lunch date with my mom. I sat down to the table feeling agitated, a result of a tense car ride to the restaurant. The wails of two toddler boys a few tables behind us filled the silence between me and my mom. The boys began loudly banging the underneath of their table, disregarding the pleas of their helpless mother and disrupting the entire restaurant. Finally, my mother calmly reached into her purse, always stocked with anything and everything one could need, and pulled out a rubber glove taken from the hospital where she works as a nurse practitioner in the newborn nursery. She held the glove up to her mouth and began to blow it up like a balloon, tying it off at the end once it was filled with air. She walked over to the boys, holding the makeshift balloon up for them, and their frowns instantly disappeared as they held their arms out wide in anticipation for this gift, giggling. Relief washed over the face of their mother when my mom triumphantly handed her the balloon. As my mom made her way back to our table, other diners nodded their heads towards us in gratitude, and a waiter even came over and thanked her on behalf of the entire staff. In this moment, I felt so much pride in my mom, and I was reminded not only what an amazing mother I have, but of how much my mom, like Virgil, cherishes being a parent.

My mom did not meet my dad until she was forty years old. Up to that point, she had resigned to the single life, despite her desire to be a mother. As a nurse practitioner in the NICU and newborn nursery, she had been working with mothers and babies most of her life, but had never gotten the chance to have a child of her own. Thus, having two children in her forties was

an amazing gift to her. Both Virgil and my mom entered parenthood after a living full lives of their own, traveling the world and establishing their careers. Therefore, my mom never shows resentment towards me and my brother for limiting her from the life she wanted, as some parents do. Rather, she loves being a mother more than anyone I know. Once, my brother and I jokingly began calling her by her first name, Carol, instead of calling her “mom.” This seemingly harmless change really upset her because it means so much to her to be called “mom.” She told us that we were the only two people in the world who can call her mom, so if we don’t then no one will. Similarly, Dante lovingly assigns titles to Virgil in order to communicate the uniqueness and importance of Virgil’s role in his life.

My mom, like Virgil, has put so much effort into being my guide, and now I am on the verge of continuing on my journey without her. Both my mom and Virgil found a new purpose in parenthood, only for their children to no longer need them. It is unfair and selfish for me to shut my mom out during this pivotal time for both of us. In the coming months, I am always going to say “I love you, too.” I will try to appreciate her lectures and keep them with me next year. I will accept her invitations whenever possible. Above all else, I am going to try to follow the example of Dante and work on developing my own “impressive vulnerability.”

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *Purgatorio*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo. Hackett Publishing, 2009.