

Melissa Brown Levine
P. O. Box 837
Hampton, GA 30228
678-488-6410
mbrownlevine@gmail.com

First North American Rights
Word count: 2487

Break to Re-build

by

Melissa Brown Levine

***Writer's reflections:** I chose to write about the dissolution of my relationship with my parents because it was a defining moment for me. The letter I wrote was a symbolic cutting of the umbilical cord. The most difficult aspect of writing this essay was actually re-reading the piece during revision. I didn't want to see the words I'd written because, even though they express my story, they cause me a great deal of pain. Creatively, I had to stop myself from padding the essay with every detail of my upbringing. I forced myself to write about events that upheld my argument that my life would be better without my parents occupying space in it.*

This piece is important because I hold myself accountable for my role in the development and maintenance of the emotional problems I have struggled with all of my life. It is important because my life is an example of free will overcoming negativity. The essay displays one woman's decision to exercise her choice to accept who she is and to work actively at self-improvement despite her background.

I was home with the flu when I saw a new Michael Jordan Nike commercial. It featured athletes training and agonizing over the preparations for game day. While the spot was visually engaging, depicting the physical and emotional strain involved with becoming a pro-athlete, it was the title of the commercial, “Break to Build,” that captured my attention. I was struck by the words because that week in October 2009 I broke my connection with my parents. With the break came my opportunity to finally begin the work of rebuilding myself.

In my family of origin I am the “scapegoat.” If we had ever made it to family counseling, I would have been labeled “the identified patient.” I was the one who was chosen by my parents to carry the blame for our family’s problems. After confronting my parents about how they treated me as a child, I realized that I had played this role not only as a youth, but as an adult as well.

A few days before I came down with the flu, I wrote a letter to my parents that reviewed the volatile history of our relationship. I confessed that I’d been harboring anger against them since I was a teenager. I told them that I was severing ties with them so that I would not have to face another new year battling the negative feelings I held towards them.

My symptoms progressed in lock step with the writing of the letter. Over the course of three days I made notes of old memories, hurtful things my parents said to me when I was a child. I also recorded my role in perpetuating the behavior. The slight tickle in my throat turned into an itch that I had to cough repeatedly to soothe. As I began to form my notes into text, the itch intensified, creating a desire to stick a finger down my throat and scratch. I finished the letter during my lunch break at work on Friday, by that evening I had a sore throat. After taking my sixteen-year-old son to a movie and dinner, the itch had turned into a hacking cough that demanded an albuterol breathing treatment to which I submitted. By Saturday night, I had every

symptom on the CDC website flu page. Four hours in the waiting room at my doctor's office the next day resulted in four prescriptions, three days off (which turned into the full week after my son contracted the virus) and a lot of time to think about what breaking up with my parents would really mean for my future.

The Monday after my diagnosis, I bundled up against the cold and walked to my mailbox. Letter in and flag up, I went back inside with the weight of the burden I had been carrying peeling back at the edges. Even so, I don't think I was able to take a full breath until after the mailman came and I knew I couldn't run back outside and retrieve the letter. As I watched him drive off, I reviewed in my head the words I had written. Prior to writing the letter, I'd read *Divorcing a Parent* by Beverly Engel. Before that I was stopped in my tracks one day by the small inner voice that I call God telling me to end the relationship with my parents. The morning of the first day of drafting the letter, I exited the shower with the words for the letter formatted in my mind as if they were being dictated.

I have been pulling back from the two of you since the end of last year. After Thanksgiving I was exhausted and overwhelmed by the range of emotions that I felt after spending three straight days with my parents. The feelings were not good, but I needed time to sort through them and separate what I was feeling about my marriage ending and how I have felt about my relationship with the two of you for the better part of my life.

I knew that my parents would think the letter came out of nowhere. They would attribute the sudden expression of emotions to my divorce in October of 2008. By the time I sat down to

write, I had gathered my feelings and used my counseling education and experience to sort and chart each of them. I made sure to match my fear, anger, bitterness, and hurt to the appropriate people, including myself.

At the beginning of the year I was still very angry with my ex-husband, but as I examined it, I realized that the foundation of my anger, the component that makes it difficult for me to calm down and move past a point of contention, is the pain I have carried around since my childhood.

Anger has been the emotion that has consumed me in many areas of my life and even though writing the letter did not cleanse me of it, the act of writing and sending it took the edge off of my rage. Once my blood stopped boiling and I was able to say “Stop it!” to the fights I had been having with my parents in my head all year, I could look at the events that I wrote about in terms of my own behavior and how those behaviors had defined who I am as an adult. The idea that I was the scapegoat in my family didn’t come to me until after I’d written the letter. It was the reoccurring theme of blame that ran through it that encouraged me to look at my role in my family with a clinical eye.

I am the eldest of my parents’ two children. On the outside they had the perfect family: one girl, one boy, the house, and a two income household. Inside our home, perfection was not actually present, but that didn’t stop my parents from wanting to believe that it was. And when pretending things were perfect didn’t work, their focus switched to my imperfections. In reality, my imperfections were a culmination of my parents’ personal faults, biases and weaknesses. The scapegoat often acts out the dysfunction in her family. I gave memorable performances.

My father was and continues to be of the school of thought that women are less than men; that they are as good as their parts. In a home where my mother was on a perpetual diet, my father made a point of telling me that I was going to get fat after I had children. He discouraged my relatives from telling me that I was beautiful because, "It will go to her head."

On average, I was a size ten throughout middle and high school. My brown skin smoothed out after acne and my body was well proportioned, strong, and healthy; that is, until I learned about anorexia and then bulimia. For two years I cycled from the former to the latter. I journaled about my methods: how I used exercise and skipped breakfast and lunch and then switched to bulimia after my mother forced me to stop my workouts and demanded that I eat. I wanted to be someone else. I coveted the bodies of models, strategically cutting their pictures out of magazines that I checked out of the library. It became an obsession that manifested into the eating disorders. "It reads like a dime store novel," my father said after I shared the journal with my parents. Criticism flowed freely in my parents' house while the spigot delivering compassion was often clogged.

Ultimately, I became the physical embodiment of my parents' mental ailments: Depressed, anxious, shy, and generally fearful with low self-esteem like my mother; angry, withdrawn, insecure, and mildly paranoid like my father. This unique combination of my parents' characteristics spawned the eating disorders as well as my suicide attempt at fifteen. Most parents faced with a daughter's attempt to take her own life would have been distraught and desirous of getting her the best help available. My father's strategy was a little different. He didn't help my mother get me to the hospital and he didn't call or visit me during the three or four days that I was hospitalized. When I returned home after my mother passed on the extended care facility the hospital referred me to, my father greeted me with, "Your soul is going to hell."

Those words and the others from both my mother and father that I reminded them of in the letter have left a stain on my spirit. Their words influenced my behavior. My behavior was my defense against their actions, but also determined who I would become as an adult.

During the year of healing after my divorce, I began to truly feel like an adult. As I took care of myself during my flu week—cooking and forcing myself to eat so I could take my medication, napping and checking e-mails at work, checking my temperature and cursing the reoccurring fluctuation from 99.1 to 100.5—a collection of thoughts and memories circled through my head and my heart. Since I was too sick to fight them off, I surrendered. I acknowledged the truth: Writing and sending the letter was not going to free me or make me better. I still had a great deal of work to do. Accepting that truth has opened up a door to my past allowing me to look back and make connections. I began to break who I am down to the components; snatches of emotions, events, and behaviors. I began to formulate equations:

Coveting + Wanting to Be Someone Else + Eating Disorders – Parental Guidance – Parental Love = Body Image Obsession

Feeling Worthless + Depressed Mood + Suicide Attempt – Parental Regard = Suicide Fixation

Withdrawing from Family + Withdrawing from Most People + Shyness + Yearning for Love – Self-worth = Two Failed Marriages

I came up with a myriad of combinations. There is enough in my background to fill several pages of negative results. But, as I watched my son, who normally has the appetite of one and a half men, spoon a small portion of stir-fried vegetables and noodles onto a small plate on Wednesday night of the flu week, I challenged myself to find the combinations that make me the type of mother who can quietly observe her child's behavior and determine that it is time to sanitize the thermometer to take his temperature; and the type of employee whose director instructed her to take the rest of the week off to care for her son in response to the afterhours e-mail request for one extra sick day. I needed to put together the combinations that made me the person with friends, one living an hour away and the other almost two, who offered repeatedly during that week to come to my house if I needed anything.

As the scapegoat, I grew up believing that I was a bad person. My brother, whom my Dad believed "...should have been born first because he is a boy," was the golden child. But the role became complicated for him as he grew into an intelligent, handsome, gay man. It grew complicated, but his role in our family did not change. Mine has. The letter to my parents gave me the opportunity to see myself as I truly am. And what I am is a woman in a state of rebuilding. I am taking the scraps from my childhood, my strained adolescence and young adulthood, and recycling them into useable, positive traits that will turn me into the whole woman I know I can be.

I sorted again during my week of convalescence, shuffling old behaviors and the resulting character traits with the revisions I have made in the last three years and placed them in one of two boxes: Need to Improve and Improved.

NEED TO IMPROVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am still shy, but socializing is becoming easier. • I acknowledge that I suffer from social anxiety and plan to enter therapy for help with this issue. • I still struggle with coveting and deal with it by counting my blessings. • I am learning to manage my anger. • I am combating depression by introducing positive thoughts and moderate exercise.

IMPROVED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am trading my negative default for a permanent positive attitude. • I am taking time to be alone, to learn who I am, and to prove to myself that I am whole as a single woman. • I recognize that I am a strong woman and I am growing more courageous every day. • I am winning the battle over my insecurities with logic, research, and surrender to the reality that I am not and will never be perfect. • I have learned to love myself and to appreciate my life.

On Thursday, my son and I were at the doctor's office before it opened at 8 a.m. After he tested positive for the flu, I came home and made phone calls to friends, eat a little breakfast, and went back out to pick up his prescriptions. When I got back to the house, I collapsed on the couch with the plan of napping for maybe thirty minutes. I slept for four hours. I believe that things happen for a reason. I link my illness to the completion of the letter. I believe the purpose of the illness was for me to be still and reflect on what cutting the umbilical cord, finally, would really mean for my life. Only now as a single woman, twice divorced, and raising a child alone

was I strong enough to sever the ties with my parents. The timing was perfect. With the letter I was able to face my irrational fear of being completely alone in the world; I challenged my parent's delusional perception of family; and I let go of the thin, loosely attached threads that connected me to my mother and father.

The Saturday after the flu came to my house both my son and I were feeling much better. We spent the day cleaning and disinfecting the house. I was able to do a full hour on the treadmill and afterwards I felt my lungs open all the way up. My spirits soared. I felt light. I had a sense that my heart would begin to heal very quickly.

In a perfect world, I would have been able to sit down with my parents and talk to them face-to-face about the abuse I suffered under their hands. But since I have fully accepted that such a world does not exist, I feel my words on paper bestowed the depth of my maturity and the breath of my budding courage. The letter was the catalyst for recycling my broken parts and rebuilding my life free of the bondage of my parents' expectations; free to grow fully into my authentic self.