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Reformulating God the Mother:  
Mutual Recognition, the Divine and Therapeutic Applications

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## Abstract

Feminine language for God has been largely absent within Christianity. However, a focus on feminine aspects of the divine can help Christians reclaim characteristics of God that get lost in a religion where language of God the Father is pervasive. This paper addresses the use of Mother as a metaphor for God and its implications for a therapeutic context. The current conversation around parental metaphors for the divine is presented including the association of immanence with a Mothering God and transcendence with God the Father. A new formulation of a Mothering God is proposed in which immanence and transcendence stand in constant tension. Therapeutic applications are explored in light of this new reformulation of a Mothering God especially as related to woman therapists.

The language we use to speak about God strongly influences our experience of God. In recent years, there has been considerable debate over gender inclusive language. I argue that the exclusive use of male language or metaphors for God is problematic because it supports a dualistic and hierarchical worldview that ultimately supports patriarchy and other forms of oppression. God the Mother is a rich metaphor that symbolizes a God who brought us into the world and cares for us. Yet, one must be mindful of the capacity for oppression that maternal language holds for women.

Christian theology traditionally uses the concepts of immanence and transcendence to understand the nature of God. An emphasis on God's transcendence focuses on God as separate from the world whereas an emphasis on God's immanence highlights God's presence in the world. Typically, God the Father is associated with transcendence and God the Mother with immanence. However, the exclusion of either immanence or transcendence limits our understanding of God.

Understandings of parental metaphors for God are influenced by our sociocultural formulations of what it means to be a father or a mother. The field of psychology has paid a great deal of attention to the mother-infant relationship. Traditionally, psychoanalytic theory has focused on the mother as an object to be internalized by the child which ignores the mother's subjectivity as a separate and distinct person. This parallels the tendency of considering a Mothering God only in relation to the earth (immanence) and not as a separate being (transcendence). Jessica Benjamin (1999) proposes a reformulation of the mother-infant relationship in which the mother's subjectivity and objectivity are balanced through the concept of mutual recognition. In mutual recognition there is a central paradox; recognizing another is contingent upon being recognized. This paradox must continue so that immanence and transcendence can stand in constant tension. This applies to our understanding of God the Mother as well. A reformulation is proposed in which a Mothering God is not simply associated with immanence but is seen as standing in the tension between immanence and transcendence.

Therapeutic applications are made based on this reformulation of a Mothering God. Specifically, I argue that a therapist can embody a Mothering God in her work by striving to stand in the tension between immanence and transcendence and, when that inevitably fails, working to repair the relationship by reclaiming her subjectivity.

***Nurturing Womb***

*Holy Womb of the world*

*from which we are born again each moment,  
and within which we grow, awaiting our birth into eternal life;  
we are not only born from you at our life-spark's beginning  
but it is from you we get the nourishment our being needs each instant:  
milk and bread, yes, and air to breathe,  
but also thought, right judgment, mercy, faith;  
and anger along with you that the weak are misled and manipulated,  
discomfort with the status quo that leaves millions out,  
resistance to the momentum of a culture  
of privilege, violence, and destitution.*

*Give us the hearts of parents also whose offspring and kin are all the inhabitants of this planet.*

*See our faith. Enlarge our compassion. Help our unbelief.*

*Creating Parent God, empowering, freeing,*

*In you we live and move and have our being.*

-William Cleary

from "Prayers to She Who Is"

### Reformulating God the Mother

The “Nurturing Womb” prayer above may be shocking. Some may find it heretical, uncomfortable, or simply novel. Or, some may find that it enlivens their experience of God. Using female or maternal language to speak about God is far from conventional. However, it can help Christians to remember and reclaim certain characteristics of God that get lost in an exclusive emphasis on God the Father. In this paper, I will argue for a reformulation of the conversation regarding use of Mother as a metaphor for God. The current formulation seeks to associate a Mothering God only with immanence or a God that is “with us.” The concept of mutual recognition from Relational Psychoanalysis will be used to create a new understanding of a Mothering God that holds immanence and transcendence in tension. Furthermore, therapeutic applications will be explored in light of this new formulation of a Mothering God especially as related to woman therapists.

The focus of this paper was born out of my experiences in training to be a therapist. I am a woman therapist. This is not something unique given the fact that women now dominate the field of psychotherapy. However, as I have gone through my training I have found that my identity as a woman strongly impacts the kind of therapist I am. Although the field is dominated by women, men still dominate the academy and often hold supervisory positions. This means that the teaching and training of therapists still arises from a predominantly male perspective. I have experienced this to be the case in my training to a large extent. Exploring the femaleness of God and how that impacts the work of therapy is my way of locating and affirming the feminine in me as well as in my female colleagues. Due to the personal nature of this topic for me, I will use the first person throughout to indicate my interaction with the ideas I present and application to a therapeutic context.

*Debate over God Language*

Before one can argue that something needs changed, one must first discuss the matter at hand. Therefore, this first section describes the nature of the conversation around the use of Mother as a metaphor for God. The way we talk about God is inextricably tied up with the type of language we use. The issue of gender inclusive language has been quite controversial in recent years. Although it has become widely accepted in reference to humanity, the use of gender inclusive language for God has not gained a similar level of acceptance. At the same time, using gender free language (excluding both masculine and feminine pronouns for God) is on the rise (Stroup, 1992). Yet, one can use gender free language (e.g., God loves God's people) and still hear masculine pronouns (e.g., God loves *his* people) as most people in America today have grown up hearing God referred to exclusively as male. Another solution is to use both masculine and feminine language for God.

In the debate over gendered language, there are several different positions (Dowd, 1992). In the traditional position, male pronouns are employed for people and for God. The conservative position utilizes gender neutral language for people (e.g., humanity) but uses male pronouns for God. Another position applies gender neutral language to people and God (no gendered pronouns used). Still others hold a personal inclusive position in which gender neutral language or alternated genders are employed for people and both male and female language are used to talk about God. Also, some adhere to an androgynous position which holds that God is both male and female. Sallie McFague, a prominent feminist theologian occupies what Dowd (1992) calls a monistic position in which the world is seen as God's body. Finally, some feminists hold a neo-pagan perspective in which they reject Christianity's God and participate in goddess religions or cults instead. I hold a personal inclusive position in which both male and

female language, including pronouns, images and metaphors, are used to speak about God.

However, in this paper I will focus on feminine language for God, specifically God as Mother or a Mothering God.

Part of my rationale for a personal inclusive position is that the exclusive use of male images of God is problematic. The parental metaphor is one of the most powerful metaphors for understanding God in Christianity (McFague, 1996). However, throughout most of Christian tradition, God has only been referred to as “Father.” Traditionally, the masculine has been associated with the spiritual or transcendent and the feminine has been associated with the earth. Therefore, referring to God with exclusively masculine metaphors supports dualistic and hierarchical understandings of reality (McFague, 1996). In this way “the male sky God under whom all things are hierarchically and dualistically ordered becomes the pattern for subsequent theology, as it also became the pattern for much of Western culture” (p. 324). Using exclusively masculine language for God, then, supports patriarchy which is closely connected with other forms of oppression including racism and classism that all serve to keep wealthy white males in power.

In daily life, we often use language in a literal manner, but when we talk about God we generally speak figuratively. This becomes problematic when people take language about God to be literal and normative when it is meant to be figurative (Thurston, 1992). Then, the metaphor is reified and God becomes functionally male (Dowd, 1992). This is essentially idolatry because a male god is not the God that is beyond gender. However, the vital point is that how we talk about God strongly influences our experience of God (Thurston, 1992). When God is conceived of as only God the Father then our experience of God will be limited. Thurston (1992) makes an important point when she says that “God can be spoken about, not

spoken of” (p. 4). No metaphor can fully illustrate all that is God. However, metaphors do help us understand and connect to God (McFague, 1996).

What I find most compelling about imaging God as Mother is the richness of the metaphor and what it speaks into my experience of God. According to King (1989) motherhood symbolizes the beginning of life. God the Mother is the one who brought humans forth at the very beginning of life. Rather than an image of a God who rationally thought up humans and produced them, the image that God as Mother evokes is a God who with much care and labor birthed each of us into the world. This is an intimate and loving picture that allows me to experience God’s love in a deep way. King (1989) also states that motherhood symbolizes primal human experiences of love, comfort, security, nurture, compassion, and protection. God the Mother is a God who knows her children intimately and provides for their wellbeing. As King (1989) says “speaking of the divine as ‘Mother’ in this sense thus expresses the richness and creativity of our original source and that of all creation, the continuing ground of security and protection. Addressing, calling, imploring the Divine in motherly terms expresses our endearment, affection, closeness and even familiarity” (p. 135). Holland (1987) shares an anecdote about the impact of using maternal language for God: “The first time I prayed ‘Our Mother,’ it was partly out of curiosity – would I be struck dead?! But something in me was released: an affirmation of myself and of God. I experienced a sense of being held, of being carried” (p. 12).

Not only does imaging God as Mother alter our personal religious experience, it has the capacity to alter the reality of our lives. Johanna Kohn-Roelin (1989) states that the goal is not simply to alter language and reclaim female names of God, “it must also *change reality* for both men and women so that their lives enable them to achieve their own identity, free from all forms

of oppression, sexism, racism or anti-Semitism” (p. 70). Yet, at the same time, the metaphor of God the Mother has limitations just as God the Father has limitations.

Mother God can also have authoritarian and patriarchal features which can hinder the emancipation of women (Kohn-Roelin, 1989). Also, motherhood is too often idealized, romanticized, and sentimentalized (King, 1989; McFague, 1996). This promotes a vision of motherhood that is impossible for women to live up to. It also exalts motherhood to the exclusion of all else which circumscribes the range of a woman’s life and aspirations and equates femaleness with giving birth (King, 1989). This is insensitive and insulting to women who have not given birth, have chosen not to be a mother or are not able to conceive and give birth to a child. As we image God the Mother we must remember the capacity for oppression that maternal language holds for women (McFague, 1996). A further limitation is that no one is forever dependent on one’s mother. To some, the metaphor of God the Mother emphasizes the childlike nature of humans while interdependence is important as well. Despite the limitations, motherhood is an experience all of us participate in some way or another “for our mother is literally, though not exclusively the source and beginning of our personal life” (p. 134). Therefore, we must remember that no metaphor including a Mothering God is perfect and be cautious and mindful of the ways in which we use this and other metaphors.

Two different emphases have traditionally existed within Christian theology in terms of understanding God’s nature (Grenz & Olson, 1992; Thurston, 1992). One emphasis is on God as transcendent. This addresses God’s self-sufficiency and differentiation from the world. In this view, God exists above the earth in the heavens and has to come down to the world (Grenz & Olson, 1992). The other emphasis is on God’s immanence. An immanent God is a God who is present with and active in the world (Grenz & Olson, 1992). However, as Thurston (1992)



points out, God is both with us and a distinct entity. Therefore, an emphasis on one to the exclusion of the other greatly limits our understanding of God. Furthermore, Grenz and Olson (1992) argue that theologians have struggled throughout history to strike a balance between God's transcendence and immanence, at times going to one extreme or the other.

God the Father has traditionally been associated with transcendence whereas a Mothering God is associated with immanence (McFague, 1987). Western culture has tended to hold a dualistic conception of the world in which the body is seen as separate from the mind. Since women have the capacity to bear children, they have often been associated with the body while men have been viewed as rational beings capable of transcending their bodily circumstances. Therefore, when one uses a masculine metaphor such as "Father" to speak about the divine, God is often experienced as a rational man completely separate from the world. Conversely, when using the feminine metaphor "Mother", the tendency is to experience God as being completely in the world.

According to Thurston (1992), Christianity has often focused exclusively on God's transcendence. As a result, the prayer life of many Christians is based on a laundry list of requests from a lofty, all-powerful God. The danger with focusing on God's transcendence is that we may feel separated and alienated from God. A focus on God's immanence has its strengths as well as dangers. When one focuses on God's nearness, one's prayers will tend to be silent and reflective in search of attunement. However, if one goes too far in emphasizing God's immanence, there is the danger of a pantheistic conception of God where God is seen as synonymous with the world. Critics of the use of maternal images or metaphors for God claim that doing so may lead one down a slippery slope toward pantheism. Sallie McFague (1987) in her book "Models of God" presents an argument for using the metaphor of God as Mother in

addition to God as Friend and Lover. She describes the world as being part of God's body. In this way, humans were birthed from God's womb. I do not have a problem with speaking metaphorically of God birthing us from her womb in that God is the Creator of all things. However, it seems to me that McFague does not make enough of a distinction between God and the world which could be interpreted by some as pantheistic. At the same time, I do not agree with critics who would say that all use of maternal images for God leads inevitably to pantheism.

Critics such as Elizabeth Achtemeier claim that to think of God as Mother would be to identify God with the world and not differentiate between the created world and the Creator (Dell'Olio, 1998). Yet, is not a father part of the world as well? Also, these critics seem to think that the creation and bringing forth of a child only requires the mother. Obviously a father is also required for a child to be born. In fact, the view that a father is linked with transcendence only serves to perpetuate the stereotype that fathers are distant and uninvolved with their families. In addition, it is difficult to see what is so problematic about conceiving of God as being close to the world. Rather than making us feel as if we are in some way equal with God, being reminded of God's immanence reminds us of how dependent we are on God. Phillips (1986) sums my sentiments on this debate nicely with: "If mother imagery is used alone, God may disappear in nature, just as when father imagery is used alone, patriarchal oppression of women, of people of color, and of the earth are the result. To fear mother imagery, however, and to be convinced that it leads inevitably to pantheism and magic, is to indulge in fear of the woman and to reject what our mothers can teach us about what is holy. God is Mother and God is Father, and human life in its sexual concreteness points to the God who is all this and more" (p. 50).

Thus far, the conversation related to parental metaphors for God has been explored. What I find troubling in this discussion is the continued influence of traditional gender stereotypes. The nature of this conversation must change to reflect less gender bias. Why is a Mothering God associated with immanence and why is God the Father associated with transcendence? I believe this is the result of the continuing effects of a dualistic and patriarchal worldview. As our sociocultural formulations reflect the worldview of the broader culture, our conceptions of what it means to be a mother and a father reflect stereotypes rooted in dualism and patriarchy. In order to alter the conversation about a Mothering God, we must first analyze our concept of mother. Psychology, perhaps more than most fields of study, has paid particular attention to the mother-infant relationship. Psychoanalytic theory has traditionally viewed the mother in terms of her relation to the child and not as a distinct person. This parallels the tendency of considering a Mothering God only in relation to the earth (immanence) and not as a separate being (transcendence). In the next section, Jessica Benjamin's (1999) reformulation of the mother-infant relationship will be presented and explored with the goal of applying it to the discussion regarding a Mothering God.

#### *Mutual Recognition in the Mother-Infant Relationship*

Jessica Benjamin (1999), a relational analyst, proposed a reformulation of the mother-infant relationship and the psychoanalytic process. Therapeutic applications will be addressed later in the paper. For now, Benjamin's position and how it differs from previous psychoanalytic theory will be described. In psychoanalytic theory, the term "object" has been used extensively. The concept of "object relations" refers to internalization and representation of relations between self and other. The reality of the other as a person outside of the individual has not been given much attention. In this formulation, the mantra is "where ego is, objects must be" (p. 184).

Benjamin brings to attention this tendency of psychoanalytic theories to discount or ignore the subjectivity of the other thus ignoring the intersubjective relationship between self and other. Whereas most analytic theory focuses on the intrapsychic, or the relationships between internal representations (aka objects) of others, relational theory brings to light the intersubjective or the relationship between two subjects. Therefore, Benjamin wants to alter the classic mantra “where ego is, objects must be” to “where objects were, subjects must be” (p. 184).

Benjamin (1999) highlights the intersubjective but she does not dispose of the intrapsychic either. She notes that in the field of psychotherapy, there is a tendency to choose one extreme over the other. Her model is a both/and model where these two dimensions of experience can stand together. Although tension sometimes exists between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective, Benjamin argues that they are complementary. She states that “by encompassing both dimensions, we can fulfill the intention of relational theories: to account both for the pervasive effects of human relationships on psychic development and for the equally ubiquitous effects of internal psychic mechanisms and fantasies in shaping psychological life and interaction” (p. 185).

Mutual recognition is a key aspect of the intersubjective view and involves two parts: being recognized and recognizing others (Benjamin, 1999). This implies two important points. First, being recognized is a human need. Secondly, people have the capacity to recognize others although not everyone fully develops this capacity. The capacity for mutual recognition develops or fails to develop in the context of early relationships. The focus in this paper will be on the development of mutual recognition in the mother-infant relationship instead of the father-infant relationship. There are two reasons for this. One reason is that the mother-infant relationship has received a great deal of attention in traditional psychoanalytic theory, especially

in object relations theory and thus needs reformulating most. The second reason is due to the focus of this paper on a Mothering God.

Recognition is a response from another that validates the self (Benjamin, 1988). A child's sense of agency, that she is the one behind her actions, is affirmed through recognition by the mother of those actions. Recognition affirms the child as she finds herself in the mother's recognition of her. The other part of the equation of mutual recognition is the capacity to recognize others. Here, the child has a need not only to be recognized but also to recognize. Seeing the mother as a subject distinct from herself is necessary for the child to experience recognition. The mother also has both the need to be recognized as well as to recognize. Thinking about the mother as a separate subject is a relatively new enterprise brought about by a feminist critique of psychoanalysis. According to these critics, conceptualizing the mother as an object reinforces the cultural tendency to see male as subject and female as object. It also perpetuates the denial of the mother's subjectivity. According to Benjamin, "the denial of the mother's subjectivity, in theory and in practice, profoundly impedes our ability to see the world as inhabited by equal subjects" (1999, p. 186). The mother is not simply an object of the child's wishes and demands. In fact, recognition of the child is only possible when the mother is a separate subject. The mother should not simply serve as a reflection of the child; rather, she must also represent external reality.

Even as early as the first week of an infant's life, the beginnings of mutual recognition can be seen in the mother-infant relationship (Benjamin, 1988). Prior to birth the baby was, in a very literal sense, part of the mother. Once the child is born, however, the mother often experiences a sense of wonder that this being is both part of herself, familiar and known, and yet wholly other, new and unknown. The mother experiences recognition when the infant responds

to her. The paradox that the baby both belongs to the mother and is an entity apart from the mother must be tolerated in order for the experience of recognition to occur. Said differently, this paradox of oneness and otherness is central to the concept of recognition. According to Benjamin (1988, p. 33, 36), “the need for recognition entails this fundamental paradox: in the very moment of realizing our own independent will, we are dependent upon another to recognize it...The ideal ‘resolution’ of the paradox of recognition is for it to continue as a *constant tension*.”

Oneness and otherness exist together in mutual recognition. According to Benjamin (1988, p. 47),

“this insight allows us to counter the argument that human beings fundamentally desire the impossible absolutes of ‘oneness’ and perfection with the more moderate view that things don’t have to be perfect, that, in fact, it is *better* if they are not. It reminds us that in every experience of similarity and subjective sharing, there must be enough difference to create the feeling of reality, that a degree of imperfection ‘ratifies’ the existence of the world.”

Hoffman (Accepted) invokes the theological terms “immanence” and “transcendence” to describe this tension between oneness and otherness in human relationships. In the next section, this discussion will be applied to the conversation about a Mothering God.

### *Reformulation of a Mothering God*

In the discussion above, the previous formulation of mother as object was altered to include subjectivity. Similarly, I believe that the current formulation of a Mothering God must be changed to include subjectivity. There is danger in denying God’s subjectivity. When that happens, we make God into our own image and God is merely a replication of ourselves. When

we are open to God's subjectivity, however, we are open to the mystery of God, the part of God that is not immediately available to us.

Earlier, I stated that people need to be recognized and also need to recognize others. Does this also apply to God? Does God really need to be recognized? I'm not entirely sure. What seems clear through scripture, though, is that God prefers to be recognized. Ulanov (1981) states that our response to God's revealing presence gives value to the experience. She also goes so far as to say that "our nurturing response nurtures the nurturer," the nurturer here being God (p. 93). As she points out, in scripture God mourns when Israel turns away and Jesus weeps over those who turn their backs on him. The other side of this discussion is the question of how God recognizes humans.

There appear to be multiple ways in which God recognizes people. The fact of God's existence as Creator of the world is, in and of itself, an affirmation of our selves. Also, at different times throughout history God seems to recognize the needs of her people and respond out of her own subjectivity. In the Old Testament, God revealed herself through burning bushes, pillars of fire and smoke, and various prophets. Through revelation or making herself known, God recognizes our need to be recognized. Ulanov (1981) talks about God's recognition of humans as being primarily her active presence in the world. The coming of Jesus, I believe, is God's ultimate act of recognition. God sent an embodied version of herself to be present with us so that we could know *and* recognize her in our own form. Jesus' death and resurrection paved the way for a continued and more direct link to God. In the example of Jesus, we can see mutual recognition at work. God recognized our need for the divine manifested in the flesh and, as a result, sent Jesus. However, because God chooses to be in relationship with us, her intentions cannot be realized unless we recognize her presence through the person of Jesus. Also, we will

not experience God's recognition unless we also recognize God. This demonstrates the paradox of mutual recognition and the need to stand in the constant tension.

In her book "Finding Space", Ann Ulanov (2001) addresses the debate over immanence versus transcendence. Using the concept of "transitional space," she states that religion exists in the space between our experience and reality. According to Ulanov, religious experience does not come solely from a source outside oneself and it does not come entirely from oneself. Whereas psychology has tended to focus on subjective religious experience, theology has tended to focus on the objective reality of God. Another way of saying this is that psychology has focused too much on the immanence of God whereas theology has focused on the transcendence of God. However, Ulanov asserts that religion exists in the space between.

The current conceptualization of a Mothering God as being only immanent must be reformulated to include the transcendent as well. As we discuss and re-imagine a Mothering God, we need to stand in the constant tension between objectivity and subjectivity, between recognizing and being recognized, and between immanence and transcendence.

This reformulation has ecclesial implications. Christians have often erred on one side of the tension between immanence and transcendence, mostly transcendence. Doing so eliminates the need to stand in the tension. This is understandable due to the anxiety that results from tolerating paradox. However, the church must develop the capacity to withstand the anxiety in order to come to a more complete understanding of God. What will help the church to endure this anxiety? I suggest that the creation of openness and conversation about this tension within Christian communities is needed.

Ulanov's (1981) response to the importing of feminine pronouns and imagery into talk about God is that it is too much of a quick fix. She says that it is a "conscious solution to a



consciously defined problem” (p. 50). Instead of changing grammar, she stated that we need to “participate in the organic growth of new images born from new mixtures of conscious and unconscious processes, from cultural and psychic influences, from women and men receiving all of themselves” (p. 51). Her response made me wonder whether the goal should be to ultimately get beyond he/she and Mother/Father. First, however, the feminine aspects of the divine need to be received and recognized. The next step in the process is the move towards a Mothering God who is both immanent and transcendent. Perhaps this oscillation between immanence and transcendence will allow the emergence of new images and experiences of God.

In the next section, I will explore the use of maternal imagery in the book of Isaiah in light of its context and apply my thoughts to modern readers and the work of the therapist. I suggest here that a Mothering God may be needed in seasons of suffering and despair to comfort and assure as well as to empower the people of God to move forward with hope; this has implications for therapists who often walk alongside people during these seasons.

At several points throughout the biblical text, maternal imagery is used to describe who God is both by God and God’s people. In Isaiah chapters 42 – 54 and 66, maternal imagery is frequently used to describe God. In Isaiah 42 – 50, the people of Israel are in exile. It is interesting that in these chapters, one can find many uses of maternal language and imagery to describe God. In chapter 43 verse 1 it says “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (NRSV). In the next chapter, the text refers to God as the one “who formed you in the womb” in two different verses (44:2, 24). This is repeated again in 49:5. The theme changes a bit in 49:1 with “the Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.” These verses all portray God as the one who molds new life at its earliest

stage. In chapter 46 this theme is carried to a new level as God speaks as one who forms *and* bears: “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb (v. 3). In these passages, God is the mother who bears her children and brings them forth into the world. It appears that there is something about these repeated phrases that God or the prophet Isaiah wants the reader to notice. I suggest that it is meant to convey a shared sense of identity among the people of Israel as God’s children. In a time of exile when fear and disillusionment about God emphasizes oneness or immanence in terms of her relationship with her people and the relationships within the community of the people of God.

However, a Mothering God is not only connected with immanence in this portion of Isaiah. Chapter 54, verse 10 says “for the mountains may depart and the hills be removed but my steadfast love shall not depart from you.” Isaiah 49:14-15 is a particularly beautiful passage of assurance: “But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” Here God is saying that she will not fail to recognize her children even though her children may fail to recognize her. Although recognition must be mutual in human relationships and is ideal in human relationship to the divine, God’s capacity for recognition is unequalled.

In chapter 66 when Israel has finally returned home to Jerusalem more maternal imagery appears. God speaks of Jerusalem as a mother (e.g., “rejoice with Jerusalem...that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom” v. 10, 11) and then identifies with Jerusalem (e.g., “as a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem). God is stating that she is the

ultimate source of all nourishment. I would also argue that God is seeking to empower Israel by assuring them that Jerusalem will be their sustenance and that she is the source behind it all.

I do not think it is a coincidence that one finds frequent use of maternal language and imagery to describe God in a text written during a time of exile. Being forced to leave one's homeland is traumatic and fragmenting. Israel in exile is a people who have lost their land and the sense of identity that came with living in the land God gave them. Seen from this perspective, it makes sense that Israel would need a Mothering God who provides oneness and recognition as well as comfort, nourishment and empowerment. In these seasons of life, a Mothering God is in demand. It is often during difficult seasons of life that people find themselves in therapy. At these times, a therapist can strive to embody a Mothering God.

#### *Therapeutic Applications*

What does it look like for a therapist to embody a Mothering God in his/her work? This question will be addressed in this final section by looking first to the concept of mutual recognition in relational psychoanalysis and then exploring further the idea of tolerating the tension between immanence and transcendence. In Benjamin's (1999) reformulation of the therapeutic process, both therapist and client stand in the tension between the intrapsychic and intersubjective dimensions, between the client's experience of the therapist as projection of internal objects and the therapist as the other who recognizes. In the transitional space in between intrapsychic and intersubjective, creative exploration can occur.

Ulanov (1981) talks about recognition as a way for the mother to receive her child's being. For her, presence is crucial to recognition and reception of the child. Presence is not synonymous with being geographically near. As most can attest to, one can sit close to another and feel miles away. Presence here is defined by the quality of the interaction. Ulanov mentions

two kinds of presence. In one type, the mother “is really with her child, touched at the core of her being as she touches her child’s. In the other she exists separately, only tangentially accepting the company of her child while her central attention focuses on something else” (p. 162). The first type of presence affirms the child’s self while the second fails to do so. Presence is crucial to therapy as well. Although we would hope that we as therapists, at least most of the time, focus our full attention on the client, how often are we receptive enough that we allow ourselves to be “touched at the core of [our] being?”

The tension between immanence and transcendence cannot always be held in perfect balance. Actually, the complete breakdown of this tension is more common. According to Benjamin (1999), “what counts is the ability to restore or repair the relationship” (p. 198). When the tension breaks down, the client’s projections succeed in negating the therapist’s subjectivity. Oftentimes, therapist and client get stuck in repetitive interactions that collapse the transitional space necessary for growth. Following the idea of mutual recognition, it is possible to repair the relationship through the use of a “third” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 204). According to Benjamin, a “third” can be thought of as metacommunication. Here, the crucial point is that the therapist addresses with the client the interaction that led to the rupture including the therapist’s own reactions. For example, if a therapist makes a mistake s/he may decide to share that mistake with the client and discuss the reasons behind it as it relates to the interaction between therapist and client. In this way, the therapist brings his/her own subjectivity back into the room in order to restore the collapse of transitional space.

Retaining or regaining subjectivity as a therapist can be difficult, especially for female therapists. Due to traditional models of psychoanalysis which have informed, to some extent, most models of therapy used today, the therapist has a tendency to remain an object. It is

expected and part of the work of therapy that the client sees the therapist as an object. However, the real danger exists when we as therapists get stuck in the role of object and negate our own subjectivity. This may be especially difficult for female therapists who are already working against a sociocultural stereotype that associates them with the role of mother and thus object. When this happens, female therapists may get stuck believing that we exist solely for the client's gratification. Where will that get the client ultimately? Will that help the client to be more fully in relationship outside of the therapeutic setting? Not only do we as therapists need to recognize the subjectivity of our clients, we also need to recognize our own subjectivity. This, I believe, requires others in the academy and in clinical training experiences to recognize the subjectivity of beginning therapists and to empower them to both recognize their subjectivity and to welcome it into the therapy room.

When we are solely immanent therapists, we will mold into whatever the client wishes. This is a potential danger, for example, of going too far with evidenced-based treatments. The therapist's own subjectivity is negated in preference for a disembodied technique. When we are solely transcendent therapists, we are not connected and therapy is for our gratification rather than for helping our clients. Ulanov (2001) says that "interpretation, especially when correct, steals the patient's soul to make the analyst feel clever. Better by far to wait until the analysand arrives at the insight, creating what he or she came to analysis to find" (p. 82). When we err on the side of transcendence we will be one step ahead hoping to get to the "truth" before our client so that we receive gratification instead of waiting for signs that the client is approaching his/her own truth. Ulanov (1981) likens therapy to a birthing process. A mother must wait for the body's signs that the baby is ready to come. Like a mother, the therapist must wait with hopeful expectancy for signs that the client is ready. "Birth is an act as well as an event. A woman's

participation is required, yet it is a paradoxical participation. She actively brings forth new life from herself yet receptively attunes herself to this emerging other in order to follow its lead” (p. 105). In a similar vein, the therapist must actively participate in the work of birthing and, at the same time, wait with an attentive and receptive posture for the client’s own truth to emerge.

In my own work as a therapist, I have often been pushed towards being a predominantly “transcendent” therapist. Many times I have been told to make more interpretations with supervisory praise withheld for those moments when I got to the “truth” before my client did. This praise left a bitter taste in my mouth as it did not feel right to me. However, I have a tendency to err on the side of immanence in that I often feel a great deal of pressure to be exactly what my client wants me to be. As a result, I sometimes struggle to retain my own subjectivity or transcendence in the therapeutic relationship. The task of trying to stand in the tension between transcendence and immanence is a challenge that is daunting for me as it is likely to be for others but, ultimately, I believe it to be a worthwhile endeavor that will benefit me and my clients. What gives me hope is my relationship with a Mothering God who is able to stand in that tension and empower me to tolerate it with more grace than I have on my own.

In conclusion, this paper presents a reformulation of the conversation regarding use of Mother as a metaphor for talking about God. In the current discussion, a Mothering God is seen as an immanent God while God the Father is transcendent. This is rooted in traditional stereotypes of female as object and male as subject. Based on the idea of mutual recognition, I argue that a Mothering God stands in the tension between subjectivity and objectivity, recognition and recognizing, and transcendence and immanence. A therapist can embody a Mothering God in her work by striving to stand in the tension between immanence and

transcendence and, when that inevitably fails, working to repair the relationship by reclaiming her subjectivity.

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