

REVERENCING THE WOMBS THAT *BROKE YOU*

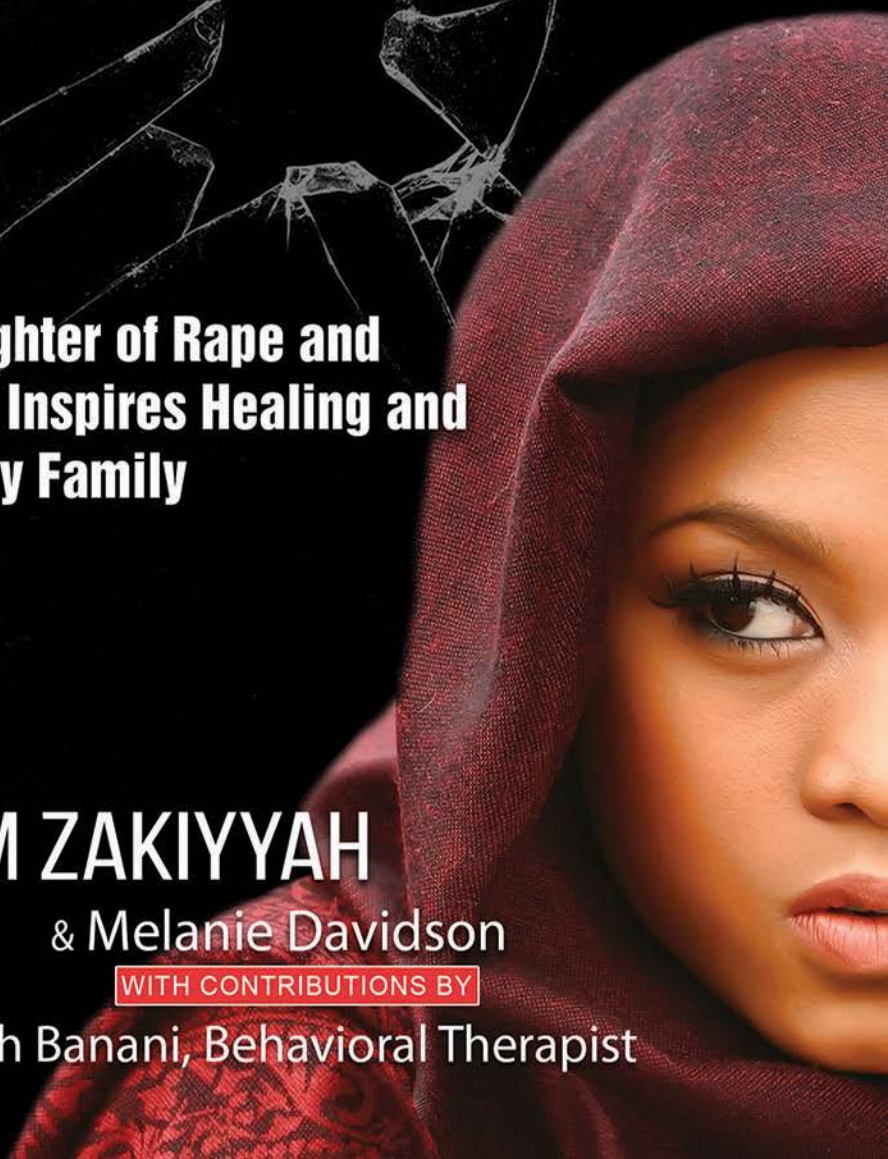
**A Daughter of Rape and
Abuse Inspires Healing and
Healthy Family**

UMM ZAKIYYAH

& Melanie Davidson

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Haleh Banani, Behavioral Therapist



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By Umm Zakiyyah and Melanie Davidson
with contributions by Haleh Banani

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In the story of Melanie Davidson, all names have been changed to protect the identity of the people involved, and "Melanie Davidson" is a pseudonym.

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Author's Note

Some time ago, I posted on my social media accounts asking if anyone had a story that they felt needed to be told. Shortly thereafter, I received an email from Melanie Davidson (a pseudonym she is using for the purpose of anonymity). She said she was a daughter of rape, conceived in violence and raised by a mother so traumatized by the experience that it made her verbally and physically abusive to Melanie from childhood through adulthood.

Melanie said she wanted to share her story because she felt it could benefit others. However, she wanted the book to be more than merely a collection of anecdotes about her life. She wanted it to be a resource for others struggling with emotional trauma in their lives.

I titled the book *Reverencing the Wombs That Broke You* as an allusion to the oft-repeated instruction, “Reverence the wombs that bore you” derived from the common English translation of the famous verse in the Qur’an that emphasizes the sanctity of parental relationships and blood ties. Though the allusion I have chosen comes from the Muslim holy book, this injunction exists in nearly all faith traditions. Even in non-religious contexts, the relationship between parent and child, as well as the family connections that stem from it, is held in high regard. Thus, the importance of keeping family ties is a universal concept that transcends culture, ethnicity, and religion; and honoring one’s parents is considered the pillar of this concept.

However, what is often missing in discussions praising those who “reverence the wombs” that bore them—and condemning those who break family ties—is the acknowledgement that there are those who suffer emotional, psychological, and physical harm from those very wombs and ties. This heartbreaking phenomenon begs the questions: What happens when the wombs that bore you are the same ones that broke you, and continue to break you still? How do you fulfill your duty and protect yourself from harm while seeking self-healing at the same time?

In the story of Melanie—a daughter of rape and abuse—we find in one woman’s life a moving attempt to navigate her own trauma and seek self-healing while maintaining ties of the womb. Melanie grew up a devout Christian and converted to Islam in college; thus, spirituality has always been part of her life journey. As such, religion forms the foundation of how she works through her trauma.

In this book, we explore the tumultuous reality of what it means to be traumatized by toxic, dysfunctional, or abusive parents and family systems. As such, each chapter begins with a reflection from Melanie’s life and is followed by both practical concepts and spiritual lessons that are brought to life through her life experiences and journey toward self-care. Throughout the book, I draw on the valuable lessons shared by trauma survivors, mental health professionals, and writers who have either directly or indirectly addressed this difficult topic.

However, I am not a mental health expert or therapist. Thus, this book does not purport to take the place of the professional help often needed by trauma survivors to work toward self-healing. It is, however, my prayer that this book offers a glimmer of comfort and hope to those quietly suffering as they strive to “reverence the wombs,” which far too often comes at the expense of themselves.

Umm Zakīyah

September 2016

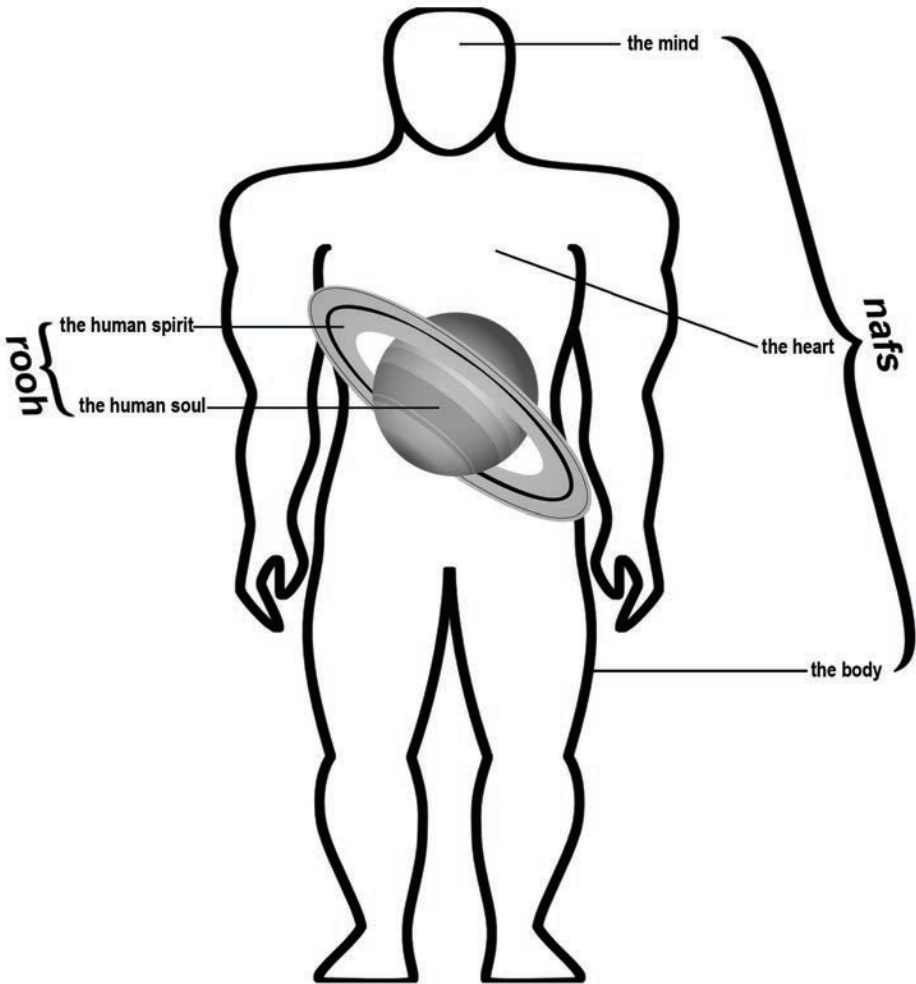
“...[I am] almost without words to express how deeply I have been moved by this book...This is a narrative that is long overdue for addressing a victim's rights to end abuse, create boundaries, and start the healing process while being free from religious guilt that they are displeasing Allah by caring for their shattered selves. For everyone who has ever been broken, this book will give you the strength to begin healing, and trust with absolute certainty, that Allah is on your side.”

—Megan Wyatt, founder of Wives of Jannah

“A raw and touching glimpse into the life of a woman whose own mother could not find in her anything to love. Melanie’s pain leaps out to envelop you. You’ll rejoice as her healing begins. The writing makes you feel the relief as she opens her wounds, to release the pain. Then love rushes in, and brings with it the hope that Melanie will find a way to actually love herself...if not her mother.”

—Faiza Coleman-Salako, founder and director of Words Heal, Inc.

The Spirit-Soul, Heart-Mind-Body Connection DIAGRAM



KEY TERMS

rooh = spirit-soul essence (which gives life to the human body)

nafs = the heart, mind, and body (which are connected to the **rooh**)*

fitrah = inherent nature of heart and **rooh**

**In Islamic tradition, the term nafs often refers to the entire human essence, including the rooh. However, in this context the nafs refers to the heart, mind, and body when connected to the rooh.*

NOTE: The above diagram, as well as the explanations provided within this book, are meant only as a detailed analogy to gain a deeper understanding of emotional trauma as experienced by survivors of abuse. Ultimately, only God knows the exact nature of the human's spiritual reality. As such, nothing explained herein is meant as authoritative, scholarly, or definitive in nature.

How To Read This Book

As mentioned in the Author's Note, each chapter of the book begins with a reflection from Melanie's life and is followed by lessons drawn from trauma survivors, mental health professionals, and writers who have either directly or indirectly addressed this difficult topic. Therefore, for maximum benefit, particularly for survivors of trauma, it is suggested that the book is read in the order that it is presented. There are three reasons for this suggestion:

1. The breaks in Melanie's story account for potential emotional triggers that survivors might experience while reading the specific details of another survivor's life. Thus, by reading the analysis section after each part shared from Melanie's life, survivors can make sense of the emotional distress of both Melanie and themselves while taking a periodic break from a potential trigger.
2. The book is designed such that a real-life example is presented for the purpose of establishing a context through which to understand the subsequent lessons and analysis.
3. With a few exceptions, the details of Melanie's life are told in chronological order. Additionally, much of the analysis content, particularly regarding the universal nature of emotional trauma vis-à-vis the inherent spirit-soul and heart-mind-body connection, is built upon content presented in previous chapters.

Nevertheless, some readers might find it preferable or most beneficial to first read Melanie's story in its entirety before going back to read the lessons and analysis sections. Other readers might find it preferable to skip around and read the book in the order that appeals to them most. Some readers might choose to begin with the Interview with Haleh Banani, which addresses how believers in the Islamic faith should tend to emotional wounds suffered by parents and other family, before reading either Melanie's story or the analysis sections.

In any case, every reader should feel free to read the book in the way that is most preferable and beneficial to him or her. For this purpose, a detailed Table of Contents is provided to meet the needs of each individual reader.

Survivors of abuse are encouraged to take their time, as some topics might require extra time to process. Also, some readers might prefer to read some sections more than once.

Throughout the book, the spirit-soul, heart-mind-body connection is discussed in relation to emotional trauma and healing. Therefore, the diagram opposite this page is provided for easy reference.

*For the broken ones trying to piece themselves back together again,
and hold on to their faith at the same time.*

“I had a therapist once describe me as broken. Said the solution was to put myself back together. I asked her how that was possible when there were pieces of me my father had taken and never returned.”

—the character Sonya in *Trail of Broken Wings* by Sejal Badani



“Forgive me, my daughter. I was too weak to stand up for you.”

—Sonya’s mother in *Trail of Broken Wings* by Sejal Badani

PART I

The Daughter of Rape

Is it true?

Does God say I must honor my father?

*But how do I honor a man who dishonored my mother,
who dishonored me?*

—the child born of rape

1

Family

“I often don’t say things out loud, even when I should. I contain and compartmentalize to a disturbing degree: In my belly-basement are hundreds of bottles of rage, despair, fear, but you’d never guess from looking at me.”

—the character Nick in *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn

Melanie

My mother was raped by my biological father. I learned this when I was too young to understand what any of it meant. But I’m not sure I was ever meant to learn it. My mother gave me away not long after I was born. I suppose she knew from the start that seeing my face would be a constant reminder of the sexual assault she endured from her assailant. From what I understand, he wasn’t a complete stranger to my mother, but he may as well have been. He was a distant work acquaintance, but it wasn’t on the job that their paths crossed in a way that would change my mother’s life forever, and mark the beginning of mine.

As it turns out, my mother and her assailant took the same route home on the metro rail that connected the main parts of Washington, D.C. It was amidst this entanglement of the metro map’s red, orange, blue, green, and yellow lines that the man who forcibly became my biological father stalked my mother. Day after day, he quietly watched her from afar, perhaps planning his attack long before my mother took any significant notice of his presence. After all, what was there to notice? He, like she, was simply taking the metro rail home from work.

I don’t know where the crime happened or when. That bit of information was never revealed to me. Till today, the story remains choppy, and I’m not sure I want to know the parts that are missing. The little I do know has been enough to throw my entire life into confusion, and I still find myself scrambling to make sense of it. I have sometimes wondered if my life would have been better had my mother been able to be rid of me, as she originally planned. How would it have been, I’ve wondered, if my grandmother had continued to be my guardian?

Perhaps I shouldn’t call her my grandmother, because she is not, at least not in the technical, familial sense of the term. But I’m not sure I’ll ever understand what the term *family* means to those who define it based on love and blood alone, as if the two concepts always come together in a neatness disturbed only by hotheadedness and human choice—and restored only by the quelling of pride and the utterance of a sincere apology.

“That’s not your daddy!”

I was only three years old and recently restored to my mother’s care when my stepsister screamed these words at me. I don’t know what prompted the outburst. Maybe we’d had a disagreement and I’d said I was going to tell Daddy, or something about Daddy, and that was enough to send my sister into a fit of

rage. She was ten, or maybe eleven, at the time, and naturally, she knew more than I did about the circumstances surrounding my birth. But until that moment, I'd had no idea that the man she called Daddy had no blood relation to me.

At three years old, you don't understand family dynamics, so in my young mind, the man who was taking care of us was my daddy, just like my mother was my mommy. Of course today, I know that he was my stepfather, the man my mother married after giving birth to me.

"You don't have a daddy!" my sister continued to scream. "We don't know who your daddy is! That's *my* daddy!"

I still remember how I'd run to my mother to report what my sister had said. I was hurt and upset not only by my sister's words but also by her having broken a lamp over my head. I was crying and bleeding when I stood before my mother and told her what my sister had said. Ironically, at that moment, I viewed my sister's insulting words as the greater crime. But I'd assumed even these were just amongst the many daily insults that my sister inflicted upon me since I arrived in the home. It didn't occur to me that there was any truth to them.

"He's not your daddy!" my mother responded in obvious annoyance. It was as if her disgust with me surpassed even my sister's. I stood in utter confusion, holding my bleeding head as my young mind tried to understand what I'd done to make my mother so upset. "Your father raped me!" she said.

These words were shouted as if she were really saying, "*You already ruined my life, now leave me alone! I don't want to even look at you!*" I had no idea what the word *rape* meant, but there was a place deep inside of me that imbibed these unspoken words more viscerally than if my mother had spoken them aloud.

When I was in high school, I wrote a poem entitled "love me" after I realized that my mother wasn't well or in any position to love herself, so how could she begin to love me? The poem was me imagining how she must have felt. She had just told me that after the initial rape, her assailant followed her home one evening then broke into her home and attacked her again with the intention of making sure she was not pregnant. She had permanent hearing damage as a result of that assault. I survived that attack, so she did protect me. My mother has always loved me as best as she could. And I will always respect and appreciate her intention and constant struggle to be my mother.

love me

You

father my child, punch me

kill me —

Slap me, curse me

Throw me, shame me

Beat me, hurt me

love me, love me

kick me, bruise me

*Punch me, damn me
Hit me, slam me
love me, love me
You
father my child, punch me
kill me —
love me, love me
father my child beat me, beat me
leave you, hate you, leave you
I finally mother my child secretly
love me, love me, love me*

Blood Ties

“You don’t choose your family. They are God’s gift to you, as you are to them.”
—Desmond Tutu

The term *family*, perhaps for good reason, is effectively a sacred term. So it is naturally difficult to fathom it representing something unholy. In this, I think there is little distinction between the religious and the non-religious regarding how they view the subject. The whole of the world seems to agree that there is something phenomenal, if not miraculous, in the bond of blood.

However, stories like Melanie’s draw into question how we traditionally understand the “ties of the womb.” In a perfect world, a man and a woman come together by choice, and when a child is conceived, it is the culmination of two people willingly sharing a cherished moment of intimacy.

It is perhaps cliché to say that we do not live in a perfect world. But that does not make the implications of this oft-repeated sentiment any less profound. We do not live in a perfect world, and I believe we have yet to grasp the depth of meaning in what appears to be a rather obvious point. But our understanding of the meaning of “family” illustrates this disconnect quite significantly.

On the most basic level, the term *family* means only that two or more people are connected through a shared bloodline or through a man and a woman officially committing to each other in marriage. Any other meaning that we attach to the word is rooted in the concept of obligation, expectation, or assumption, not in its actual definition. While it is not necessarily wrong to view family through any of these lens, equating these concepts with the very meaning of family can prove extremely problematic, particularly for people in abusive, toxic, or dysfunctional family situations. As a real-life example, I think Melanie’s family makes this point undeniably clear.

2

Love

“How could people hate me so much for doing absolutely nothing?”
—the character Oakley in *Silence* by Natasha Peterson

Melanie

I learned about sex before I learned about love, just as I’d learned about rape before I learned about compassion. Rape I learned about from my mother shouting at me, and sex I learned about from a girl who wanted to “play house” with me—and from a porn film I saw at a birthday party when I was six years old.

The girl was seven years old, a year older than I was. She was the daughter of the girlfriend of a man who was a relative of my adoptive father. When the woman would come to visit, her daughter and I would go to my room, presumably to play together.

“Let’s play house,” the girl would say when we were alone in my room. I would agree, thinking nothing of her request. She then instructed me to take off all of my clothes, and she did the same. She told me to get in the bed and lie down, and she climbed on top of me. Though I was physically larger than the girl, she had a domineering personality that made me trust and obey her without thought. “I’m going to show you how a baby is made,” she would say. “This is how you have sex.” She would then use her fingers to simulate a man penetrating a woman. Naturally, this caused me considerable physical discomfort, but since I had no idea what was going on and assumed that the girl did, I allowed her to complete her demonstration on me.

This was my first introduction to the concept of sex. My second introduction came shortly thereafter at a classmate’s birthday party. While the adults prepared the cake and whatever else was required for the celebration, one woman gathered the children in the living room and put on a video for us to watch while we waited for everything to be ready. As it turns out, the video was a porn flick, and this was to be the children’s entertainment that day.

“Sit down,” the woman told us, directing our attention toward the screen. “I want you to watch what the man does and see how the woman responds.” She continued like this throughout the entire video, occasionally pointing out particular acts and reactions that we should pay attention to.

Following these two experiences, the first with the girl “playing house” with me and the second with the porn video shown at my friend’s birthday party, it didn’t take long for me to put two and two together regarding what happened to my mother. I began to understand more specifically what the term *rape* meant and why my mother was so disgusted by the mere sight of me. I understood that what the girl had demonstrated on me and what I’d seen on the video had

happened to my mother—and that she didn't like it. I began to understand that the man and woman in the video had agreed to do what they were doing, but my mother hadn't agreed.

Later that same year, when I was still around six years old, I learned about sex in real life through my sister having sex in front of me. "I want a baby," my sister would often say, "because I want someone to love me." To my sister, the way to attain the love she sought was through having sex with whomever she could. To her, sex was more a means to an end than it was an act of love. I suppose that was why she was not concerned with keeping it private. She would have sex on the sidewalk, in the backyard, or wherever. It didn't matter to her, so long as she was that much closer to having the baby who she imagined would love her.

I have no idea what motivated my sister's idea that love could be obtained through becoming a mother, but it was clear that she was battling some internal demons of her own. I don't know if it was the drastic life change incited by her father's marriage to my mother, or if her trauma began long before that. But it was clear that her internal world was one of pain and confusion.

My memories of my sister are strong and vivid, and they are all of violence and insults hurled at me. From her, I was constantly stampeded with hurtful words that I didn't understand. My mother didn't know what to do with her violent, promiscuous stepdaughter, and my mother didn't know what to do with me. My mother was constantly yelling at the both of us, my sister due to her unruly behavior and me because of my existence. So I learned early on that I would find neither compassion nor refuge in my mother's presence, especially when I myself was hurting and in need of comfort or support.

But in between the yelling, I saw my mother try to expose my sister to positive things. It was apparent that my mother's efforts were in hopes of kindling a sort of inspiration or direction in my sister, and one of my mother's hopes rested in my sister taking an interest in music. Thus, my mother enrolled her in piano lessons. But it was to no avail. It was during a piano lesson that my sister tried to take her own life.

I was around six years old when it happened, and my sister was thirteen. During her piano lesson, she had gotten a hold of my mother's prescription medication, prescribed to my mother after having undergone surgery due to a slipped or herniated disc. Because my mother was suffering back problems, she had a lot of strong medication that she was taking. Knowing this, my sister went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and took every bit of medication that was there.

Thankfully, my sister survived the ordeal. But about a year later, at fourteen years old, my sister finally achieved her long sought-after goal in search of love: she was pregnant. Shortly after we found out this news, my sister went to live with her biological mother, and I never saw her again.

Amidst all of the emotional turmoil in my mother's home, my reprieve would come in my frequent visits to my grandmother, whom my mother had given me to after I was born. Biologically, there is no familial relationship between me and the woman I call my grandmother. In reality, she is the mother of the husband of my maternal aunt—the mother of my uncle by marriage. She had taken me in when I was a baby, and I lived with her until I was three years old, when I was returned to my mother because my mother was newly married and her husband said it wasn't right for me to live with someone else.

My stepfather ultimately adopted me, so his name is on my birth certificate, and I carry his last name. I suppose this is proof that I had some semblance of a loving home. But I still valued my grandmother's home over anyone else's. My adoptive father was kind enough, but even he could not protect me from my mother's fits of rage. He could barely protect himself. I have no memories of him being unkind to me, and while this made him a source of comfort at times, his inability to fully protect me made it difficult for us to develop a meaningful bond. As such, my grandmother's home was the only place I felt completely safe and welcomed. It was the only place that I felt loved.

My grandmother would light up whenever she saw me, and she'd call me her baby and say I was beautiful. But my mother was constantly finding fault in me. Even if she heard someone else compliment me, she'd be sure to disagree with them and point out something wrong in my appearance or behavior.

I tried to be good such that I never gave my mother reason to disapprove of me. At home, I did everything that was asked of me and was careful to stay out of trouble. Any rules that were laid down, I made sure to follow them. At school, I was an overachiever and was always getting straight A's. I was in gifted and talented classes and was often the recipient of academic accolades. But my mother took no notice.

Today, I know I reminded my mother too much of the man who had raped her, and every time she saw me, she saw him. So there was nothing I could do or say to make her happy with me. I was a constant reminder of the pain and disappointment she had endured from her attacker. I imagine it must have been agony for her to carry me for nine long months, walking in front of the world pregnant with a baby she had no voluntary part in making.

My mother herself was a very intelligent, accomplished woman. She had an excellent job and a six-figure income, which was no small feat for an African-American woman in the early 1970s. So during that time, I'm sure she must have felt the judgment due to her condition as an unmarried Black woman.

When I was around seven or eight years old, my mother gave birth to her first child by her husband. I suppose for her, it was like giving birth to her very first child because before then she had only given birth to me. She had two children after me, and when my younger sisters were born, I got my first glimpse into what a mother's love for her child should look like. My mother was affectionate toward them and often doted over them. She was constantly dressing

them up in nice clothes and telling them they were pretty. To my mother, my younger sisters were perfection. They were “good children,” and till today, they remain good in my mother’s eyes. They could do no wrong.

But I’m good, I’d often think to myself. But my mother didn’t think so. If anyone complimented her three daughters, she would disagree with any positive description of me and shift the positive attention to my two younger sisters.

I remember one day when I was around twelve years old and visiting my grandmother’s house. My aunt came home early, and we picked up my cousins from their Montessori school. When we returned to my grandmother’s house, my aunt sat down with her children and helped them with their homework. As I watched her guide them through each part of the assignments and patiently answer their questions, I was overcome with shock. I had never seen this sort of interaction between a mother and her children. My parents never even talked to me about school, let alone sit down with me and help me with my schoolwork. Whenever I would show them the straight A’s on my report card, they responded with disinterest and didn’t even comment.

So this is what parents are supposed to do, I thought to myself that day as I watched my aunt. I also learned that the father of one of my cousins would reward him with money if he got B’s on his report card. *He gets hundreds of dollars for B’s*, I said to myself. *But I always get A’s and my parents give me nothing*. I felt as if no one cared for me except my grandmother. She was the only one who showed that she was proud of me.

Every time my grandmother learned of my academic accomplishments, she became very happy. My two younger sisters didn’t get A’s often, but when they did, my parents were happy for them. Even when they were only in preschool and I was twelve, my parents showed more happiness for their accomplishments than mine.

After I saw my aunt help my cousins with their homework, I decided to show my two younger sisters that same compassion and concern throughout their school years. Though I myself wouldn’t receive any praise from my parents for my academic achievements, I got fulfillment from praising my sisters’ accomplishments in their work from kindergarten onward. Whenever they did well on an assignment or earned an A, I would post their work on the refrigerator to show how proud I was of them. From this and my other maternal interactions with them, my sisters and I developed a compassionate bond that continues till today.

It turns out that my assistance with their homework and showing sincere interest in their lives was a greater blessing than I could have imagined. Throughout their childhood and youth, my mother would be gone for long periods of time, and sometimes we had no idea where she’d gone. Her job required her to travel internationally at times, so we often assumed she was out of the country. However, we later learned that many of her extended absences were due to her being committed to the psychiatric unit of the hospital. She would

have mental breaks and be unable to cope with the demands of her daily life. So she was not there for her children as often as another mother would be.

Her long absences coupled with her consistent aggravation with me made it difficult for us to develop a strong mother-daughter bond. Nevertheless, I do think my mother loved me as best she could. Though I was her firstborn and should have inspired all the motherly affection she showered on my sisters, I was conceived in violence, not love. Consequently, I experienced firsthand how such severe trauma could forever disrupt the natural affection a mother shows to her child.

However, I do believe what my mother offered me was the most she could. It wasn't much, but it really was the best she could do. The trauma following the sexual assault, along with her continuous mental breaks, made it very difficult to hold herself together emotionally and psychologically. So it was impossible for her to offer much to me when my face alone incited emotional triggers about the rape. Till today, I believe she loves me as best she can. Likewise, I love her as I best I can. But our relationship remains difficult and is a work in progress.

Unconditional Love

“Too much control thrives when family members cling to a myth that everything is perfect when it's not.”

—Dan Neuharth, *If You Had Controlling Parents*

Perhaps it is through observing the enduring affection between mother and child that has most significantly inspired our concepts of unconditional love, a love so strong that it is altered by neither time nor circumstance. But is it real?

In speeches and in writing, unconditional love is praised so highly and spoken about so freely that it seems almost sacrilegious to pose a question that challenges its existence. However, when we are continuously faced with the reality of children neglected and abused by their very own parents—sometimes from birth, sometimes later in life—it behooves us to take a moment to consider what we mean by the term unconditional love. But perhaps more importantly, it is necessary to consider the effects that this definition, as well as its underlying assumptions, has on those who believe in it wholeheartedly, especially when their traumatic personal circumstances suggest otherwise.

When Melanie speaks about her mother loving her as best she can and vice versa, she is not speaking about a natural, effortless love that is unaltered by human choice or circumstance. She is speaking about a love based on conscious, continuous work, a love rooted in deliberate behavior and choice, even as this love is inevitably imperfect. She is not speaking of what many term “unconditional love.”

If we are to understand “unconditional love” according to the apparent meaning of the term, in my view, it is not a concept that exists amongst human

beings. Moreover, even if it did exist, it is not a unique, praiseworthy or desirable type of love. My view is shaped not only by my faith tradition, but also by the obvious reality of the world in which we live. As I reflect in my personal journal:

Unconditional love does not exist, nor is it praiseworthy. All love comes with conditions, and should. God Himself has conditions on whom He loves: “But if they turn away [from obedience], then verily, God loves not those who disbelieve” (Qur’an, 3:32).

The Qur’an also specifies the conditions for gaining His love: “Say [O Muhammad], ‘If you love God, [then] follow me. God will love you and forgive you your sins. For God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful’” (Qur’an, 3:31).

Regarding a mother’s natural love for her child, I reflect in my journal:

Natural or innate love, like that between a mother and child, is not the same as unconditional love. Natural love is like a seed lying in fertile ground with no prior effort on your part. However, for that seed to blossom into a fragrant flower or delectable fruit, it requires daily nurturing and care. Otherwise, it dies. Similarly, all love—whether innate or romantic—is conditional upon some level of effort and dedication if it is to remain alive.

Thus, those who say they believe in unconditional love are not really speaking of love that is unconditional *per se*. Rather they are speaking of deeply felt lasting love. They are speaking of a love that has endured despite the many storms of life that had threatened to weaken or uproot it. Nevertheless, in poetic matters of the heart, hyperbole is generally more palatable and preferable than technical truth. As such, the term *unconditional love* is favored more than the more accurate term *conditional love*. In this vein, the usage of the term *unconditional love* is akin to a term of endearment: Like calling a loved one *my angel*, *baby*, or *honey*, it is meant to be sentimental, not truthful.

I propose that a better and more honest term than *unconditional love* is *enduring love*, a love that endures precisely because it meets the conditions necessary for that love to endure. In other words, when we are observing what we call “unconditional love,” we are really observing the positive side of conditional love, the only type of love that exists.

In this context, however, it is important to note that the term *conditional love* does not mean that humans are consciously or overtly demanding that loved ones fulfill certain conditions in order to earn or sustain their love. The term merely refers to the inherent nature of human love itself. Nevertheless, not all conditional love is equal, and perhaps the most obvious example is that of the oft-enduring bond between mother and child compared with the oft-disrupted bond between romantic partners.

While the compassionate bond between a mother and child is arguably the most powerful expression of love on earth, this fact alone does not make it unconditional. It simply makes it possibly the most enduring bond of love and the most difficult to disrupt. But that it can be (and often is) disrupted suggests that certain conditions (whether conscious or unconscious) were not met to ensure that it was sustained long-term.

Before I explain how this all connects to the story of Melanie and others suffering similar trauma, I believe it is important to note that my view of unconditional love is rooted in how I define love itself. To me, while love is definitely rooted in unseen feelings of the heart, love is not merely unseen feelings of the heart. Love, like faith, requires both internal and external manifestation before it can be rightly called *love*. In other words, love is an action word more than it is a feeling word, though some minimal level of feeling is necessary to make it complete. However, love does not exist simply because someone claims or believes that it does, even if they are speaking of their own heart.

The Myth of Unconditional Love. Naturally, because unconditional love itself is not rooted in human reality, those who claim to believe in it have varying and often contradictory assumptions regarding its existence. Ironically, those with the healthiest view of “unconditional love” define it as rooted in conditions, even as they do not consciously realize they are placing conditions on its definition. In other words, for all practical purposes, they define “unconditional love” as conditional love that has yielded positive, lasting results.

Put another way, their definition is really describing *enduring love* (or what can be viewed as healthily nourished natural or innate love), the positive side of conditional love. Because this use of the term *unconditional love* is not really in reference to love without conditions, its mythical aspects exist only in terminology, not in meaning. Thus, when one’s belief in unconditional love is rooted in hyperbolic terms of endearment, it poses very little danger—so long as it is continuously understood as enduring conditional love, as opposed to effortless unconditional love (which does not exist).

However, the dangers of believing in unconditional love become most obvious when we explore the arguably more popular and widespread understanding of it: love that endures forever and remains unaltered simply because the one deserving of it exists. (Here, I’ll admit a caveat to my earlier reflection that unconditional love does not exist nor is it praiseworthy. In this context, I am speaking only of love amongst human beings. I am not speaking of the love humans *should* have for their Creator and what and whom He loves. Theoretically, it can be argued that in the case of humans loving God, unconditional love is indeed praiseworthy, and I would agree. However, even in this case, humans are incapable of showing this form of unconditional love toward God in the way that He deserves. As such, our human faults and failings

render even this praiseworthy theoretical example as proof that unconditional love does not exist).

Dangers of the “Unconditional Love” Myth. When unconditional love is understood according to its more popular usage—effortless love that endures irrespective of time or circumstance—the dangers of believing in it become more obvious. While cases of abuse and neglect are often cited as exceptions to the existence of unconditional love, it is often the belief in unconditional love that not only fuels the abuse, but also allows it to last for so long unabated.

When parents assume that all of their actions are motivated by unconditional love, they can become blind to when they are not behaving lovingly. Moreover, they are even less likely to recognize when their actions are motivated by the opposite of love, be it resentment, envy, or even hatred. In many homes, the term “tough love” (which refers to healthy though unpleasant, necessary disciplinary measures inspired by genuine concern for the child’s well-being) is used as a euphemism for abuse and mistreatment, which is often rooted in the parents’ own unaddressed emotional trauma.

In more extreme cases, it is the parents’ belief in unconditional love that actually inspires deliberate mistreatment of their children. In other words, some parents define “unconditional love” as the license to, quite literally, do whatever they want with or to their children. In this erroneous belief system, parents view anything and everything they do as an act of love. Consequently, when a child’s emotional, psychological, or physical wellbeing is viciously assaulted, a parent will claim that he or she is doing it “for their own good.”

Due to their view that parental love has no conditions or limits (i.e. it is “unconditional”), these parents ascribe to the pathology of complete and literal ownership of their children’s minds, bodies, and souls. “I brought you into this world, and I can take you out!” is a common proclamation made by these parents. Because they view the harm they inflict on their children as a manifestation of “unconditional love,” they genuinely believe their children should love and appreciate them no matter what. Often these abusive parents cite the very acts that traumatize and harm their children as proof of their unconditional parental love.

In the case of Melanie’s mother, we can see a distinct difference between how Melanie is treated and how her younger sisters are treated. This is an obvious example of how even parental love is conditional. In Melanie’s case, the level of love she was shown was in direct relation to the circumstances surrounding her mother’s pregnancy. Though Melanie’s situation is arguably an extreme example, it is well-known that even in families that are considered healthy, normal, and functional, obvious favoritism exists in the parents’ interactions with their children. In fact, emotional trauma is not uncommon in even these “good families.” As such, there are often many parallels between the

emotional struggles of children who have suffered obvious abuse and those who have suffered subtler forms of trauma at the hands of their parents.

Regarding the psychological harms of believing that love is unconditional, especially in families, consider this excerpt from the blog “Myth of Unconditional Love” by Jennifer Stuck:

I’ve been bombarded with the idea of unconditional love for as long as I can remember. Everywhere from home, to church, to Valentine’s Day commercials, people have pushed the concept that I should show love with no strings attached and expect nothing in return...But what does this type of thinking do to my personal boundaries? And more importantly, why **SHOULDN’T** my love have conditions?

I’ve recently become aware that the belief in unconditional love has interfered with my healing from childhood sexual abuse. In the past, I found it difficult to express anger towards the people who hurt me. My abusers weren’t my family and I never loved them, but I did care deeply about the people in my family who failed to protect me. The positive feelings I felt for my family coupled with the anger I felt about them neglecting me was confusing.

I was always taught that I should love no matter what, forgive all mistakes, and never question their place in my life. They were my family after all. But my anger went against the definition of unconditional love I was always taught...I was already harboring guilt after being sexually abused, and the idea of unconditional love just piled on more.

On top of adding to my guilt, being told I should love someone even when they have hurt or neglected me was like being told to ignore my personal boundaries. Years of childhood sexual abuse had already taught me to ignore my feelings and put everyone else’s needs first. The belief in unconditional love just reinforced that. According to everyone else, my feelings didn’t matter and I had no choice in who or when I loved. I wasn’t allowed to place conditions on my love. I was supposed to love them no matter what they did. But that was in their best interest, not mine.

The whole concept of unconditional love has been used by abusers and the people who protect them for generations to keep victims silent. When you think about it, who else would require love without conditions? (Stuck, 2011)

Regarding believing in unconditional love in a marriage, Willard F. Harley, Jr. (a professed Christian) writes in part one of “What’s Wrong with Unconditional Love?”:

But the [marriage] vows that I made...were not for unconditional love. My vows were that I would care for [my wife] regardless of conditions beyond our control...

So let me explain to you what unconditional love in marriage is, and then we'll see whether or not it makes any sense to promise such a thing...

"Unconditional" means that there are no prerequisites or contingencies to the promise. The promise of love is to be made regardless of all circumstances, including what the other person chooses to do. There should be no confusion regarding its meaning.

"Love," however, is a different matter, and I've seen many different ways to define it. I define love as applied to marriage in two ways: (1) romantic love which is the feeling of incredible attraction to someone and (2) caring love which is meeting someone's needs. When you're in love, you feel something, and when you care, you do something...

My definitions of love makes [*sic*] the spouse very unique, but the promise itself very conditional. If I promise to be incredibly attracted to [my wife] Joyce, and to meet her emotional needs for the rest of our lives together, it doesn't make sense if there are no conditions attached...

If I had promised to be in love with Joyce unconditionally, I would have failed to understand how romantic love is created and destroyed. It's not what I do that causes me to be in love with Joyce--it's what she does. So I can only promise to be in love with her if she meets my important emotional needs, and avoids hurting me. I have nothing to do with it, except to give her an opportunity to make those deposits.

My second definition of love, caring love, makes unconditional love seem possible. Technically, I could try to meet my wife's emotional needs without condition. But could I do it indefinitely, and would it be a good idea?

Let's take a few examples. Suppose a wife were to have an affair, divorce her husband, and marry her lover. Should her ex-husband continue supporting her financially if they had no children together? Should he provide the same support that he would if they were married? Should he be there to help her through life's struggles? Some who believe in unconditional love feel that he should.

Or, suppose a husband sexually molested their children and ended up in prison. Should his wife continue to meet his emotional needs during conjugal visits? Some who believe in unconditional love think that she should.

What if a husband were to beat his wife senseless in a fit of drunken rage? Should she continue to meet his emotional needs? I once counseled a couple where the husband tried to kill his wife three times. After his last effort he buried her in a shallow grave because he thought she was dead. But she managed to recover, dig herself free, and crawl for help. Should she give him another chance? Should she meet his emotional needs for the rest of his life? The elders of her church thought she should because they believed in unconditional love. After I

encouraged her to divorce her husband, they never referred anyone to me again...(Harley, n.d.).

Regarding religion being used to support the concept of unconditional love, Harley says further:

I've heard almost every argument in favor of unconditional love, and I've found that the argument that is the most difficult for me to refute is religious. While this argument has been made by advocates of many different religions, I'll focus on the Christian argument because that's the faith that I endorse.

The argument goes something like this: We should love our spouses unconditionally because Jesus Christ loves us unconditionally. Even if it's not safe or practical to do so (as with infidelity, physical abuse, or divorce) we should love unconditionally out of obedience to God. While I certainly encourage being in obedience to God, I can't find any text from the Christian Bible that suggests that conclusion.

The phrase, "unconditional love" is found nowhere in Scripture. We read "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Those who encourage us to love unconditionally take this to mean that God loves us all unconditionally. But if that's true, it must be my third meaning of the word, love--he wishes us the best in life. That's because the verse goes on to explain that we must do something to save ourselves. According to this verse, we must meet his conditions to be saved...

The concept of salvation itself is expressed in many different ways in various texts, but it always comes with a condition. It's never suggested that salvation comes with no strings attached. As one example, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9)...

So if there's no religious reason to give or receive unconditional love in marriage, we're left with practical reasons. And I know of none (Harley, n.d.).

Though the depths of the additional danger of believing in the myth of unconditional love are beyond the scope of this book, I think it is beneficial here to mention briefly the intellectual, moral, and spiritual harms this belief entails. In an article entitled "The Myth of Unconditional Love," writer Walter Hudson references Amazon's critically acclaimed *Transparent* series to illustrate his point:

While watching the...trailer for Amazon's *Transparent*, I was struck by the tagline, "Love is unconditional." In the context of a show about a transgender father who comes out to his grown children, the idea seems

clear. If his children love him, they won't care that he thinks he's a woman.

Is that true though? Do I need to accept anything my loved ones say, think, or do for them to remain loved ones? Does love require universal acceptance?

The popular notion of "unconditional love" emerges from post-modern moral relativism. It is an interpersonal application of the idea that everything is equally valid and equally true. In that context, judgment has become hate...One cannot disagree with the gay orthodoxy without being labeled a hater...

We're dealing with a particularly insidious lie that cheapens love by transmuting it from a value-based emotional response to an autonomic pleasantry. Put another way, unconditional love is nothing special. If love is unconditional, then anyone deserves it. If anyone deserves it, then the particulars of an individual's behaviors, beliefs, and values do not matter...

Ironically, the unconditional love crowd typically punctuate their rhetoric with the sentiment "love people for who they are." But that doesn't make the least bit of sense. You can't both love someone for who they are and love them unconditionally. Their identity is a condition. They are not someone else. From this we quickly realize that the real exhortation of "unconditional love" is to accept whatever taboo, be it homosexuality, transgenderism, or any of a hundred other things...

Indeed, true love drives continual growth and improvement. True love responds to values sought and attained, to principles manifest in action.

I love my wife for who she is, not for whatever she happens to be, but for what she believes and how she lives her life. Her values align with my own. I could not love her otherwise. If I claimed to, it would be a lie...

Love requires judgment. Love upholds standards. Love sets conditions. When our loved ones fall short, we correct them in love. If we didn't care, we wouldn't bother. In that sense, what the "unconditional love" peddlers sell is not actually love, but a miserable and toxic indifference (Hudson, 2015).

Healing Through Letting Go of "Unconditional Love." I spent a considerable amount of time explaining the myth of unconditional love because I believe that understanding this myth is crucial for many survivors. Even for those of us who have not suffered emotional trauma or abuse in our lives, navigating life with a healthy, realistic view of love can improve our relationships with friends, family, and loved ones.

Understanding both the limits and potential endurance of love can inspire us to be more mindful of our own behavior and intentions, and it can free us from self-blame when someone we imagine loves us behaves in a harmful or abusive

manner. Many children of abuse who believe their parents love them unconditionally often look for faults within themselves to explain the hurtful treatment they consistently suffer at the hands of their mother or father.

Logically, if a parent loves a child unconditionally, any negative treatment is rooted in a problem within the child, not in the limits of the parent's own ability or willingness to love. Likewise, the concept of unconditional love implies that any unjust behavior toward one child and preferential treatment toward another must be understood as the child's fault.

However, if a child understands that parents are merely human beings with very real limits to their ability and willingness to love, then he or she can move beyond self-blame to self-healing—guilt-free. This healthy psychology and outlook on life allow adult children of abuse to engage in necessary self-care without viewing their healing journey as “selfishness” simply because their parents are angry or resentful of this newfound independence.

Here is an excerpt from my book *Broken yet Faithful. From the Journal of Umm Zakiyyah*, wherein I touch on this subject:

Healing.

Selfishness and self-care are not the same.

Once you realize this, you free up your mind, body, and spirit to heal emotional wounds, guilt-free. And you can now draw very clear lines protecting your personal space from toxic energy—and people—that threaten to disrupt it (2016, p. 30).

Melanie's healing, as we'll see later in the book, is largely rooted in Melanie recognizing that the sexual assault suffered by her mother put very real limitations on her mother's ability to display affection and love that is generally viewed as “natural” between a mother and her child. Thus, when Melanie says that her mother loves her as best she can, Melanie is acknowledging the very real limitations on the love her mother shows her from childhood through adulthood.

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About the Author

Daughter of American converts to Islam, Umm Zakiyyah (also known by her birth name Ruby Moore), writes about the interfaith struggles of Muslims and Christians, and the intercultural, spiritual, and moral struggles of Muslims in America. Her work has earned praise from writers, professors, and filmmakers and has been translated into multiple languages.

To find out more about the author, visit ummezakiyyah.com or uzauthor.com, subscribe to her YouTube channel: [uzreflections](https://www.youtube.com/channel/uzreflections), follow her on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/uzauthor) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/uzauthor): [uzauthor](https://www.instagram.com/uzauthor), or join her Facebook page at [facebook.com/ummezakiyyahpage](https://www.facebook.com/ummezakiyyahpage).