

Woman Writer + Writer Mother: A Conversation between Sarah Manguso and Rachel Zucker

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Our ages, educations, professions, resumes, and mailing addresses are similar, but Sarah has no offspring and Rachel has three sons. This one difference seems more than any other quality to establish and absolutely separate our private and public identities as women, as writers, and as human beings.

In an attempt to understand why, we corresponded over several months.

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SM: I want to ask you about motherhood because – childless and approaching the age at which conception is difficult – I am intimidated by the apparent difficulty of being at once an artist and a mother, and I crave input from thoughtful mothers.

RZ: I'm surprised by your interest.

A few years ago I invited you to write an essay about a living woman poet. Arielle Greenberg and I were co-editing an anthology of essays about mentorship, and I was curious to know which poet you would pick and what you would say about mentorship. What you said, though, was that you did not want to be included in a women-only anthology. I don't have your words in front of me, but your answer was reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop's response to the editors of *No More Masks*, an anthology of poetry by women. You declined, as Bishop had done, saying you considered yourself a writer, not a woman writer.

I remember being astonished and exasperated. The births of my two sons and my experience mothering them had radically affected every part of my life—I could not imagine what it would feel like to not feel like a *woman* writer or a *mother* writer. (At the time I didn't distinguish between motherhood and womanhood.) I felt then that the words “mother” and “woman” were invisibly adhered to every action and element of my life. I was, at every moment and in every way, a woman _____, a mother _____.

But you didn't feel that way.

SM: No. I still don't feel that way. I don't feel that my femaleness is incidental to my identity, but at the time I was unwilling to choose femaleness as my principal category of identity, even just within the confines of a book project. Bishop's line seems reasonable to me: “Art is art and to separate writing, musical compositions, etc., into two sexes is to emphasize values that are not art.”

Cynthia Ozick wrote this in 1997 in the *Atlantic*: “I absolutely reject the phrase ‘woman writer’ as anti-feminist. ... People often ask how I can reject the phrase ‘woman writer’ and not reject the phrase ‘Jewish writer’ – a preposterous question. ‘Jewish’ is a category of civilization, culture, and intellect, and ‘woman’ is a category of anatomy and physiology. It's rough thinking to confuse vast cultural and intellectual movements with the capacity to bear children.”

It was that piece of text (not Bishop) that I quoted in my email to you and Arielle when I declined to contribute to your anthology. Maybe I unwittingly portrayed myself as an antagonist, when really what I wanted to be was a conscientious objector. A respectful one.

The female archetypes available in our culture are few. Mother, wife, spinster, whore. All of these identities depend upon the sexual organs. I did not want to disappear into my body. Not again. I was in and out of the hospital throughout my twenties, and even when everything was in remission, my deteriorating body was all I thought about. I couldn't control my body. It ran my life for a long time.

A man can become a husband and father and still be a writer first in the public imagination, but it seems a woman must choose. In the public imagination, it seems that if a woman is to be perceived as a writer first, she must stay sexually available to men, even if that availability is only hypothetical. The public doesn't believe (yet?) that women are as complex as men, so perceptions of women aren't as nuanced.

One symptom of this problem is that people seem unable to talk about women's writing without talking about their bodies. I periodically start to log the adjectives used in the *New York Times* Book Review for a comparative analysis, but after the first day, it's just too depressing and obvious. Books by women are "gorgeous," and books by men are "brilliant."

At this point in history, *wife* and *mother* are still noncomplex, nonqualifiable categories—they're such powerful archetypes, they swallow all the others, even if a woman has been a writer beforehand.

RZ: Forgive me for saying so, but you sound like a nonmother to me when you say these things. I also want women to be more than their sexual organs and yet I am truly confounded by the ways in which my feelings about the importance of gender and bodies have changed for me since having children.

SM: I may sound to you like a nonmother, but I could introduce you to people to whom I sound, simply, white. Or rich. Or poor. Or American.

RZ: True. You also sound to me like an intellectual and like a feminist.

Perhaps Ozick is right that "It's rough thinking to confuse vast cultural and intellectual movements with the capacity to bear children." Or perhaps she's wrong. I'm wondering not just about "the capacity to bear children" but also about my (and others') *experiences* birthing and mothering.

And this isn't just about pregnancy. What about the reality of caring for infants or older children? The physical realities of childbearing and childrearing change my ideas about feminism. I may resent being limited to my gender, and yet I feel that to some extent these archetypes are inescapable because they are true.

SM: Capacity versus experience—that's an important distinction, absolutely. Still, why does the experience still have to be an identity-changer for women but not men?

A couple of women I know published an announcement of the birth of their first child. They included details, like the fact that the baby was delivered on the sidewalk in front of the hospital—but made painstaking care not to designate which of them actually gave birth to the baby. I liked that. They're parents now. Whose uterus fed the fetus is private and maybe irrelevant.

RZ: Fascinating. Did one of them hide the pregnancy? One of the wonderful and terrible things about being pregnant is how public and visible it is. Are both moms planning to nurse the baby? Will one mother nurse but not in public? For equality's sake will both abstain from nursing?

Pregnancy and birth (which is just one of several ways that women become mothers) are physical, literal, and figurative transformations of the self. Some women will never be pregnant or give birth but the fact that only women *can* and men *never can* is significant, don't you think? Don't you feel it changes how girls and women feel about themselves and their bodies from the time they understand where babies come from?

SM: It absolutely changes the way girls feel about themselves. It's a differentiation from half the world that can never completely disappear. I hate being perceived as a potential mother—an empty vessel—but in Western medical culture, that is my identity. When I am given a new medication, I have to prove I'm not pregnant, couldn't possibly be pregnant. Before being given potentially toxic medications, I am asked to pinpoint when I want to be pregnant—sooner, later, or never. Even as a kid I wore a lead apron over my ovaries when I got an X-ray. For as long as I have lived, I have been an egg-box. In a Western hospital, my eggs are the most valuable part of me.

RZ: Do you feel like an “egg-box”? I think I did, before I had children. I think I still do, to some extent. For example, I'm very aware of how my libido is tied to my fertility. For the most part I only want to have sex when I am fertile. I recently got an IUD put in because I don't trust my own rational ability to override my biological urges. I sound so pathetically unable to control my feelings—“womanly”?—and yet to say otherwise is to lie.

Is it just the culture that makes me into an “egg-box”? Or is it something else, something in me? I always, always wanted to have children. It is a struggle for me to not have more.

SM: I don't feel like an egg-box, no. My eggs seem hypothetical to me.

RZ: It's hard for me to understand that feeling.

When pregnant, I had the recurrent, visceral, mostly unpleasant sense that I had turned into a humpty dumpty—a huge egg with arms and legs.

After birthing, my eggs and their transformations into my actual children were so visible, tangible to me. Most of my days are spent in close proximity to my children or spent working but always with part of my brain occupied with the task of waiting for them to come home or wake up. Looking up just now (I'm writing during my baby's nap), I laughed—I have this lovely, fat ceramic chicken on my desk. I bought this hen several years ago in Austin where I had traveled to attend the Association of Writing Programs conference. That conference is usually the only time I spend a night or two away from my children. When I saw the hen in a local artisan's store, I thought, “oh, that's me!” and now here she sits.

Even now, with my IUD, I feel very much like an egg-box. I feel, even when not pregnant or nursing a baby, that the making, bearing, and nursing of babies is what my body was meant to do.

I know, of course, that I can do many other things with my body, be many other things, but it still means something to me that this is the original or truest function of my body.

SM: Your fertile female body seems a key determinant to your identity.

Fertility seems a fairly important part of our cosmic process, but it becomes fascinatingly problematic when we look through the other end of the telescope and consider individual particles in that process. Fertility is irrelevant to the lives of my friend A., a gay man; D., an infertile woman; R., a severely disabled kid.

The body absolutely determines the course of our species, but not necessarily the course of the individual. And we relate as individuals. I think what we're talking about here is simply the problem of empathy between different categories of women—which is of course just a subset of the general problem of empathy between different human beings.

What do you and I have in common besides our shared enemy, the old boys' network?

RZ: Well, we actually have a great deal in common—gender, race, nationality. Also, we are roughly the same age, were born in the Northeast, attended Ivy League schools as undergraduates and earned MFAs in poetry from the Iowa Writers' workshop (although not at the same time). I'm an only child and believe you are too. We are both writers. I live in Manhattan and you live in Brooklyn.

That's a lot of similarities. If we want to understand one another then we have try to form empathy around our similarities and our differences.

SM: Yes. And not just our differences on paper, but the differences in how we experience ourselves. In my mind my identity begins with Writer and Teacher; Woman is much further down the list.

RZ: I was a writer and teacher before I was a mother but so much of my mental and physical energy is spent in my role of mother. Am I *more* a mother than a writer now? I'm not sure. I don't think I can really separate them enough to measure them against each other.

It is interesting that despite our many similarities, we don't know each other very well. Over the years our paths have crossed from time to time, but we've never become friends. Is it because I have children and you don't?

I know that I've made assumptions about you, about the kind of nonmom you are.

I've always imagined that you went to parties and stayed out late and slept with various handsome men (and maybe women too) and had beautiful clothes that were not machine washable and that your body functioned in ways that did not surprise, alarm or amaze you. I felt sure that you went to sleep late, woke up late, and read the newspaper at breakfast. Your apartment, as I pictured it, was quiet and peaceful but not very tidy. Your life was your own. You read books voraciously but were sometimes lonely. You traveled and went to writer's colonies and applied for fellowships and teaching jobs that might require you to move to other states or countries for a few months. Your mother worried that you weren't married and you told her that her alarm was antiquated and sexist.

SM: I think we both made assumptions about each other based on the popular stereotypes associated with New York women. I certainly did. I thought your life consisted of reading banal storybooks, making instant oatmeal, and doing laundry. I couldn't imagine how that would feel fulfilling. I considered an obviously complex and evolved person but went straight to the stereotype, which is basically a failure of my imagination.

You've read my memoir now, so you know that my life and my relationship to my body are not as you describe above.

I don't know if the severe limits on my life have been greater or lesser in degree, or similar or different in type, to the limits on your life, a mother's life.

RZ: I agree that most assumptions about mothers and nonmothers are erroneous.

For example, a few months ago I sent a YouTube link to a movie I made about my son's home birth out to everyone on my email list. I was surprised when you responded. I had assumed you wouldn't be interested in my movie. I thought you might find it overly sentimental or possibly disgusting. But you said it inspired you. How? Why?

SM: "Inspires" as in fills me with breath and hope, as in somehow both increases and decreases the mysteries surrounding motherhood and birth.

During a high school internship program at a local teaching hospital, with a teenager's total assurance that I would be a doctor when I grew up, I watched a vaginal birth and came close to fainting. The attending doctor had to take care of me while the mother was in labor. It was almost funny. So I was surprised by how clean and simple the birth process seemed in your movie.

I am genuinely interested in the lives of mothers inasmuch as I am interested in the lives of people in general, but I'm separately fascinated by some mothers' apparent conviction that nonmothers are shallow, that mothers suffer and feel more deeply than nonmothers. It seems as if these mothers want to shun me because I'm not a member of their sorority—hell, I didn't even show up to rush.

RZ: I've never thought that you or nonmothers in general are "shallow" but clearly I've made a lot of other uncomplimentary or idealized assumptions. Perhaps I should have spent more time thinking about what you and I

have in common or about what I have lost in the years in which I signed on so completely to the world of mothers and the idea that we are different from nonmothers. How does such a perception affect women? What can we do to change things?

SM: The problem with sustaining the dichotomy between mothers and nonmothers, of course, is that in doing so we weaken all women against the reigning culture of men.

James Baldwin is supposed to have said at Berkeley, that no white man, no matter how wretched, would want to trade places with him. Well, no man, no matter what color, would want to trade places with me.

RZ: Maybe because I'm trying to justify my own path or maybe because I truly feel this way—I don't know—but I've spent my whole life assuming that (to bring it back to James Baldwin) no mother, no matter how wretched, would want to trade places with a nonmother. So I'm back to the dichotomy.

SM: I find it hard to understand that feeling.

RZ: Obviously I'm exaggerating. Some women do *not* want to be mothers. Women have abortions or give children up for adoption or responsibly avoid pregnancy, but by and large, despite the fact that motherhood is not physically, logistically, financially or socially supported, most women do become mothers at some point even if they don't choose a particular pregnancy or child.

Is this because of a cultural message that motherhood is the ultimate goal for women? Why do so many women become mothers?

And how can I discuss my feeling of having chosen the "right" way, the only path that makes sense to me without being offensive? Motherhood, it seems to me, is both extremely difficult but also and ultimately, the greatest privilege. I guess I fear nonmothers' scorn and envy when I say these things.

SM: It is hard for me to understand mothers who assume I envy them, or who assume that motherhood is my goal.

But the problem here is that the dialectic of mother versus nonmother isn't a perfect one. Every mother has also been a nonmother, so only they know the difference. Nonmothers simply can't have this perspective.

It's generalizing an individual belief—that my, or anyone's, experience of womanhood should be considered the ultimate experience for all women—that's the problem.

RZ: I can see how my assumption that motherhood is (or should be) your (or anyone's) ultimate goal would be offensive and problematic. I need to think about what's led me to embrace such an essentialist view of womanhood.

SM: My friend J., the mother of a severely disabled child, finds the mother/nonmother dialectic deeply problematic. She knows that not all mothers are in the same boat.

I find that dialectic problematic, too, because I know that not all nonmothers are in the same boat.

There's a vast difference between the life of a committed artist and the life of a person who gets paid to take orders forty hours a week and spends the rest of the time entertaining herself.

There are very many ways to live a nonfulfilling life. I have found several. But from where I'm standing, plenty of mothers seem to have found them, too.

What I want to know is: what do thoughtful and insightful mothers know that I can't know?

RZ: So much of being a mother is learning to tolerate discomfort. There is an athleticism to motherhood, a kind of torture-victim's resolve. Nursing a child is like a spiritual practice, a meditative discipline, a consecrated patience. I

imagine I might feel this way about yoga if I had time to do yoga. Also, I would give up my life for my children but not for my husband and not for my parents and not for my friends....

SM: That might be it – the essential difference between us. I don't know anyone I'd die for. That is a fascinating dialectic. Do you think all mothers feel the same way?

RZ: I think they do. I think it is one of those biological imperatives that kicks in for almost all mothers. Not right away, necessarily, but pretty soon.

Other things I know: I feel completely responsible for the health and welfare of other living beings (my children). I have learned to communicate with nonverbal and irrational human beings. I have learned to cajole, to teach, to lead, to reward, to dissuade, to negotiate, to mediate with and between my children.

My ego has shrunk and expanded more than I thought was possible. I have stifled and survived the kind of rage and boredom that might lead me to harm myself or others. The ability to withstand these feelings seems to have grown out of my placenta or developed in my psyche during my nights of interrupted sleep. (I don't mean to imply that adoptive mothers don't feel this—only that the development of these feelings and my ability to withstand them felt involuntary.) This—call it equilibrium—now extends beyond my children.

SM: I know something about rage and boredom and the eradication of the ego.

RZ: How did you learn this?

SM: I learned it more or less alone, as a hospital patient. It was a perversion of parenthood – I tried to keep my physically regressed and helpless self emotionally and mentally functional. I learned how to walk again, and to use a fork again, with the help of therapists.

Still, I had no one to take care of but myself, so it was a different lesson from the ones of motherhood.

RZ: I wondered, after reading your memoir, whether, when you were in the hospital, you felt there was a dichotomy in the world: sick and not sick. And now, do you feel there are two types of people: those who have faced death or a serious illness and those who have always taken their health for granted?

SM: Well, yes, in a way. I believe the essential dichotomy is between those governed by the childish ego and those whose egos have been eradicated—through suffering or motherhood or whatever.

RZ: It is possible that the things I've learned from being a mother are things I could have learned in other ways—by running a marathon, by caring for a sick parent or partner or friend, by having pets, by taking antidepressants, by being in therapy, by studying nonviolent communication.

The fact that I could have learned these things in other ways does not mean that *I* would have otherwise learned them.

SM: I guess that's what we can't know about ourselves, given that we live in four dimensions and can't backtrack.

RZ: I think about this a lot. I wonder what have I missed by mothering my way through my late 20s and 30s? What have you learned that I don't know? Is a mother still, also, a woman? Or does she lose something of her womanhood in becoming a mother? Do nonmothers think of mothers, no matter how young, as old, as over, as staid, as "them"?

SM: Well, as I see it, there are degrees of participation in being a mother just as there are degrees of participation in being a writer.

I have an easier time identifying with you than with some other mothers. Yet it's hard for me to identify with mothers in the abstract. I'd like to think that my consideration of them as "them" is a response to my bewilderment that I have yet to meet a mother whose life seems like one I could choose.

I read your essay about writing behind a closed door for minutes or hours at a time while someone minded your sons, and wondered—do you *want* to pay deep and sustained attention to your work since having children? Does your work differ in quality or degree?

RZ: I *do* want to pay deep and sustained attention to my work. Of course this desire ebbs and flows just as it did before I had children. When it is strong, the conflict of interest can be painful. On the other hand, the writing time feels more precious than ever before and I feel more grateful for my writing and more appreciate of having this passion. When my oldest son was born I was an adjunct at NYU teaching composition to freshmen. It wasn't a great job, but I never noticed that until my son was born. In order to keep up with all those many, many papers, I didn't (once I had a baby) have time to write. It very quickly became clear that I didn't care about that job, but cared desperately about writing. So there is something clarifying about having children even though it complicates things.

SM: That makes sense.

How did you consider motherhood before you were a mother? Did it enter into your politics, your relationships with men? With women? How did you perceive your mother?

RZ: One of my primary experiences as a child was watching my mother work. She is a storyteller and a writer. We lived in Greenwich Village and my mother wrote and practiced in her office, which was a separate apartment in the brownstone we rented. I was trained, at an early age, to be a good listener, which meant being quiet. I spent many hours being quiet while my mother performed in front of audiences or in the big mirrors of her office or on in the on-air room of WNYC for her weekly radio program.

As a writer I've learned so much from my mother—her work ethic and dedication are amazing. But as a mother, she was a model that was difficult for me to figure out. I grew up determined to be a “hands-on” mother. Many of my aspirations and much of my identity was formulated in opposition to my mother. I imagined starting my own school or doing something to “help people” but mostly I wanted to be a mother. Available, attentive, present.

I am a different mother from my mother. I have three sons instead of one daughter. After eleven years I am still married and think my marriage is much stronger than my parents' marriage was (although, yikes! they were married for thirteen years). But we're both artists, both deeply committed to our work.

It's often a challenge for me to attend to my children with a full heart, to be with them without trying to do something else. I often want to be writing when I am with my children, and I worry that they will sense this conflict in me and feel unloved.

Having children made me want to work *more* and made me more covetous of the feeling of deep engagement I get from writing. So there is always a conflict. I work hard to protect my time with my children, but I've also had to forgive my mother for a lot of things she did when I was growing up that I swore I would not do. I know that I am more emotionally and physically available to my sons than my mother was to me but perhaps that's because, as a woman-artist in the 1970s and 1980s, my mother had to be more focused on her work.

My father was gone all day (at work) and for weeks at a time (for work) but this never lessened him in my eyes or affected my ideas of how to be a parent. Clearly, I had different expectations of him, of fathers, than I did of my mother and mothers. The fact that my mother was upstairs in her office for much of the day while I was with my babysitter was upsetting. Of course it is not only about hours logged, and this is part of what haunts me. I felt that when my father was with me he was really with me. I always felt like my mother wanted to be somewhere else. What do my children imagine that I feel when I'm with them?

As you say, there are degrees of participation in being a mother. Unfortunately I don't know many (any?) mothers who feel at peace with the degree of participation they've chosen. This seems, unfortunately, an ineluctable part of being a modern mother.

What about your mother? What about your childhood ideas about becoming a mother yourself? Did you think about it often? Do you have models of women you admire who are not mothers?

SM: Well, we have that much in common: our adult identities were formed at least in part by the ways we observed and experienced our own mothers' identities. After she graduated high school, my mother stayed at home while taking classes at a local college, then worked for a few years, still living at home, before she was married. I don't have all the information on what she did for the nine years she was married to my father before I was born, but afterward, she was a full-time wife and mother. She responded "housewife" when asked to identify her career on official forms. For as long as I can remember, I felt depressed by that. I sensed (imagined?) her depression and boredom. Later on, her rage and despair became even more obvious (imagined?) to me. I swore I would never get married—my parents have been married forty-four years and counting—or take on any dependents. I left home and became financially independent a few days after I graduated college.

My fear of becoming the woman I perceived as my mother—trapped, frustrated, helpless, enraged—is what has impelled me to make most of the major decisions of my life. Then again, an older woman friend said to me—offhand, but it became indelible—"She's probably happier than you think."

It fascinates me that so many women continue to choose motherhood. Does this mean I want to remain a child myself?

Do mothers perceive women without children as, essentially, children themselves?

RZ: I will speak for myself. I think that when I think of women who are not mothers I both fear and pity them. I feel threatened and confused. I am fascinated by and ashamed of these feelings. They probably have more to do with ambivalence about my choices than with theirs.

Is this because, despite feeling that I would never trade places with women without children, I worry that I am throwing my life away? I worry that the hours and hours of child care and domestic child-related tasks I do day after day and year after year are a waste of my time?

SM: What's the threat? As for the confusion, I guess I feel confused about what people do if they aren't workaholics, but then I think, well, they run marathons and go on trips and play softball and have healthy, well-rounded, rewarding lives. And they have children.

RZ: Making art sometimes feels highly indulgent and narcissistic. So does having children. At the same time, making art and having children sometimes seem to me like the only valuable things to do. I feel confused about what gives nonmothers' lives meaning. Is that terrible? Condescending? It's hard to admit that I wonder about this. The tone and attitude remind me of how fundamentalist Christians talk to me when trying to tell me "the good news."

SM: Making art can often be indulgent and narcissistic, but if one is doing it right, the ego doesn't necessarily participate.

I understand your position, I think—I can't imagine calling my life meaningful without as much time for silent contemplation as I have. It's hard to imagine fitting parenting into the life I've devised, and which seems like the only way I can remain alive and sane. Yet I know there must exist a deep fulfillment in being a parent.

RZ: I have this idea that if I didn't have children I would read a million esoteric books, and I would become so smart and interesting. I do sometimes wonder if I've "wasted" my education. Once, a friend of my father jokingly said to me, "oh, you went to Yale to get your *M-R-S*," I wanted to slap him. In dark moments I fear it's partly true.

I obviously want things both ways. I feel defined by my role as a mother and wife and am grateful for the ways these identifications give my life a sense of purpose. At the same time I intermittently feel a festering restlessness, a self-loathing for what I've become: mother of three living on the Upper West Side. A good girl.

There are all sort of contradictions for me: becoming a mother made me a feminist but being a mother means I spend a lot of my time doing menial domestic tasks. I'm not sure how my mothering—the daily aspects of caring for my children—fits into my ideas about feminism. I hate the way motherhood seems to separate me from women who don't have children, and I hate the way motherhood separates mothers according to the choices they make about

birthing, nursing, economics, parenting philosophies, working, etc. At the same time I feel that motherhood brings me into a crucially important and sustaining sisterhood with other women, especially other mothers.

SM: It amazes me that a mother would think my life is not fulfilling. I truly appreciate and admire your courage in admitting that.

My psychiatrist tells me that many mentally retarded people report internal fulfillment. Did you feel unfulfilled before you had a child? Is having a child what led to fulfillment? Do you think anything else could have led there?

RZ: For a long time I believed that the world was divided up into two groups: mothers and nonmothers. I had friends in the second group but more and more they seemed foreign or even burdensome to me and I disliked the way I imagined I seemed to them. Becoming a mother awakened in me a strong interest in feminism, but to be honest, for several years this interest was pretty much confined to feminist issues that concerned mothers.

SM: Yes. I tend to prefer the company of people who share my values. It's convenient not to have to defend oneself. I remember being challenged by a woman who asked me if a yearlong university fellowship required that I live on campus. When I told her it did, she railed that it wasn't fair, that she had a husband and a daughter upstate and couldn't leave home, and that she wanted the fellowship, too. I couldn't believe this woman—how could she not see that I had made sacrifices in order to be able to accept the gift of such a fellowship, that I had no house, no partner, no child, no health insurance? That the fellowship existed to help people like me, writers who had chosen writing over the comforts of family, writers who actually needed money and a place to live? It infuriated me that this woman's sense of entitlement blinded her to this. She took for granted the comforts she'd chosen.

I think it's tempting to count a particular identity component as more important than the others—money, parental status, relationship status, gender, health, race, nationality, vocation, education, and on and on—and to use that overvaluation as a means of judging people who lie on the other side of the dialectic from oneself.

I think I needed this conversation in order to remember that an individual human is a vast unknowable phenomenon, composed of infinite variables, and unlike any other.

RZ: I'm thinking right now about Venn diagrams, which my older boys are studying in school. Perhaps you remember these—they're helpful in learning about sets and logic—two slightly overlapping circles is a simple example. One circle represents things that are round. The other circle represents fruit. The area that overlaps represents fruits that are round.

Before this conversation I imagined us as two circles that overlapped in a small area. Inside the overlapping area were the things we have in common: writer, woman, American, etc.

It is obvious to me now that our circles overlap more than I had imagined.

More importantly, though, I see now how incredibly oversimplified a view like this is of human relationships. I had assumed that what we had in common was what would bring us close, but of course this is not necessarily true. In our case what brought us closer was a shared interest in exploring a difference between us.

There are these wild and beautiful Venn diagrams that represent higher numbers of sets—overlapping polygons and sine curves—but I think the analogy is limiting. I see us more as an area of detail in a large pointillist painting. We are made of up of millions of dots of millions of colors and perhaps my concentration of dots is reddish, and perhaps yours is greenish. But when one steps back we are both part of the larger painting of women, of humanity, of life. This is not to say that close examination is meaningless or that our closely examined micro-patterns are insignificant—not at all. It is on this level that we most commonly experience daily life. But it's important for me to remember that what I saw as such an important difference between us—having children or not having children—is pretty minor when seen from farther away, and it's important to remember that the differences whether in shape or color are what enable us to see anything meaningful at all.

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