

WARRIOR MOTHER SYNOPSIS

Warrior Mother: Fierce Love, Unbearable, Loss, and Rituals that Heal is the true story of a mother's fierce love and determination, and her willingness to go outside the bounds of the ordinary when two of her three adult children are diagnosed with life-threatening disease. At a dance workshop, held to address the threat of the pandemic AIDS, the author admits she doesn't know how to be the mother to her gay son. With the help of women in her spirituality group, she learns to say yes to what life is asking of her son, and of her, as his mother.

The author's best friend, dying of breast cancer, asks the author to accompany her through what turns out to be, fourteen days of her dying, ironically preparing this mother for what lie ahead with her own children. Five years later, the author and her family confront again, a life and death circumstance – her 40-year-old daughter's diagnosis of breast cancer. When the customary treatments fail, her daughter decides on a bone marrow transplant and the author visits a healer in Brazil on her behalf.

Experience as a professional social worker and family therapist doesn't always help the author to cope, but her familiarity with improvisational song, dance, and storytelling, and women's spirituality rituals carry her through. The book follows the family through memorials and celebrations of lives well lived, the impact of grief on those left behind, and the rituals that help them heal.

Five summers ago, Rich sent me off to participate in a writers' workshop with the comment, "I hope someday you will find something more pleasant to write about." When I returned from the writers' workshop in Iowa City, held a couple of weeks after the town had suffered a significant flood, I brought back two empty sandbags, like the thousands of bags of sand stacked as barricades against the rising waters. My empty sandbags had been decorated and made into handbags by artists in the community and sold to raise money to help the local Habitat for Humanity fund the cleanup efforts. At home I laid out my decorated sandbags alongside a folder of my writing. "My writings are my sandbags," I told Rich. "We have to make art out of what happens to us, or at least something useful, and we don't get to pick what that is."

People have asked me how I've survived all the tragedy and loss in my life. Perhaps I've written the stories of my journeys with my children, other family members, and my best friend to answer that question for myself. Witnessing how hard both my children fought to stay alive and all that they were willing to endure to gain more life has defined my grieving process. I never wanted to dishonor them by wasting one moment of whatever precious life I am given.

Like a prospector searching for gold, with the help of my journal, I have panned and sifted through these experiences—of birth, death, and the places in between. I have shaken the sieve in such a way as to uncover, among the dirt, pebbles, and debris, the valuable shiny elements in these stories. This sifting and sorting has been, like the experiences themselves, tough at times, but also enlightening. I've come to appreciate the many ways that people confront illness, diagnoses, treatment decisions, and, yes, even death, and the many faces and masks of grief. And ultimately, I've come to see the demands made on me as a mother as requiring me to become a warrior mother. In our lifelong mother roles, whether our children are sick or well, young or old, like warriors, we engage wholeheartedly in a cause, and like spiritual warriors, we are asked to use our compassion and wisdom to help our children and ourselves grow and thrive through whatever life sends our way.