

Regulars Relative Values

The punk priestess Poly Styrene — real name Marianne Elliott-Said — 53, the X-Ray Spex singer who has recently been diagnosed with breast cancer, and her daughter, Celeste, 29, a teacher and musician

I had to leave mum when I was eight for the sake of my sanity

Marianne: Other people seemed far more worried about my having a baby when I was 24 than I was. I felt Celeste grounded me. I moved into the Hare Krishna temple in Hertfordshire when she was four months old, because after punk I felt I needed a set of standards to raise my daughter by. And I thought the company of other kids would be good for her. I felt great — but then you do when you're bipolar. It's others who see your behaviour as a bit off. I wasn't diagnosed until 1991, so I struggled with mood swings throughout Celeste's childhood. Now a tablet every other day keeps me balanced, but it took me a long while to come to terms with it.

Boy George turned up at the temple one day with Gavin Rossdale and Marilyn to try to break me out, because they were worried about me. But I was very happy. I felt punk had been quite a negative and destructive force, and I'd joined the temple to replenish myself with something positive. But when Celeste was eight my bipolar worsened. It just felt completely crashing. That's when I needed some help from my mum. When you're in a manic phase, you're so elated you think you're invincible and you say things people find disturbing. Being in the temple didn't help. I thought I was God — it was like a divine madness.

I went into hospital and Celeste went to stay with my mum. Then

the family court decided she should live there permanently, and I found that hard. I just had to cope as best I could. I had a flat nearby and bought her clothes and took her books. I tried to look on it as though she was at boarding school. I did the nice things with her, taking her to art galleries and round the park on roller skates. I tried to feed her mind — I remember buying her Spanish tapes — because I wasn't involved with the routine things. Thank God I had a good mum and Celeste wasn't taken into care.

She was 16 when I got her back, and she was very, very angry about a lot of things. Everything was a little bit rocky for a couple of years until she went to uni. We were both very emotional and confused. There was a lot of crying and slamming doors, but we talked and we cleared out a lot of stuff. She felt guilty, that my illness was her fault; she felt my life had been great before she came along. I had to reassure her she was the best thing that ever happened to me and that she helped keep me on the straight and narrow. I don't know where I'd have ended up if I hadn't had a child when I was young.

Avoiding stress seems to be the key to managing bipolar. I've lived in Hastings, on the south coast, for the last 10 years, and Celeste and I have had the best relationship since I've been here. I try not to beat myself

up too much over my parenting as it doesn't help. I think I was great

when she was very small. Then I went through a phase when I wasn't so great because I was paranoid and overprotective. I was stressed out by the idea that there might be paedophiles within the Krishna community, because at that time there were reports of child abuse in temples in America. But I was way over the top, constantly examining her and questioning her, and I did frighten her. As she's got older we've been able to discuss all this stuff, and today we have a lovely relationship.

Celeste is married and living in Madrid now, where she's teaching humanities. I wish she wasn't so far away, but she's coming over every three weeks at the moment. I've been diagnosed with cancer, which has been a huge shock for both of us. I'm trying to fight it and I'm determined to stay positive. Celeste has done lots of research and she feels I can get better. And I need to get better for her, because I'm all the family she's got.

I feel so lucky that all the problems between us have been ironed out, and I know she feels that too. When I was a teenager I was running about barefoot. I didn't have a thought for the future, it was all about the music. Celeste needed to create a more stable life for herself, especially with her dad also being a bit of a troubadour. She gives me really good advice on everything from mortgages to insurance. She wants me to think about selling my house, because I'm going to



struggle to get up the stairs. You know how two heads are sometimes better than one? That's what it's like with Celeste now. It's like having another, more sensible head.

Celeste: Mum would be normal for a time, then she'd be depressed and not want to get out of bed. But the most difficult thing — not for her, because she was in another world, but for other people — was the manic part. As a child I was terribly embarrassed by it all. She worried obsessively about me, and even then I knew that kind of paranoia was different from the way other mums were. The Hare Krishna community was very tight-knit. I could tell people were talking and I hated it. What I dealt with — alone, most of the time — was her being scared and anxious and not wanting to go out. We were at home a lot, which was boring; there was nothing to do. Later on I became really angry when I realised her condition could have been controlled with medication all along, but she didn't want to take it. She didn't accept she had an illness until about 10 years ago, and I think that was to do with pride — not wanting to admit to that kind of weakness. Society has changed a lot in its attitudes to mental illness. When I was growing up, quite honestly, people just thought she was mad.

I felt responsible for Mum from an early age. I worried constantly. When she was well we had a great time and a really good relationship, but the Hare Krishna movement, combined with her bipolar, made for a pretty toxic environment. The rules are incredibly strict and very invasive, which I think made her worse, because a lot of her paranoia was related to religion. I left the community when I was eight, to live with my nan, and it was such a relief. I went to a regular school and

saw Mum at weekends. The hardest thing for her — and it's a very sore subject — is that it was my decision not to live with her. She constantly tried to get me back, but I refused. It was pure self-preservation. I did it for my own sanity. I was very grown-up at eight, and I just knew that, to survive, I had to leave her. In the end my leaving was good for Mum. She distanced herself from

the Hare Krishna movement, got her own place near my nan's, and it gave her something to fight for. After that she got better and better. I always knew she loved me a lot and wanted me there, but I also knew it wasn't the best thing for me. I stayed with her every weekend, so she was doing a lot of parenting, but I didn't need to rely on her.

When I was about 16 and able to look after myself, I made the decision to live with her again. But it wasn't the best time. As a teenager I was pretty stroppy and very angry, but our relationship got better as time went on. We're very different people, which became more and more evident. I was very negative about Hare Krishna, and that was a big issue. I was quite smart and I'd attack it with strong arguments, which really wasn't what she needed. And I wasn't interested in music. My love of music deepened as I got older.

I don't doubt my mum's strength and resolution to beat this cancer. She has quite a childlike manner, but underneath she's strong — stronger than me in many ways. She's learnt to be, because she was ripped off so much when she was younger. She left school with no qualifications, to be in a band, and the reality for a lot of musicians of her generation is they're now famous — but poor. They never had a Plan B. Her experience made me determined to work hard and get an education. Music is

something I enjoy, but it's not my entire life the way it is hers.

Mum's mellowed a lot. She's very shy and she still doesn't deal with loads of attention very well, but she's her own person now. Her being ill has panicked me, but I'm trying to stay positive. She's always so upbeat, and that rubs off on me. I'm hoping she'll come and stay with me to recuperate. Living together again might be testing, but she never complains. And we don't have the same conflicts any more. I'm more tolerant of the things she believes in and she now respects my way of thinking. It just doesn't seem to matter any more that we disagree ■
Poly Styrene's Generation Indigo is out on March 28 (Future Noise Music); www.poly-styrene.co.uk

Interviews by Caroline Scott.
Photograph: Fabrizio Rainone



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Two-part harmony:
Marianne with
Celeste today, and
(inset) at the Hare
Krishna temple,
which Marianne
joined when
Celeste was four
months old

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