

Birth of a Mother

Erma Bombeck, musing how she would live differently if she had her time over again, said she would cherish every moment of being pregnant as her one chance in life to help God with a miracle. I tried to capture this sense of privilege while expecting my first baby. It worked - for about a week. By then I had decided pregnancy was a trial I had to survive any way I could; a nine month endurance test. I made it to term cheerful and confident anyway, and it was a great relief to discover that I loved breastfeeding. I was amazed that my body could do something so special. It made up for everything - not just the dreadful pregnancy, but for all the stress and trauma of growing up - being a woman was awesome! And it was a great disappointment to realise, after a series of postnatal complications, that I was going to have to bottle feed.

To add insult to injury, the same problems which left me unable to breastfeed also meant I was now too ill to make up formula. Struggling to even change a nappy, I had to lie in bed fussing until someone brought me the baby *and* a bottle. After a 'natural' and easy conception and birth, this was a sudden and unexpected threat to my capacity as a mother. It felt like a type of impotence, a curse allied to infertility or miscarriage - my body had let me down. People pointed out that at least now, others could feed him, but this was what upset me the most. I had lost the "exclusive rights" to feeding my baby, and the last vestiges of control and independence that gave me; milk had been unique to me, and now anyone could provide it. So much else was going wrong, and breastfeeding felt like the only consolation I had left (though friends tactfully reminded me, there was the healthy baby and the loving husband and so on). Bottle feeding represented my powerlessness, and how helpless the illness had left me. My baby was thriving, but my confidence was shattered.

I was also exquisitely sensitive about bottle feeding in public, despite never receiving anything but positive comments (total strangers commented on how they loved the way I was holding my baby). But I couldn't explain why I wasn't breastfeeding, or how traumatic the past few months had been; even though I knew they would never judge me for bottle feeding, the issues around it were too sensitive. La Leche League meetings were one of the few places I felt safe enough to bottle feed outside the home. Surely I didn't need to say anything - they must realise I would breastfeed if I could, or I wouldn't be there in the first place. And no-one could tell me that it "didn't matter" that I couldn't breastfeed; right now, it did. As I told them, my breastfeeding relationship with my baby was no less precious to me because it lasted only six weeks rather than six months or six years - and perhaps more than anyone else there, I needed to talk about it.

One memory which stands out is bottle feeding in a church crying-room, to the sound of other babies slurping away at the breast, and feeling isolated and overwhelmed by my health problems. My son looked at me as if to say he'd rather be bottle fed by me than breastfed by anyone else, and I clung to this assurance. I cried to think that women elsewhere in the world would have lost

him to malnutrition, or had to hand him to a wet nurse. I felt unequivocally privileged to be able to breastfeed my second baby.

Both of my children were born after very quick and easy labours; by the time the cord was cut, I was ready to do it all over again! But for me, what I have described was part of a 'labour of the heart' which I now see as no less a natural part of becoming a mother than the physical birth pains. (I use the word 'natural' in the sense my obstetrician meant when he said, 'Mother nature is a cow sometimes!')

Even in this, I consider myself fortunate and know that many women have had to overcome difficulties and losses which make mine seem trivial. In hindsight, having to bottle feed my first baby was like another birth pang in that first long, difficult, emotional 'labour' which - in contrast to the physical one - took so much longer than I expected. It was all hard work, but it wasn't a baby that was being delivered this time - it was a mother.

I can now accept that we'd all like to be spared from pain, but bottle feeding, as well as breastfeeding, had a vital role in shaping me as a parent. And I'm grateful for it now, if only because, like everything else, it was all part of the same miracle.

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