

Musings on Motherhood

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MOTHERHOOD IS BOTH MORE GLORIOUS AND MORE DIFFICULT than I could have known when I was playing with dolls, pretending to be a mama. The reality of motherhood was beyond me until I became a mother myself. Submersed in the life of my own family, I began to realize the heights and depths of motherhood.

A woman's life is changed forever when another life begins within her. After I became pregnant, I was constantly aware of my precious cargo, my dreams as full of plans and fears as my waking hours. Obsessively, I counted down the days. The pictures and descriptions of developing fetuses in the many books I had absorbed fascinated me. My curiosity about who this little person would be was equaled only by the physical effort of getting her here to find out.

From the moment I knew I was pregnant, my life was no longer my own. The Korean culture in which we were living at the time has the belief that everything a woman sees, hears, and does when she is pregnant affects her baby. So she should listen to beautiful music, read uplifting books, watch lovely scenes. Wanting the best for my child, I tried to follow the example of the Koreans.

It was difficult to do this, however, with my head in a toilet. As sublime as my stewardship was, it also had elements of the disgusting. I was deathly sick for weeks, vomiting three or four times a day. The low point of that particular existence came when I had to get off a bus in the middle of Seoul and throw up on the sidewalk. I tried to be inconspicuous, but as a tall, very pregnant foreigner, I don't think I was.

Finally, a friend recommended something that helped a lot—Gatorade. Like a wino, I carried a bottle around with me, sipping surreptitiously whenever my stomach threatened rebellion. Gatorade was my salvation. And I preach the word now whenever I can.

Nausea was not the only plague of pregnancy. Pregnancy is more difficult for some than for others, but I believe it is never really easy. There are just too many demands on and changes in a woman's body. Once, before I was married, my mother told me about a friend of hers whose daughter

had recently had a baby. The friend had said with enthusiasm, "Doesn't having a baby rejuvenate you?" I didn't understand at the time the disbelief in my mother's voice as she was telling me this. I do now. Now I would respond to that question of rejuvenation, "Hell, no!"

As my body became heavier and clumsier, I remembered the scripture, "Then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains: ... And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days" (Matt. 24:16, 19). The impossibility of fleeing when I could hardly walk was brought home to me. I also felt a kinship with the pioneer women whose stories I had heard. The woman who had her baby in a lean-to during a snow storm. Or the woman who, as labor came on, crossed a river on a log to get to the midwife. I felt admiration and understanding as I never had before.

I also felt envious of women in the early church who had enjoyed the comfort of laying on of hands by other women. Some sisters in the Relief Society were ordained to bless women in travail. How reassuring that must have been to have loving female friends, who could understand your condition, surround you, and place their hands on you in blessing.

As full of hope and expectation as pregnancy was, it was also interminable. I could remember not being married. I couldn't remember not being pregnant. One of the really infuriating abilities of a husband is to forget that his wife is pregnant. Time can go by quickly for the person not expecting. But if you don't think time can stand still, get pregnant. You'll see.

Being pregnant expanded not only my body but also my awareness. I felt a kinship with all womankind. In a lovely coincidence, I was in the hospital with my little daughter on my first Mother's Day. "We honor all women on Mother's Day," the little gift said that came on our dinner trays. I felt a part of that group as I never had before.

My mother has often said that only a woman who has carried a baby for months can look forward to delivery. I felt I was more than ready when the time came. I had studied books and made careful plans, but all my planning went awry with my first delivery. I ended up hooked up and plugged in to all kinds of devices, and my daughter was born Caesarean. My second delivery was a small victory over statistics. My daughter was born naturally, and I had very little medication.

During that second delivery, I discovered a place and a part of myself that I had no idea was there—where manners and refinement were absolutely inconsequential. Even awareness of other people was clouded by the intensity of the process. My delivery nurse, who had the gentlest touch I have ever experienced, discussed the delivery with me later. I expressed embarrassment over my intensity and abandon. She said the delivery had been so normal that she couldn't think what I was talking

about. I groped for the word to describe the experience when she supplied it—primitive. It was a powerfully primitive experience, undiluted by civilized protocol or restraint.

Until I experienced it myself, I never realized what an heroic effort carrying and bearing a child really is—has always been and still is in spite of modern medicine and technology. Adam said of Eve, “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). For him, we are told, it is figurative, but for women, having a baby is a literal sacrifice of the flesh—a sacrifice not usually unto death, but nearer death than I had realized.

I inherited an old book of my great-grandmother’s titled *Vitology* which is falling apart from use and age. In the section on pregnancy and birth, it says, “It is no uncommon thing for a patient otherwise healthy to have ‘a bad getting-up after labor’—that is, to be a longer time than usual in recovering the general condition, which in some cases is not attained for years.” Although most women now probably recover “the general condition” sooner than many did in my great-grandmother’s time, recovery often comes slowly.

I hadn’t appreciated this before my own recovery. I had heard too many stories about women like the Pearl S. Buck character who delivered her own twins and then went back to the fields to work. Now I know this was an exceptional, not to mention fictional, woman. Having a baby was hard on me, and I think it is on many. I am reminded of a passage from James Michener’s *Hawaii*. The brother-husband of the queen would crawl on his belly to her with flowers to show his respect and devotion. Knowing as I do now what a woman endures to bear a child, I believe that is an appropriate thing for a man to do.

I felt a kinship with other women past and present, but I also think new mothers are not so different from their animal counterparts. We went to the zoo one day and were watching the chimpanzees. One was swaying back and forth. I thought it was from being caged, but as we got closer, I could see that she had a baby. She was nursing it and rocking—the common motion of mothers.

After my daughter was born, I was surprised by the intensity of the need to be close to her. I knew I would love her. I didn’t know I would be so absorbed in her. It would have been reassuring to have had the constant physical contact of her strapped to my back like a papoose. I have read that perhaps this need for closeness is from our ancestors who had to protect their babies from preying beasts or be ready in an instant to flee. I was ready. When we finally put her in another room to sleep, I felt a fearful urgency to rush to her, grab her, and crush her to me, to save her from the wild beasts that might come through our third-floor apartment window.

When she was very tiny, I surprised myself when a snarl would just catch in my throat if someone was too insistent to hold her and separate us. I understand the bird mother that pretends her wing is broken to distract the predator, or the otherwise mild bear that charges when she has cubs.

My need to be close to her made it a struggle to keep my world from being just the two of us. I was just the two of us for so long. I had encompassed all our being. I wanted to maintain our unity even as she already began to gain her independence. Being pregnant had been the focus of my life for what seemed such a long time that it was difficult to realize that that focus must shift to aiding the separation.

Having a baby means having powerful, new emotions and experiences. But it also means having little of anything else, particularly sleep. I have always been envious of those parents who say their baby slept all night after the second or third week or even the first year. My baby didn't sleep all night until she was well over two. And there are still the nights when a little body comes snuggling into my bed because it is easier for her to sleep when she is by me. It is not necessarily easier for me. But her utter contentment at being next to me makes me willing to forgo some rest.

Nights are rough, but the daytime hours also become full of maintenance jobs. How can one little person generate so much laundry? How is it possible for one little body to make such a mess in such a short time? Sometimes my mind drifts back (if I have time to drift) to my single days at college. The apartment stayed neat for so long. A little vacuuming now and then, a little dusting. How can the presence of a very small being create so much work?

And what about all the other challenges of raising children? I made a brief list of things I worry about: car seats, library cards, child molesters, schools, teachers, friends, plants with strange red berries, saving money, swallowing pennies, rap music, and potty training. And then there are things I've learned to dislike: toy commercials, cereal commercials, people who ignore children, people who ignore me when I have my children with me, rap music, and potty training.

And let me just mention here that I miss being able to concentrate on what I'm doing without being interrupted. I miss using the bathroom without being interrupted. I really miss browsing. I haven't browsed in years.

As they get older, the demands simply change. Just when I get used to one kind of behavior, a whole new set of challenges and questions comes up. They're called "phases." One of the most recent had to do with the birds and the bees. When I was expecting my second daughter, my three-year-old learned all about where the baby grows and how it is born.

But about four years later when we were going over the familiar part of how the baby grows in the mama's tummy, my now seven-year-old asked that dreaded question, "But how does the baby get in the mama's tummy?"

As I do with most challenges in my life, I bought a book on the subject. I was surprised and, I must admit, somewhat embarrassed by the abundance and explicitness of the books. Finally, I found one that met the criterion of being factual without being either too cute or too specific. I also talked to one of my daughter's teachers who has three teenage daughters herself. After commiserating with me and giving me some helpful advice, she said, "Wait until she asks, as my daughter did recently, what an orgasm is." I can't wait.

Life with children is not all challenge and hardship. At night, when they're asleep, I am drawn into their room to be near them a little longer. In Korea little children sleep with adults, parents or often grandparents. When we visited my in-laws there, my husband and I slept with the children in one room. It was very satisfying. When I would wake up in the night and have all my family near me, I felt contented. I realized this was a blessing I would not always have, and I was grateful.

Sometimes when I go into their room at night, a sweet spirit pervades. They hallow the room with their presence, and for a moment I feel the honor that it is to have them in my home, their goodness and innocence blessing my life. What can I do to deserve this honor? How can I live up to the responsibility of this gift?

Since motherhood, life consists of such dichotomous longings. Sometimes I ache to be out and away, to escape the responsibilities that come with children. Sometimes I wish for more time to myself, for privacy, quiet, and order. But then I hold my lap-sized little one. My arms just fit her small roundness. My chin rests on her head. The sweet baby smell of her hair wafts up to me. And my contentment is infinitely deep.