

Baby at My Breast

REFLECTIONS OF
A NURSING MOTHER



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*I have soothed and quieted my soul,
like a child at its mother's breast.
My soul is as peaceful as a child
sleeping in its mother's arms.*

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From Psalm 131, translated by Stephen Mitchell in
The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry,
edited by Stephen Mitchell

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Preface

WELCOME, READER, to this book about nursing, in which I recount the days I nursed my daughter, Lucie—for four years. Who would have guessed it would go on that long? Not I, not at the beginning, when I had no idea breastfeeding into the pre-school years was even possible. But one day leads to another, and if there are no outside pressures to limit you, (and sometimes even when there are) you may find yourself asking, as I did, “Why not?”

Or to put it more exactly, at least in my case, “What *for*?”

There were good reasons why I nursed, and it seems to me only one of them was for food. All the others were immaterial—in other words, they had to do with things I couldn’t touch or see. They had to do with trust, security, comfort, affection, commitment, dependence and independence. They had to do with everything we might think of when we talk about love.

I was in the very midst of nursing when I became engrossed in this writing project. On the one hand, it was fascinating to experience my daughter coming into relationship to this mysterious, biological act—fascinating to document her day-by-day activity, and to reflect on the effects it had on her well-being. On the other hand, it was also about *my* day-to-day experience, about bringing this child to *my* breast, over and over again. It was about the exhilaration, the peace, the joy—about the satisfaction and often intense pleasure I experienced. And it was about how those states

always and ultimately transcended the questioning, the frustration, the fatigue and drama and pain.

As I look back on it, every day was about pitting expectations against realities, sorting through dogmas, finding a line of clarity beyond reasoning by letting myself be guided, ultimately, by someone just newly this side of the threshold of life. It was exhilarating to discover how considering choices for *her* moved things inside *me*, caused me to self-reflect, to self-examine, to feel, spiritually, a changing and deepening in my character, to find that letting myself be guided in this way led to the profoundest sense of peace. I soon realized I was keeping a record of self-awakening, alongside the record of my daughter's journey. I was charting a course of maturing and finding myself as a woman through this intimate connection to another human being.

The focus of this story is all on nursing—that is the particular lens I chose for relating my experience of mothering. It is told episodically, progressing from my initiation—a naïve beginner, product of a middle-class Long Island culture that did not embrace nursing and the crisis of self-questioning that accompanied it—through the shifting in my consciousness and practice as it evolved in the progressive, nursing-friendly Western Massachusetts community where we have lived since Lucie's birth. It moves finally toward a growing perspective on all the conflicting thoughts and feelings that arose in me in my attempts to see clearly and act “rightly,” above all.

A lot of time has passed as I have prepared this book to go to press, and I have left intact references to cultural realities of my time as a breastfeeding mom in the 1990s because, simply, the “issues” and benefits for breastfeeding moms are timeless, and this is just my slice of the ongoing story. I hope this book will be read by those who have nursed before me and after, and, most importantly, perhaps, by those who are considering whether to nurse, now, or in the future, to whom I want to lend my whole-hearted

encouragement and support. I am at enough distance from my nursing days to say, with unequivocal enthusiasm, that the period that I nursed Lucie proved to be both a foundation for a healthy, wholesome life for her and one of the most satisfying opportunities in my lifetime so far for personal growth.

Prologue: February, 1997

IT'S SEVEN A.M. on a weekday morning in our little rented duplex apartment in Florence, Massachusetts. The door to my office, the second bedroom that isn't her bedroom—that perhaps, someday, will be her bedroom—opens. All one and a half feet of her staggers in.

“Good morning!” I sing. “You woke up! Did you come to find Mommy?”

No answer. She rubs her eyes, stumbles a little closer to my outstretched arms, reaches.

When I lift her up, she burrows her head in my shoulder and hair, against my ear. I relish her snuggled against me like this, though I know she will last but a few moments. Before the thought is even out, she is fidgeting, scooting, working her way down across my lap.

Then she is still, nose pressed against my buttoned-up bathrobe, warm breath penetrating two layers of flannel. I want just to hold her a moment, if she will bear it, to watch her face, the movements it makes, fighting its way back to sleep. I want to feel her and cradle her, without having her suck.

I know she's waiting, and a moment of holding satisfies me.

“Would you like to nurse?” I say.

A flash of smile through all her thick sleepiness.

I unbutton my bathrobe to the already-wide-opened front of my pajama. She roots, latches on, touches her fingers to her hair.

I'm sitting in a swivel chair, my back to the desk where the

computer perches in front of the window. Opposite me is an antique oak dresser topped with a thick diaper-changing pad. It's the only reminder of when we once prematurely furnished this room to be hers. In the mirror above the dresser I see us: her in my lap, me bracing her with my arm. Half of my opened pajama hangs limp, covering her face and my bared breast. I move it aside.

Now I see her sucking. My breast looks beautiful in her mouth.

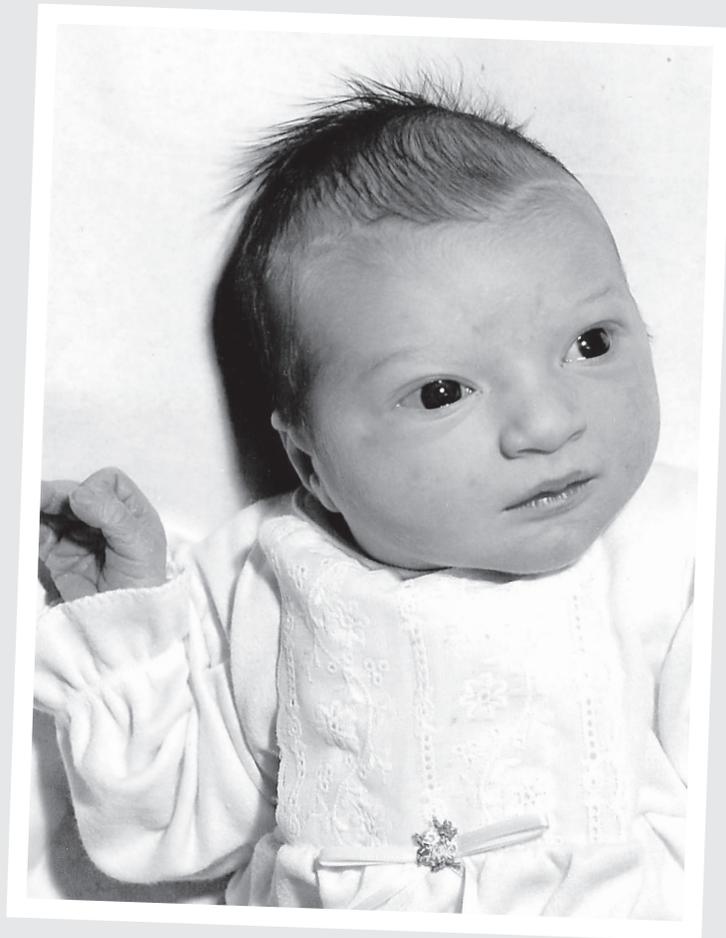
We have lived in this apartment since a couple of months before her birth, and moved here just after a three-year relocation from New York City to Ames, Iowa, where I worked through my Masters degree in English. Before she came in, I was trying to turn notes from my pregnancy into a book about becoming a mother at forty. I was working on a passage about anticipating that motherhood, trying to write about my pregnancy as if she weren't here, trying to get back to my feelings before I had the experience of her. In the mirror I see the computer on the desk behind my shoulder. The words on the screen are all backwards.

I daydream for a few minutes. It has been a couple of years since I was an older graduate student in a small department on a huge land-grant state campus. It has been twenty-five years since I lived in my parents' house on Long Island, New York, before going off to college. I was the oldest of six children in that household, and not one of my siblings was breastfed. My aunts and neighbors did not breastfeed. I didn't know anyone who did. And yet, I always knew I would, even before I turned out to be an "older mom." In Manhattan, where my husband, Roger, and I lived for fifteen years before uprooting for Iowa, the subject or example of breastfeeding never came up in my circle of mostly singles and childless couples. But when we settled in Western Mass, having explored a number of New England college towns, gypsy-style, spending nights in a tent, my seven-months-along belly lolling back and forth on my air mattress, we found ourselves in another milieu— where breastfeeding seemed a way of life. All

at once I was not a potential pioneer, but a naïf, completely uninitiated in the world of moms who did not bind their breasts at childbirth, but lactated freely until their children were. . .

I look at the little person in my lap. I have learned a lot since she was born—about breastfeeding, and about being a mother. Right now I don't know when this breastfeeding adventure will end. But I know that so far, in ways I could never have imagined, this long-anticipated initiation into breastfeeding has brought me closer to my child, and to myself.

OUT OF THE COSMOS



One, Two: December 5th and 6th, 1995

THE HOSPITAL ROOM IS DIM—only indirect lights and a small table lamp from home glow, giving the room an amber cast—womb-like, grotto-like, even like the inside of a barn illumined by an oil lamp. My long labor has been a quiet, personal affair. Soft music plays in the background on our tape recorder. Nurses and the midwife come and go, appearing like apparitions and dissolving into the brightness beyond my closed door. Quietly, they offer me ice chips, rub my lower back as I sit, curved, over a huge green polyethylene ball, head buried in my crossed arms on my bed. They whisper reminders to breathe, I'm doing well. Roger sits nearby in an armchair, quietly, helplessly supportive.

I am alone. This, above all, is my experience. It is the overarching, clear, poignant fact of my present existence, even more palpable than the pain, these unrelenting waves of impossibly deep cramping. Successions of pelvis-strangling pressure with no release, my contractions have run one into the other; I hardly know whether there is a pause between them. I know only that there is no one to deliver me from this torment. I must endure it. And I have no idea how long it must go on. There is no one who can get into my skin with me. I am alone.

But, of course, there *is* someone in my skin with me, someone who is enduring this trial as much as I; but somehow my consciousness cannot connect this experience to her. It is difficult for me to remember that a baby is the source of this pain. That she is

trying to emerge. That she is coming to life through my body, through this narrow, creaking, vise-like exit from my body.

And her trial is a long one. My eventual pushing does not release her.

I push till my blood vessels will burst, but she does not budge. She lodges, heartbeat slowing, in my narrow pelvis, crown tantalizingly visible to the midwife, but unbudging. It takes an episiotomy and several more gargantuan pushes to send her spewing whole and healthy into the world.

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Something in the birth experience teaches that a mother's body does not readily separate from its child, and vice versa. I think about the soul life of the child, whenever and wherever that begins, hers to develop and be governed by all her life. Her aloneness. But what of this physical life that has just appeared, that carries the soul life about in the world and helps or hinders it to grow? It will take eighteen years before this mature person—body and soul—can be set out on the road on her own. The question is, how do we get from what is inextricable to what is independent? The experience of childbirth gives a clue: it doesn't happen so easily, or so fast. It's a long process, that, it turns out for me, must be slowly, ever-so gradually embraced.

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The umbilical cord is cut and my daughter is whisked off to a table for her clogged breathing passages to be cleared. It takes many minutes, during which time I am filled with the dread of anticlimax. Something is missing here. "Give me that baby!" I yell into a dim corner of the room. And finally, she is placed in my arms. I feel her heft, her substance, outside me for the first time. I manage to babble to her, small talk. She has come through me and is here, with wide-open eyes, looking at me intently. My inner mind is

speechless, filled only with awe.

And suddenly my experience is not of aloneness, but of twoness. In one single moment of release, I have forgotten all that I endured before. The shroud has been lifted from that event, and here, revealed, is the truth of my experience. She has been part of me. And she has been herself, as well.

And what will become clearer and clearer to me in the ensuing days it that she is still both, even though the umbilical cord has been cut.

I glance down at the ridiculous, impractical, hospital gown I'm wearing, which opens only to the back. Why did the midwife insist that I wear it? Why aren't I naked? At the very least, where's my own button-up-the-front flannel nightshirt? I wriggle one arm out of the hospital gown. I want to see if my baby will nurse.