

and profound sociocultural legacy represented by the transformation of women's blood to milk to *life*.

References

- Antonelli, J. (1994). Feminist spirituality: The politics of the psyche. In C. Spretnak (Ed), *The politics of women's spirituality* (p. 420) Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Baumslag, N., & Michels, D. (1995). *Milk, money, and madness: The culture and politics of breastfeeding*. Washington, DC, Bergin & Garvey Trade.
- Spretnak, C. (1988). *The womanspirit sourcebook*. New York: Harpercollins.
- Steingraber, S. (2003). *Having faith: An ecologist's journey to motherhood*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group.
- Stuebe, A. (2010). What does feminism have to do with breastfeeding. *Breastfeeding Medicine*, <http://bfmed.wordpress.com/2010/06/12/what-does-feminism-have-to-do-with-breastfeeding/> Retrieved on March 1, 2012.
- Wolf, N. (2003). *Misconceptions: Truth, lies, and the unexpected on the journal to motherhood*. New York: Anchor Books.

For some more information about breastfeeding as an ecological issue, see this article: Nursing the World Back to Health, <http://www.lli.org/nb/nbmajun95p68.html>

Breastfeeding as a Spiritual Practice

Every single human being was drummed into this world by a woman, having listened to the heart rhythms of their mother.

—Connie Sauer

When I became a mother, many things in my life changed. I was startled and dismayed by the magnitude in which my free time diminished and one by one many of my leisure pursuits and hobbies were discarded. The time for one of my favorite hobbies



increased exponentially, however: reading. As a child I was a voracious reader—my mother had to set a limit for me of “only two books a day.” In college and graduate school, reading for fun fell away and I spent six years reading primarily textbooks and journal articles. In the years following, I began to read for pleasure again and when my first baby was born in 2003, I once again became a truly avid reader. Why? Because of breastfeeding. As I nursed my little son, I read and read and read. This became the rhythm of our lives: suck, swallow, read, and consider.

At first I scoured *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* and the Sears' *The Baby Book* to try to make sense of my new life and then began to gobble up books about motherhood and women's experiences of mothering. Reading did actually help me adjust to motherhood. Subtitled “Breastfeeding as a Spiritual Practice,” an article published in the fall 2003 issue of

Remer, M. (2012). Breastfeeding as a spiritual practice. *Restoration Earth: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Nature & Civilization*, 1(2), 39–43. Copyright © The Authors. All rights reserved. For reprint information contact: oceanseminary@verizon.net.

Mothering magazine was immensely meaningful to me. My baby was about two weeks old when the magazine arrived—the first issue I had received after his birth. This article was in it and it was exactly what I needed to read. Breastfeeding can be a meditative and spiritual act—it is actually a “practice” a “discipline” of sorts. The author, Leslie Davis, explains it better:

I realized I'd never before devoted myself to something so entirely. Of course I've devoted myself to my husband, to my family, to friends, to my writing, to mothering, and even to God and other spiritual endeavors at various points in my life...I'd completely given myself to this act of nursing in a way that I never had before. Nothing was more important than nursing my son. Nothing was put before it. There was no procrastination as with exercise, no excuses as with trying to stop eating sugar, no laziness as with housecleaning and other chores. Nursing had to be done, and I did it, over and over again, multiple times a day, for more than 800 days in a row. It was the closest thing to a spiritual practice that I'd ever experienced.

With my first baby, viewing the act of breastfeeding through a spiritual lens like this was a lifeline to me as a vulnerable, sensitive, and bruised postpartum woman trying desperately to adjust my pace as an overachieving “successful” independent person to one spending hours in my nursing chair attached to a tiny mouth. I marvel at the uncountable number of times I spent nursing my first son and then my second son and now my daughter. The intensity and totality of the breastfeeding relationship is extremely profound—it requires a more complete physical/body investment with someone than you will ever have with anyone else in your life, including sexual relationships. While I don't like to lump the breastfeeding relationship in the same category with sex, because it feels like I'm saying breastfeeding is sexual, when it isn't...though, since lactation is definitely part of a woman's reproductive functions, I guess maybe it is...my basic line of thought was that if you nurse a couple of kids through toddlerhood, odds are high that you will have nursed them many more times than you will end up hav-

ing sex with a partner in your entire *lifetime*.

I calculated that so far in my life I've put a baby to my breast more than 12,000 times. Even if I only experienced a *single moment* of mindful awareness or contemplation or transcendence or sacredness during each of those occasions, that is one heck of a potent, dedicated, and holy practice. In the unique symbiosis of the nursing relationship, I recall a quote from the book *The Blue Jay's Dance* (1996) by Louise Erdrich about male writers from the nineteenth century and their longing for an experience of oneness and seeking the mystery of an epiphany. She says: “*Perhaps we owe some of our most moving literature to men who didn't understand that they wanted to be women nursing babies.*” (p. 148)

I have learned a lot about the fundamental truth of relatedness through my own experiences as a mother. Relationship is our first and deepest urge. The infant's first instinct is to connect with others. Before an infant can verbalize or mobilize, she reaches out a hand to her mother. I have seen this with my own babies. Mothering is a profoundly physical experience. The mother's body is the baby's “habitat” in pregnancy and for many months following birth. Through the mother's body the baby learns to interpret and to relate to the rest of the world and it is to mother's body that she returns for safety, nurturance, and peace. Birth and breastfeeding exist on a continuum as well, with mother's chest becoming baby's new “home” after having lived in her womb for nine months. These thoroughly embodied experiences of the act of *giving life* and in creating someone else's life and relationship to the world are profoundly meaningful.

How many generations of women have pushed out their babies and fed them at the breast without knowing the exact mechanics of reproduction, let alone milk production. There are all kinds of historical myths and “rules” about breastmilk and breastfeeding and even ten years ago we used to think the inner structure of the breast was completely different than what we think it is like now. Guess what? Our breasts still made milk and we still fed our babies, whether or not we knew exactly how the milk was being produced and delivered. Body knowledge, in this case, definitely still trumped scientific knowledge. I love that feeling when I snuggle down to nurse my own baby—my body is producing milk for her re-



ardless of my conscious knowledge of the patterns or processes. And, guess what, humans cannot improve upon it. The body continues to do what the human mind and hand cannot replicate in a lab. And, has done so for millennia. I couldn't make this milk myself using my brain and hands and yet day in and day out I *do* make it for her, using the literal blood and breath of my body, approximately 32 ounces of milk every single day for the last fourteen months. That is beautiful.

A simple meditation technique to use while breastfeeding is: "*breathing in, I am nursing my baby. Breathing out, I am at peace.*"

Parenting as a Spiritual Practice

The spirituality of daily life with children is not only to be found in the breastfeeding relationship, but is woven into the warp and weft of the daily tasks of parenting with mindfulness, connection,

and love. In this simple little verse from Eileen Rosensteel *in the 2011 We'Moon Datebook*, she describes it thusly:

*My prayers are
The food I cook
The children I hug
The art I create
The words I write*

I need no religion. (p. 152)

In the book *Tying Rocks to Clouds (1996)* the author interviews Stephen Levine, the father of three children and in response to a question about whether serious spiritual development is possible when having relationships with others (spouse, children, etc.) he says: "Talk about a fierce teaching. It is easier to sit for three years in a cave than to raise a child from the time he is born to three years old." (p 160)

In the book, *The Tao of Motherhood (2011)* (literally the Tao Te Ching for mothers—a translation of the ancient *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-Tzu, but reworked slightly so that every "chapter" is about mothering and mothering well) a quote from the end of the chapter on selflessness:

*"You can sit and meditate while
your baby cries himself to sleep.*

*Or you can go to him and share
his tears, and find your Self."*

And, then from Peggy O'Mara's (1993) collection of essays, *The Way Back Home*, she raises this question: "Why is it that to rise gladly at 4:00 am to meditate and meet one's God is considered a religious experience, and yet to rise at 4:00 am to serve the needs of one's helpless child is considered the ultimate in deprivation?" (p. 19) O'Mara continues by explaining,

One can learn sitting meditation by rocking and nursing a little one to sleep; one can learn reclining meditation by staying still to avoid disturbing a little one who has been awake for hours; and one can learn walking meditation by walking and swaying with a little one who would like to be asleep for hours. One *must* learn to breathe deeply in a relaxed and meditative manner in order to still the mind that doubts one's strength to go on, that sees every speck of dust on the floor and wants to clean it,



and that tempts one to be up and about the busyness of accomplishment... (p. 19)

I do find that I have a tendency to think about my own spiritual practices as something that has to wait until I am alone, until I have “down time,” until I have space alone in my head in which to think and to be still. On the flip side, as I noted earlier, the act of breastfeeding, day in and day out, provides all manner of time for spiritual contemplation and meditative reflection. I often find it difficult to stay centered and grounded in mindfulness of breath and spirit during the swirl of life with little ones. I’ve done a lot of reading about “Zen parenting” type topics and it seems like it would be so simple to integrate mothering with mindfulness. Then, I find myself frazzled and scattered and self-berating, and wonder what the heck

happened to my Zen. Then, I read an interesting article about anger and Zen Buddhism that clarified that meditation and Zen practices are *not about being serene and unfrazzled*, but about being present and able to sit with it all. And, it offered this helpful reminder:

I used to imagine that spiritual work was undertaken alone in a cave somewhere with prayer beads and a leather-bound religious tome. Nowadays, that sounds to me more like a vacation from spiritual work. Group monastic living has taught me that the people in your life don’t get in the way of your spiritual practice; these people *are* your spiritual practice. (Haubner, 2012, “The Angry Monk”)

I don’t need to wait to be alone in order to be “spiritual” in this life with my babies. This sometimes messy, sometimes chaotic, sometimes serene, some-

times frazzling, often joyful life *is it*.

Motherhood is an intensely *embodied* experience. It is profoundly empowering to know that you can build a whole person and sustain their lives with nothing but the materials of your own body—this is my blood, my milk, *made flesh*.

References

- Davis, L. (2003). Breathing in: I am nursing my baby. *Mothering*, Issue 120, September/October 2003 (pages unknown—electronic version available here: <http://mothering.com/breastfeeding/breathing-i-am-nursing-my-baby-breastfeeding-spiritual-practice>)
- Erdrich, L. (1996). *The Blue Jay's Dance*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial
- Haubner, S. J. (September/October, 2012). The angry monk. *Utne*. Retrieved from <http://www.utne.com/Mind-Body/Angry-Monk-Buddhism-Zen-Spiritual-Practice.aspx?page=5> on March 1, 2012.
- Elliott, W. (1996). *Tying rocks to clouds*. New York: Doubleday.
- McClure, V., & Thoele, S. P. (2011). *The Tao of motherhood*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- O'Mara, P. (1993). *The way back home*. Santa Fe, NM: Mothering Magazine
- Rosensteel, E. (2011). Untitled. In *We'Moon datebook* (p. 152). Wolfcreek, OR: Mother Tongue Ink & We'Moon Company.

All photographs are of the author and taken by photographer Karen Orozco; photograph of author, baby, and son taken by Hope Nilges.



MOLLY REMER, MSW, ICCE, CCCE, is a certified birth educator, writer, and activist who lives with her husband and children in central Missouri. She is the editor of the *Friends of Missouri Midwives* newsletter, a breastfeeding counselor, a professor of human services, and doctoral student in women's spirituality at Ocean Seminary College. She blogs about birth, motherhood, and women's issues at <http://talkbirth.me/posts>.

How to meditate with a baby...

Lie down in a comfortable place.
Latch baby on.
Feel your bodies relax and become
Suffused with peace.
Rest your nose in his hair.
Inhale.

—© 2008 by Molly Remer



“Water Lily” © 2012, photograph by Raymonde Savoie, all rights reserved.; see bio on p. 33.