Story Time: Not Just for Children Anymore

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ABSTRACT

Sharing breastfeeding stories has enormous value for both teller and listener. In a culture that often misunderstands and devalues breastfeeding and the nursing relationship, stories reduce women's anxiety and insecurity, validate their experiences, reveal the social and cultural roots of these experiences, and illuminate why breastfeeding matters so much to women.

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When I was 6 weeks pregnant for the first time, I was sitting in a coffee house when a couple entered with a baby just a few weeks old. I stared. A green-horn to the world of pregnancy, childbirth, and babies, I was full of questions and somehow struck up a conversation with the mother. Ten years later, I don't remember this woman's name, but I do remember learning all about her cervix.

Such was the beginning of my quest for stories. In my efforts to learn everything I could about pregnancy, labor, and childbirth, I found women's first-hand accounts the most compelling. I devoured them. Reading and listening to women's birth stories helped me to anticipate and prepare for the birth of my own child and were every bit as helpful as learning about the technical and mechanical details of birthing.

It was the same way with breastfeeding. During my pregnancy, though, I hadn't given it much thought. What was there to know? I would put my baby to my breast and, voilà, she would nurse. So when my daughter refused to latch on to my breast for almost six grueling weeks and screamed

whenever facing my nipple head-on, I was caught completely off guard. Nobody had told me anything about infant dehydration, finger-feeding, supplementing with formula, struggling with nipple shields, and pumping around the clock with a breast pump. Stories, where were the stories?

Since those difficult days 10 years ago, I have heard hundreds of them. And my appreciation has deepened enough to know that medical expertise and how-to advice are not substitutes for what we can learn by listening to women's voices. As Jennifer, a new mother said, "My friends hadn't told me their nursing troubles because they said if I knew how hard it could be sometimes, I'd never have tried. Yet more stories would have kept me from feeling so alone in my journey."

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Barbara Behrmann maintains a Web site (www.breastfeedingcafe.com) that describes her efforts to share women's stories of breastfeeding and the challenges of motherhood.

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In an era of instant messaging and cellular communication, we often end up with “McTalk”, conversation that ultimately leaves us unsatisfied. We crave meaningful exchange and heartfelt stories. One need look no further than *Chicken Soup for the* (fill-in-the-blank) *Soul* to realize this.

Some kinds of stories, of course, are easy to find. The *Reader's Digest* feature, “Drama in Real Life,” for example, which pays tribute to shipwreck survivors or rescuers who save people from burning buildings or mountain tops, demands attention because the situations are rare. Thrilling. Larger than life.

But other kinds of stories are less showy—those involving the daily, under-the-radar-screen events that comprise the warp and weft of our lives. Mothers' stories. Of course, some mothers' stories do involve drama. I think of birth stories, for example, as the female version of men's war stories—at least, as they are often told in U.S. culture. War stories involve flesh and blood, “in-the-trenches” accounts of triumph (*birth*) over adversity (*labor*). But other stories tend to remain unheard. Like breastfeeding stories.

In the U.S., where only 36% of women are nursing at six months and only 14% do so exclusively (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003), nursing mothers often feel alone, invisible, and unheard. They get the message that their experience, their “story,” doesn't matter. But enormous value exists in breastfeeding stories, both for the teller and the listener.

STORIES REDUCE ANXIETY, INSECURITY, AND LONELINESS

Even though about 70% of U.S. women start out giving breastfeeding a try, many give birth never having seen it done. Not having a basic understanding of what to expect creates insecurity and anxiety. It may even help explain why American women have the highest postpartum depression rate in the Western world.

As Jane Swiggart (1991) asserts in *The Myth of the Bad Mother*, we focus so much on the needs

of the child that we often neglect the needs of the mother. Consequently, women are often desperate for connection and emotional support. This is one reason why breastfeeding support groups, (e.g., La Leche League) are so important. And a big part of what goes on there is the sharing of stories. Hearing about other women's experiences and telling our own helps us maintain close, intimate relationships with children in a culture that makes this difficult. I remember, for example, finding cookie crumbs in my bra and the conversations my toddler used to have with my breasts. The left one was her “sweet-heart” and the right one was her “darling.” It was wonderful to share these kinds of anecdotes with women who didn't judge me or call me crazy.

Other times, stories simply help women to maintain perspective in a culture that devalues and misunderstands breastfeeding. “There are a lot of pressures to get us to stop nursing,” said a mother in Colorado. “It's just not the norm.”

Whether they are tales of despair or delight, stories are fundamental in helping women “transcend the isolation that separates us from each other and from ourselves” (Ornish, 1996, p. xvii).

STORIES VALIDATE WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

In *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood*, Sandra Steingraber writes eloquently about the nursing relationship she shared with her daughter. “Being in a breastfeeding relationship with another human being,” she writes, “is not an officially recognized association in the same way that, say, being married, incorporated, employed—or even pregnant—is. The idea that there are women walking around in the world whose bodies are the sole sustenance for other living beings has not inspired new working, travel, urban planning, or business arrangements. . . .” (Steingraber, 2001, p. 244).

Not only does society often fail to accommodate nursing mothers, but breastfeeding simply remains invisible. This deprives women of the opportunity to see their experience mirrored back. Walk into most shopping malls, for example, and bottle-feeding mothers abound. Breastfeeding mothers, though, are often in the corner with blankets slung over their shoulders or babies hidden in slings. And the more successful they are at masking their activity, the more approval they earn (Stearns, 1999).

Even women who don't start out hiding their nursing relationship eventually modify their behavior to reflect the cultural assumption that breastfeeding should not be *seen*. Past a certain age, it

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shouldn't even happen at all. "Even though I used to nurse my daughter everywhere, I guess I'm bowing to societal pressure," admits Cheli, a mother in Maryland. "Rather than having to deal with strangers saying, 'What are you doing nursing that big ol' kid?', I'm now selective in the situations in which I allow her to nurse. It's not as automatic as it used to be." Stories help increase breastfeeding's value and visibility and help nursing mothers emerge from the nursery.

STORIES EMPHASIZE THE SOUL, NOT THE SCIENCE

Much of what women hear about breastfeeding emphasizes the milk itself. But nursing doesn't simply nourish; it calms an upset child, comforts an injured one, and eases many into sleep. "Being a mother and breastfeeding are so incredibly integrated for me that I can't even imagine one without the other," says Nancy, a pharmacist in Colorado.

Stories reveal that breastfeeding is more than what women choose to feed their babies and unveil themes not typically heard in breastfeeding promotional literature.

Healing

"Nursing Taea was the one thing that remained constant during the chaos of not having a place to live, of moving from place to place, of having huge problems with my boyfriend. It was our comfort zone, the one thing we could rely on."

Intimacy

"My daughter knows we are planning to have a new baby some day soon. The other day, she bent over, kissed my nipple and said, 'I put enough love in here to last for the baby when it nurses.' Why is it that children instinctively know what nursing is all about? And how did society get so far removed from the simple idea of nurturing and love?"

Empowerment

"Breastfeeding has been the most empowering experience of my life. It was the first part of the reproductive process that had gone the way it was supposed to, and it has given me faith in the strength and capability of my body. I discovered how strong and capable I truly am."

Not only do stories enhance our understanding of why breastfeeding matters to *women*, but they can help break down barriers between breastfeeding and bottle-feeding mothers. Nursing mothers often

accuse bottle-feeding mothers of being selfish and uncaring. Formula-feeding mothers, in turn, accuse breastfeeding advocates of being strident and insensitive. As Staci, a breastfeeding-turned-bottle-feeding mother in Nebraska explains, "What many don't realize is that, when a woman fails after wanting so badly to succeed at breastfeeding, she is literally going through a phase of mourning."

"From women's stories," writes anthropologist Penny Van Esterik, "we learn that breastfeeding is about love, ecology, politics, power, women's knowledge, and the wisdom of the body. It is about the personal messages and memories that contribute to who we are as people and the way we relate to others" (Van Esterik, 1994, p. 73).

STORIES REVEAL CULTURAL PATTERNS AND COMMONALITIES

Stories help us understand the cultural roots of our experiences and the interpretations we give to them. When similar themes emerge in story after story, it becomes clear that, despite the uniqueness of each woman's experience, underlying cultural patterns and commonalities are evident. This helps women understand that what they face are not simply *private* problems, but larger *social* issues.

How else do we discover, for example, that few women who have a planned home birth go on to have breastfeeding difficulties, while women who give birth in U.S. hospitals are plagued by them? How else do we account for the similarity in the struggles women face when so many have to return to work at 6 weeks postpartum? How else do we understand why so many women in the U.S. fail to trust the ability of their bodies to birth and nurture children and end up surprised at the impact breastfeeding has on their self-esteem? And what better way to understand that many of the challenges American women face are not significant problems elsewhere in the world?

THE POWER OF STORIES

I recently gave a talk to a group of nutrition educators where I shared the story of a television broadcaster who was nursing a 3-year-old. Her experience centered around the intimacy between her and her son and how breastfeeding was central to their

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W Among the many Internet sites offering nursing mothers support, community, and an opportunity to read and share breastfeeding stories, two good places to start are: *MOBI—Mothers Overcoming Breastfeeding Issues* (www.internetbabies.com/mobi/), a site for women experiencing nursing challenges, and *The Militant Breastfeeding Cult* (www.MilitantBreastfeedingCult.com/), a great source for support, advocacy, and a wealth of stories.

From the collection of mother-baby art at Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

relationship. “I know nursing won’t last forever,” I read, quoting her statement. “In a couple of years, he’s not going to want to be held, cuddled, and kissed all the time. So even though it would be nice if he would sleep through the night in his own bed, I don’t actively say that I have to stop next month, that this has to end. And just like I think he’ll potty train and give up naps when he’s ready, he’ll sleep alone and stop nursing when he’s ready.”

After my talk, a woman approached me. “I want to thank you on behalf of my 21-month-old daughter,” she said. “This was just what I needed to hear.” Her extended family was pressuring her to wean and, because the previous night had been her first night apart from her daughter, she reluctantly resigned herself to follow their advice. “But after hearing your stories,” she said defiantly, “I’m going to keep on nursing!” I was struck by the gratitude in her voice, the relief that she could, in fact, follow her heart.

Such is the power of storytelling. And such is the need for women to talk about breastfeeding with each other. In a society in which pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing are subject to increasingly sophisticated technology and advice from medical authorities, women have the power to be each others’ greatest allies. We just have to start talking. And listening. There is power in storytelling, and every woman has a story that deserves to be shared.

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