

Introduction: That Whole Motherhood Thing

By Cori Howard

A million years ago, I was sitting in a bar with an old friend discussing my future. I was pregnant, thirty-years-old and totally freaking out. As I sat there nursing a cranberry juice, she asked if I always knew I wanted kids. She wasn't remotely interested in having any and is still, at 35, voted by our friends least likely to succumb to motherhood. Yet her question threw me. I'd never really thought about it. Motherhood, for me, was always an assumption, a given.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted babies and bottles and that whole motherhood thing. Never mind that "the whole motherhood thing" came with no visual image attached. It was like a grey polaroid—overexposed and murky. I wanted babies like I wanted a new sweater—something to hug and snuggle and keep me warm. The desire was deep, passionate and desperately naïve.

When I had my first child on May 3, 2001, I was still desperately naïve. I really believed my life was not going to be any different. I'm not sure why it was so important that my life remain the same. I'm not sure why I was so resistant to the whole motherhood thing, when that was what I wanted. I expected I would give birth, figure out how to feed, clothe and bathe the baby, give it a few hugs and get back to work. I'm not kidding.

Funnier still, my work, at the time, involved a lot of travel. One day, I would be on a plane to Los Angeles to cover the Academy Awards and the next day, I was heading to the Nevada desert to write about the Burning Man festival. Looking back on it now, it seems more than a little odd that I wouldn't have for one second thought it might be difficult to continue doing that with a tiny infant in tow. I also apparently had no idea

dinners out would be a thing of the past, as would movies and going to the bar with friends. I didn't realize I would become a totally different person. For a journalist, my lack of research into the real mothering experience was appalling.

A few people tried to warn me. An editor at the National Post told me it would be hard for me to go right back to work, that I might not *want* to. The thought had never, not once, crossed my mind. People told me I would be tired, overwhelmed, disinterested in my husband and in sex. I laughed at them. In my Zen-ed out pregnant state, I let all their negative thoughts wash right over me. I believed with all my heart I would be different.

So when my son came along, I was as ill-prepared for the massive transition to motherhood as you can get. And I had absolutely no clue that I would become the kind of mother I am today. Today, I am the mother of two children—two and five. I sleep with them. I never go out at night. I go insane when I'm away from them at work and feel cheated of the time I miss with them. When I'm not working, I inhale them. Poor kids. I kiss them non-stop. I am insatiable. My friends think I'm insane. Clearly, I'm a little obsessed.

All I know is that I fell deeply in love with my children. I was radicalized by becoming a mother. This was my revolution. And I became one of those crazy moms I used to roll my eyes at—wearing their babies in slings, breastfeeding until toddlerhood, bringing their kids everywhere. Poof. There I was. Reincarnated as a Totally Different Person.

Of course, it wasn't really as sudden as poof. My transition to motherhood took a few months. In that time, those blissful first few summer months, I walked all over Vancouver with my baby in his stroller, breastfeeding on park benches or lying under big trees, marking my territory. Within weeks, I felt my ambition ebbing away. I was lulled and besotted with my new life: walking around the city, napping in the afternoon, sitting in cafés staring at my beautiful child. It was with some horror that I realized one day that I didn't want to go back to work. That was my first clue to the new person emerging inside me.

Then, when my son was 18 months, I left him. It was, not counting labour, my first real rite of passage into motherhood. A good friend was having a book launch in New York and my pre-baby self was dying to go. I told her I'd be there and booked my ticket. A few days before I was to go, I called to cancel the ticket. I was torn up inside. It was as though I was deciding on the fate of a nation, I was that consumed, that tormented.

I wanted to go but I didn't want to go. It was the war of my pre-baby self with my mother self and it was horrible. I called my friend to apologize and she convinced me to come anyway. So I called and rebooked another ticket and started to feel the same anxiety about leaving my baby creeping back. A few days later, the anxiety was killing me. I cancelled the ticket again. My friend was sympathetic, to a point. Okay, she said. Trust your instincts. If you don't think you can handle being away from him, stay home. Of course, I went anyway. It was a disaster.

I spent the whole weekend miserable and hormonal, crying and trying to relieve the pain of my swollen, leaking breasts in the shower. I had lost the battle being waged in my heart and I was sad. I was also mourning the loss of my old self and my old life. Perhaps, like so many people said later, I had to go through my New York disaster to know how strongly I felt about being with my son. At least the trip provided a good lesson: I had to trust myself, my new self. Before New York, I couldn't do that because I didn't know who I was. In my self-doubt, I let other people decide what I should do—not just about New York but later about co-sleeping, choosing a preschool, feeding my kids the right foods. Until I accepted and trusted the person I'd become, I was bullied and pressured by other people who felt they knew everything about motherhood.

In making the decision to go to New York, I encountered many people who felt I needed to get away. I needed “a break.” That was my favorite line. I never understood why I might need a break from my beautiful child. They said it was good for me. Like wheat germ. They said it would be good for him too. They said at 18 months, he needed to learn to be “independent.”

In retrospect, it was all so ridiculous. I don't know where people get these ideas. I don't know why people think they can tell other mothers what to do. It's such an individual thing, how you mother your children. That much will become quickly evident as you read the essays in this book. Mostly, we just do the best we can. And mostly, that's enough. But if I had been encouraged to "do what I felt was right" rather than doing "what I should do," maybe my identity crisis would have been a little easier. Or maybe it's just all part of the rite of passage.

I don't want to be too hard on myself. There's enough judging of mothers and mothering by friends, family and perfect strangers. I'll leave the criticism to them. I'm more interested in figuring out how this happened. How a woman like me, raised with more opportunities and choices than any previous generation of women, could be so unprepared for motherhood. Just like women in the 60s, mothers today are discovering that the ways we are brought up and the goals we set for ourselves are strangely, and often painfully, contradictory. Liberation, autonomy and equality are all good principles for women to aspire to, in theory. But they don't fit so well with mothering. How can you put yourself and your kids first at the same time? And then, where does your partner, assuming you have one, fit into the picture? You get the idea.

But it's not just women from the 60s who will find parallels in today's mothering experience. As any reading on the history of motherhood will reveal, cycles repeat themselves and mothers today are struggling with many of the same issues as mothers of previous generations. Perhaps the one mark of distinction for today's mothers is our widespread sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are: with our mother load (the career, the kids, the house, the husband), with gender roles, with society's expectations. It's hard to be satisfied when you are brought up to believe you will have a fabulous career, a fabulous family, a fabulous social life and a fabulous house. And when you suddenly find yourself with all those things, you realize it's not at all fabulous because having all those things means losing yourself; that motherhood has much more inherent

value and joy than we were ever taught to believe; that having a job and kids and an “equal” relationship or marriage is highly stressful, and not always possible.

Maybe I wanted to write this book to write myself out of madness. That is what it feels like every time I write something about motherhood—a big exhale. Except I didn’t want to do all the writing in this book myself. So much of what I’ve found interesting about the struggles of motherhood has been hearing other women’s stories, sharing their experiences. It can be vindicating, depressing, surprising or just plain relieving to know I’m not the only one having trouble, say, weaning my two-year-old or swearing in front of, and sometimes at, my kids. (Those are the printable confessions.)

I’ve had many life-altering moments in my five years of motherhood. But to give room to the other voices in this collection, I’ll tell you about just one more. My second epiphany as a mother happened in my car. My son was two and I had just dropped him off at daycare. I was starting a new job four days a week and I’d found this wonderful woman who ran a daycare out of her home with just a handful of other children. She was a Greek goddess with three grown boys, a huge house, a lovely garden and a firm but loving understanding of children. I knew I should feel comfortable and stress-free leaving my son in such a great place all day. But instead I felt sick, physically and emotionally sick. I would spend the first five minutes of my ride to work downtown crying and slamming my steering wheel in anger. Then I would have five minutes to transition from sobbing mess into professional journalist. I was like Clark Kent, only my car was my phone booth and my disguise always felt transparent and fraudulent. Then one day, driving away from the 120th tearful goodbye, I realized that this was just not the life I wanted. It was suddenly so clear.

I hadn’t thought through “the whole motherhood thing.” I hadn’t thought ahead to what would happen when my babies were toddlers and then in school and then teenagers. I hadn’t thought about how, or if, I could change my job to accommodate them. I hadn’t thought of anything, really, other than swaddling and snuggling them. So when I realized I didn’t want to have this corporate, mainstream life of working and daycare, I had to

think hard and fast of a way to end the commute and seal the open gap in my heart every time I left my son at the door.

So I had another child. It was an irrational response to the crisis, of course. But I'd wanted another child anyway and the sooner, the better. That's the saying, right? Well, that got me a year at home with my two children. And when I had to go back to work, (my job was now as a radio producer at the CBC) I went back three days a week. Now, my husband stays home on those days and works at starting up his own business the other days. It's not perfect. We are fairly financially stressed, to put it mildly. My relationship with my husband has had some serious ups and downs as we negotiate this new tag-team approach to parenting.

Just now, as my daughter turns two, I feel myself staggering slowly out of the haze of early motherhood. But I still crave the conversations I have with my mom friends, conversations about how we manage with the career, the house, the husband, the kids. Why do we want to have it all? Do we have to? What are the alternatives? Mostly, these conversations take place in the park, in the grocery store, at the community center, and sometimes, very rarely, at the bar.

I wish I'd been privvy to these conversations before I had kids, but they only happen between moms. And even if I'd had the chance to listen, I was too self-indulgent and arrogant to have heard what they were saying. That these conversations are still hidden behind the door of motherhood is a sure sign of our society's response to birth and motherhood: we don't really want to hear about it, we don't want to celebrate it, we just want mothers to do it quietly and leave the rest of us alone.

Until I was 31, my only hands-on experience with a baby was helping take care of my sister who was ten years younger than me, and while traveling in Guatemala, helping some women in a village take care of theirs. Here in Canada, unlike Guatemala or any number of Third World countries, we like to keep babies (and children) separate. We don't integrate them into the fabric of our lives. Strangers aren't likely to come up to you

on the street cooing and wanting to hold your baby and talk to you about your life. They might smile politely, or say something like: “Oh, what a cute baby. How old is he?” As if his age matters. After that, the conversation usually dies.

Into that conversational void with society at large has come conversation among mothers. It’s our modern-day ritual of celebration and connection. It is that conversation, a conversation constantly interrupted by kids, husbands and work that started this book. Since I’ve become a mom, I’ve been having the most intense, emotionally raw conversations of my life. They are the conversations I expected and never found at university. We talk about all the mundane day to day details, of course: diapers, poo, how to make macaroni and cheese. But we also talk about our jobs and how they work or don’t work to make a family life possible and sane. We talk about our marriages, our friends, our quest for community, for the village to help us raise our children, the meaning of life—ours and our children’s.

I wanted to bring women together in this book to continue this long, constantly interrupted conversation. I wanted to provide a space where mothers could talk about the huge transformation involved in becoming mothers. I wanted them to explore the difficulties they’ve had in the process of becoming mothers; the choices and decisions they’ve faced and how they’ve handled them; how they’ve managed the identity crisis, the career crisis, the relationship crisis.

This book is my ritual. My offering to mothers everywhere.