

Berneil Rupp Mueller

Rachel Epp Buller (ed.), *Have Milk, Will Travel: Adventures in Breastfeeding* (Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2013), pp. 147, ISBN: 1927335213, £ 9.70, paperback.

If only I had known about the La Leche League some fifty years ago when I did not successfully breastfeed two babies and didn't even try with a third. If only I had possessed such a book as *Have Milk, Will Travel*, maybe, just maybe, I would have been successful. If not, it wouldn't have been for the lack of ideas, encouragement, consolation, and the gift of laughter. *Have Milk, Will Travel* is a small book of 32 accounts (prose, a poem, and a cartoon) of the pleasures, the challenges and, the surprises of breastfeeding, plus insightful preface and forewords by the editor, Rachel Epp Buller, and two lactation consultants, Corky Harvey and Wendy Haldeman.

Humor pervades each account (even when the writer expresses regret about not being able to nurse her child) – humor that is raucous, or quiet, or “hip,” that is willing to let go of vulnerability. Here is humor that has sustained women through extraordinarily challenging circumstances. One writer describes it as “the elixir for all things” (p. 92). Along with that precious “liquid gold” reputed to increase IQ, promote immunity to disease, develop adventurous eaters, and create a healthy emotional bond, humor, too, can be nurturing.

The contributors to *Have Milk, Will Travel* have, or have had, careers outside the home. The balancing act of providing milk and being on the job provides some of the adventure narrative of the book, although a nursing mother at home might startle a visiting grandparent, or, with a child at the breast, surprise the UPS man at the door. Some of these mothers have not only answered the demands of a job but simultaneously the demands of breasts by transporting equipment for extracting milk, calculating the time and finding the places to pump milk, determining how to store it or get it through airport security. They have had to think about how and where to pump milk while on a radio programme, or producing a television show, or giving

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an interview. And try to explain to male colleagues the needs of the moment! And be able to laugh about it. Humor can be energizing.

Whether a mother is on the job or at home, breastfeeding is not always simple and natural. The writers tell of dealing with cracked and bleeding nipples, flat nipples, mastitis, the pain of engorged breasts (which cold cabbage leaves will apparently relieve!). They tell of the pain of a baby's latching on, of a baby's not being able to latch on, of slow feeders, of blocked ducts. Many have experienced profusely leaking breasts while in public and in inescapable situations. The various strategies many of these writers have used to attempt to be successful are worthy of public awards.

Humor can help to assuage the discomforts of embarrassment. A nursing mother needs ingenuity and a healthy sense of the absurd when wishing to camouflage, in public, the spilled milk on a dress, the milk that has been so carefully pumped; or when the breast becomes a geyser and shoots milk across the room of a crowded restaurant; or when a young son decides to try the "milk station" of a stranger sunbathing and asleep on a topless beach; or when a nursing mother forgets to cover her breast while suddenly meeting an admired celebrity in a park. And then there's the irony of being told one can't nurse in a museum, in the presence of portraits of nudes!

Nearly all the writers are from the United States, with most from California. Canada is also represented. Perhaps sequels to this book might feature women from South America, Europe, and the non-Western world. One writer nursing a baby in the rain in a Central American jungle realizes that "this is how it is to be a mom for much of the world . . . Part of the natural world, not separate from it" p. 50). I envision books with accounts in the writers' original languages beside English translations. While *Have Milk, Will Travel* does focus on the specific topic of breastfeeding, embedded in and emanating from its lively and humor-infused accounts are larger, pervasive issues for women.

No room for privacy

In the routine of nourishing a small being, some of the authors reflect on their bodies not belonging to them, on having no respite from the demands of a hungry baby, on a longing for privacy. Added to the physical needs of the nursing infant are often the expectations and needs

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of other family members. There may be other children with their demands. A father/partner continues to want companionship, comfort, empathy. And sexual involvement.

A woman's body could be viewed physically as a "central transportation center," with the vagina as a major artery – menstrual flow, sperm traveling in, baby traveling out, for instance. The transportation system provides a dining area, a "one-stop milk shop" (p. xii), or a "gas station" with incessant pumping of the "fuel." A woman's mind is invaded as the system must also provide the necessary dispensation of "travel" information and direction for both herself and those around her. The "speaker system" must be operable at all times.

Who has ownership of this system? Who has ownership of the "milk shop," for instance? Several of the writers recall negotiating this issue as their infants grew. Is the shop open at all hours and no matter where the mother is? In "Breast Is Best" (pp. 27-30), Mosa Maxwell-Smith tells of her baby girl's love for her mother's breasts, sometimes exposing them in public to make certain the nipples "got more daylight"! A mother might have to confront issues of eroticism with a son as Jessica Claire Haney relates (pp. 46-48). How are boundaries to be explained to a young child? Navigating these issues leads to the question of age limits for the "milk shop." How long should one nurse a baby? Answers vary.

How is a mother to negotiate the tension between wanting to share her body, and wanting her body back? How does she announce that the transportation system and the dining area are closed for necessary repairs and maintenance? How does she achieve this without feelings of guilt? Must this be primarily a physical act of separation in the need to find one's own authentic center, to renew one's body, mind, and spirit? Not always, apparently. One writer found her escape while nursing her child, refusing to be interrupted and enjoying an "autumn afternoon glow" (p. 116).

When bodies fail expectations

Several accounts in *Have Milk, Will Travel* tell poignantly of the failure to breastfeed and of the difficulty in accepting this. How could the "ultimate way" to nurture a child, the "natural" way, fail? Expectations are that the body should operate according to its maternal functions. If it doesn't, perhaps the mother is not trying hard enough, perhaps is not sufficiently informed, or is

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lacking in inventiveness. If no attempts seem to work, how then is one to deal with failure, with guilt, with anger? How could the body be such a traitor?

While involved in arduous attempts to succeed, it's difficult and painful to release oneself from the effort, to free oneself from binding determination. In one account of unrelenting persistence, the milk supply was insufficient and the baby was sucking blood from the mother's breast (pp. 22-26). This writer expresses succinctly dealing with the burden of perceived failure: "We put far too much pressure on ourselves to do what's Right, even when there is no such thing as Right to begin with" (p. 26).

It is not easy, however, to reach that point of understanding and acceptance, to overcome the sense of failure and accompanying guilt. Years may pass before a mother learns that her failure to breastfeed was probably related to her (older) age when she gave birth (pp. 100-107). One may travel a long road before realizing that accepting, understanding, and incorporating perceived failure into one's consciousness is an accomplishment, and that reaching this acceptance is itself an act of re-creation, of transformation.

Attitudes toward bodies, embracing their beauty

Too often women are left feeling inadequate as they deal with shapes that don't match society's ideals. For instance, contemplating breast development can include multiple issues. According to societal standards, breasts may be too small, or too large, or not shaped perfectly. Their size might even be associated with personality traits. In "The Price of a Boob's Job" by Maria Polonchek (pp. 131-137), the author relates that during junior high and high school days, her large breasts identified her with "loose behavior" and as a "slut." Dealing with the physical appearance of breasts during pregnancy and after the birth of a child is a continuing theme in the book. And there are accounts of anticipation or realization of aging, sagging breasts, and the attempts to accept this change. Much of society does not see with the clear vision of the little girl who pronounced her mother's diminished, floppy breasts "poo-eety" (pp. 55-57).

Society's perceptions of woman as changing from an object of sexual appeal to nurturing mother to cronedom are difficult to resist in the process of positive self-identity. "Pussy" becomes a vagina (p. 131). Breasts, once seen as objects of beauty, become part of what can be

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seen as an embarrassing nursing station. The aging woman is seen as sexless. This is a difficult road to travel, to travel and retain respect and love for one's body.

Definitions of sexual appeal can be harmful. Why is a cleavage an object of beauty while, for too many, nursing a baby is not? (Is it a matter of degree of exposure?) There may be attacks by disease with resulting identity issues. Consider breast cancer and the removal of breasts and what this does to self-identity. Which elements in society are determining the importance of breasts in this respect? The pervasiveness of "youth culture" can lead to older women becoming invisible in society.

Society's interpretations regarding women pervade attitudes toward the total female body at all ages – its proportions, its complex functions, its malfunctions. But there is an epiphany when one can affirm in a difficult situation that one is "deep inside the blaze of motherhood, / just where you were meant to be, / in the heart of it all, sunk / to your knees / in love" (p. 21). Or thoughts about finally saying good-bye to breastfeeding may lead to the deep understanding that "for this time, here on earth, my body is lit with spirit" (p. 130). These positive understandings can extend to all ages.

This small book is a lovely gift for expectant and nursing mothers – and, well, for anyone with a sympathetic and inquiring mind. In the meantime, after reading and laughing and empathizing, I'm left with aching sides and aching breasts. I think I'll go out and buy some cabbage leaves.

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