

This Is Motherhood

A Motherly Collection of Reflections + Practices

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New Mama

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.

HELEN KELLER

INTRODUCTION

LIZ TENETY

I was thirty-six weeks' pregnant with my first child when I realized I was just going to have to wing it. As my doctor was wrapping up my weekly appointment—measuring my swollen belly, checking my blood pressure, observing my vitals—I blurted out the burning question, which I was surprised she hadn't already answered: “But how will I know when I'm in labor? And what do I do when the baby's coming?”

My OB/GYN launched into her regular routine as she walked out the door. “Contractions get longer, closer together, and more intense. You'll call the office. We'll see you at the hospital,” she said with barely a breath. Her words were ones she clearly had repeated a thousand times before. But didn't she know? Nothing about having a baby was routine to me.

I had been dutifully showing up for every prenatal appointment, expecting that my doctor would help guide me through this mind-blowing transformation that was occurring in my life. But as she closed the door with that “easy” answer about the signs of labor, the weight of motherhood hit me all at once:

My OB/GYN wasn't there to help me become a mom, to handle the psychological stress, manage the fear, or to even embrace the joy.

My doctor wasn't with me while I hunted for the perfectly safe car seat for my precious baby. She wasn't lying in bed with me, completely uncomfortable and entirely still—except for the life moving nonstop inside of me. She wasn't negotiating with me for maternity leave at work, wondering

how I would manage. She certainly wasn't there to calm me when I woke up from my recurring pregnancy nightmare, where I forgot I had a baby and left my child somewhere. No, my doctor was doing her job—a medical job.

I realized in that moment that becoming a mother was a powerful transformation I needed to go through myself.

That's not to say I was alone. My husband was *so* supportive. My family was beyond thrilled. My friends were compassionate and curious. Although motherhood was a frontier that others had traveled, it was land I had not yet explored. I had read the pregnancy books but felt wholly unprepared. I was in my third trimester, but I wasn't yet "ready." And even though my son was on his way, I could barely wrap my mind around the idea that in a few short weeks, I would be his mother.

The journey to motherhood looks different for every woman. There are many ways to get there. It's vast and mysterious and beautiful beyond description. But it can be terrifying and even lonely.

In the years since my children were born, I have learned that none of us are really alone. The surreal feeling of the weight of motherhood does lighten, but it also returns, like when I watched my baby walk off to his first day of kindergarten or when I've gazed at my children sleeping soundly in their beds. How are they even real? It can just seem too hard to believe, a task too monumental to fully understand. And yet, we just show up, day by day. Lesson by lesson. Love by love.

So how did I know I was in labor? My first sign was when my water broke two days after my due date in the middle of our local CVS. Labor was nothing like I expected—and meeting my sweet son was immeasurably better than I ever dreamed.

Perhaps in your case, motherhood's reality sunk in on the car ride home from the hospital with your newborn baby. Maybe you found your stride the day your baby started sleeping through the night. Maybe you're still finding your way. And that's okay too.

Six years and two more babies later, I'm experiencing new frontiers every day. I'm still learning—and still winging it. But motherhood to me is the best adventure of all.

You've got this, mama.

P.S. This section is designed to support you through the massive change of motherhood. We've included an exercise at the end for you to write a letter to your baby documenting this special moment in time.

This Magic Moment

CAIT THRASHER

When I was pregnant with my first child, I took a birthing class with my husband. For hours we studied pain management techniques, watched videos of live births, learned where an internal fetal monitor was inserted, and contemplated other likely interventions, including medications. Our teacher was very experienced, and she answered every question we had, leaving nothing to our imaginations.

My husband and I wrote a birth plan, toured the hospital, packed our baby bag—and mentally prepared ourselves to throw our plans out the window. In the weeks leading up to labor I nested, I walked, I swam, I ate, I napped. I approached my impending labor and delivery in the way all the books and movies and busybodies at the grocery store tell you to: Plan, organize, and “sleep now because you’ll never get to again!”

I was focused—and very, very nervous. But while my mind was busy turning over the possibilities of Pitocin and episiotomies, I forgot to get excited. Well, I was *kind of* excited, but as my due date came and went, I got crankier and more frustrated. Looking back, I wish I had let the feeling of excitement soak in more.

What most people forget to tell you as they regale you with how many hours they spent in labor, how many stitches they got, and how much pain they were in giving birth—is that the single most spectacularly wonderful moment of your entire life is going to happen on that same day!

In the seconds it takes for that last push to do its job and for you to set eyes on your baby, you will feel more happiness, triumph, wonder, and overwhelming awe than you've ever felt in your entire life.

Nothing is more physically satisfying or rewarding than giving birth to a baby. Nothing. It's hands down, without question, the best feeling in the world. And then—on top of your own personal physical miracle that you just performed—there is suddenly a brand-new, tiny human in the room. This little person is in command of your heart, and every worthy feeling you are capable of having. And you're new too! Now you're a mother.

I've spoken to my husband about it, who was there holding my leg (smartly not telling me what to do through my labor), and he'd tell you the same thing: Seeing our daughter for the first time was the most intensely awesome moment of his entire life.

This experience of becoming a parent has led me to believe that no matter how you meet your child—whether by C-section, surrogacy, vaginal birth, or adoption—the moment you do is one of the best of your entire life. And this feeling isn't limited to your first kid, which I learned after having a second child.

Even though I don't actually want more kids, I can't help but get a little jealous at the nine-months'-pregnant mamas I pass on the street. I love looking at them, knowing that the best day of their lives is just around the corner.

Labor is definitely difficult and painful and all the things everyone tells you it is, but I would gladly go through it *again and again* to get to experience *that* moment.

So, as you pack your hospital bag, or reread your pregnancy books, or find yourself worrying, take time to get excited! You're about to become a mother.

Birth Is Just the Beginning

JESSICA WIMER

Women often think that their worth as a new mom is defined by their birth experience and success with breastfeeding. A mom who planned for an unmedicated birth may be disappointed with herself when she's whisked to the ER for an emergency C-section. The mama who can't get her newborn to latch on may feel distraught and wonder if that means she's failing at motherhood.

Becoming a mother is not something that happens overnight. It's about much more than the first few moments and weeks with your baby.

Early on in your motherhood journey, it may feel like you've had to strip away all of the elements that make you who you are. As time trudges on, you realize that becoming a mother is not about losing your old self, but about blossoming into a new one. We emerge from the chrysalis of our former selves unsure if we're ready to embrace our new form and take flight. We struggle as we learn to fly. We hold on to who we used to be—and miss some of the possibilities that reside just over the horizon.

As we grind through sleepless nights and never-ending days wearing puke-stained yoga pants and a messy topknot to hide the fact we haven't showered in days, it feels nearly impossible to believe something vital has not been lost.

And perhaps life will never be the same. But mourning this loss would be as preposterous as a butterfly mourning the loss of her caterpillar self.

Great things are in store for you and that little baby. The promise of a future is nestled in your arms, and not just your baby's future. Yours too.

And the best part?

You get to define what kind of woman you're going to be.

I choose to define myself beyond my ability to mother my children, and this gives me peace during difficult parts of my day. I'm defined by my job and my role as wife, and by my love of nature, books, and cookies. I'm still an individual, and I need to connect with these other parts of myself to be able to share my light with the world.

While you're sitting in your mesh undies in a hospital bed or at home with a screaming toddler, remember: You're standing at the edge of a precipice. This is not an end. It's a place to launch yourself. Will you fly? I hope so.

With my young children, the days are so long and there are times it's nearly impossible to find any space for myself. Little hands clinging to my skirt hinder my flight. But that's okay. I like to smell the flowers. I will not be slowed forever. One day those little hands will be gone.

In this slower version of time, I am refining who I am, reveling in all sorts of discoveries that would have been left unearthed. Some are pretty. Some are not. At times I find myself grasping for composure as my once-never-ending supply of patience has run dry. Sometimes I am unkind to the two little beings who fill up my days with requests and reactions and cuddles and cries. But my kids have taught me the value of humbling myself when I am wrong. Their ability to forgive and forget is so foreign in my adult landscape. And my toddler has given me the ability to stop counting the minutes and instead soak in the moments.

While there are times I feel so restless that all I can think of is shedding my responsibilities and enjoying some well-earned freedom, I know, too, that motherhood is helping me become a beautiful new creation: the truest version of myself.

This Too Shall Pass

RASHA RUSHDY

The second time around, there were a lot of things I'd forgotten about having a newborn. Those first few weeks can truly be the most exhausting, the most challenging, the most painful, and the most terrifying. You wonder how your world has been turned on its head and whether it will ever be the same.

Repeat after me, mama: This, too, shall pass.

Last night, I spent two hours solely dedicated to settling my fussy twenty-day-old while her father got her two-year-old sister ready for bed. I envied his task—its predictability, its dependable routine, its lack of screams and cries, and the absence of self-doubt and desperation in those moments of *What do you want me to do?!* as I tried to figure out what this little person needed.

Those endless nights of wake-ups, marathon nursing sessions, never-ending diaper and outfit changes, spit-up, bedsheet overhauls, patting, shushing, and settling. Having to rock or bounce your baby with searing pain running down your back . . . all this will pass.

That excruciating, debilitating pain you felt shortly after delivery, just when you thought your recovery was going swimmingly, that made you think

something was seriously wrong—made you question whether you were ever going to feel like yourself again . . . it, too, shall pass.

I'd forgotten what it was like to have to suddenly drop everything while caring for a newborn—dishes mid-rinse, laundry mid-sort, your shower mid-shampoo. Whether it's getting dressed, eating a meal, or getting some work done, you wonder if you'll ever have time to yourself again or be able to complete a task from start to finish.

But this, too, shall pass.

In the quiet of that 5:30 a.m. nursing session, everyone is still asleep except you and your new baby. Dawn filters through a crack in the curtains, dancing across those soft, perfect cheeks. In that moment, the world stops, and it's just you and your baby. You *somehow* fall in love with each other even more. You stare at her and wonder if she'll give you her first real smile today.

These moments, too, shall pass.

Even the nursing session, which you genuinely thought would never end until she melted her tiny body into your arms, peacefully exhaling her warm breaths on your neck, will pass. The days when all she wants is to lay on your chest, asleep and content to be close to the heartbeat that guided her for nine months, will be gone before you know it.

Your ability to be the person who can provide that baby with everything she needs—whether she's hungry, tired, scared, lonely . . . it will pass. There will come a point where you won't be her everything, the center of her universe.

These moments,
too,
shall pass.