

Rebel Mama

How To Raise Your Kids Without Losing Yourself

By Dusti Arab

Copyright © 2013 by Dusti R. Arab

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

www.DustiArab.com

This book is dedicated to Evie and Tristan for providing the heartbeat (and occasionally soundtrack) for this book. You are both loved.

Table of Contents

Introduction:: What To Expect:: A Thought Before We Dive
In

My Unfortunate Pregnancy

Life Beyond Labels:: Living Outside the Labels

Before Baby:: Looking Back:: Myths of the Status Quo

The Problem With Being A Woman:: A Story About Shame

Depression That Happens When You're Supposed To Be So
Happy

The Social Stigma Of Being A Young Mom, and Why
Having Kids By 25 Will Become The Norm:: How Do You
Define Yourself?: Remember, We Are In Uncharted Waters

What Makes a Great Mom:: Trailblazer or Traditional?

Defining Your Values, or Who Do You Think You Are?

Why Sharing Your Story Matters:: Implications of Sharing
Your Story – Handle It Like Hester Prynne

Pursuing Truth – Here's Mine

Conclusion

Introduction

There's a scene in every movie about pregnancy motherhood where the leading lady has her baby, holds the baby in her arms for the first time, and suddenly knows exactly what she has to do. Hollywood idealizes this moment as something so perfect, like having a baby bestows the sublime knowledge of motherhood and life on us all in an instant.

It's a lie.

It doesn't happen. At least it certainly didn't happen for me. When I first laid eyes on my daughter, she had her lip in a very firm pout, and neither of us was thrilled with what had just taken place. I wasn't exactly perfect mother material.

I had no idea who I was, let alone what being a mother meant for my identity. I had never even *planned* on being a mother. It wasn't a dream of mine, not the game plan. At 20 years old, with no college education, a dead-beat husband, no decent female role models, and zero security, I wasn't exactly in the perfect place in life to become a mother. Stepping into motherhood isn't always as sweet, divine, or gloriously empowering as many parenting books would have you believe.

But it can be. And that's what this book is for.

There is no perfect situation to become a mother, regardless of what society tries to press on you. You can't always control every tiny factor around how/when/where your baby is born, but you are in complete control of how you handle the situation. You can strive for your experience of motherhood to reflect your values. You can make decisions and choose goals that allow you to do what you love with who you love. Your ideal experience of motherhood won't be exactly like anyone else's, and understanding that allows you to take action to attain that ideal. (Because you can.)

You are in control of how you choose to step into this role and relationship of mother, even if the circumstances you're in now seem to say otherwise.

What to expect

When I got pregnant, I had no idea what it took or meant to be a mother, and none of the dozens of books I read got me any closer to an answer. So I made it my mission to figure out how to be the best mom I could, outside the conventions of traditional parenting.

This isn't just an autobiography. This is the story of the forming of one mother, and the stories that shaped what motherhood manifested as for one person. This is a snapshot of the reality a mother steps into today. It's also meant to be a tool to help you along the way.

The future of humanity rests on your capable shoulders. No matter if you're trying to decide whether or not to become a parent at all or you have young children or you've been there and done that, mothering is a role nearly every woman will play in her life in some form or another. Preparing to tackle it on your terms is a worthwhile pursuit regardless of where you are in your journey.

More than that, this book is about committing to self-discovery no matter what - because **you cannot do anything valuable without knowing who you are**. If you are unwilling or unable to dedicate yourself to the process of discovering your why's, who you are at your core, and what your reinvention will manifest as when you step into this new role, you should put this book aside now. You are not remotely ready to become a mother. (I wasn't.)

But if you're prepared to go there, **to question everything**, you can become an incredible mother on your terms.

You have a duty and responsibility to rise above conventions and standard how-to parenting bullshit. The false security of the status quo isn't there to help you; it's there to hold you back. If you're ready to move beyond the construct of Supermom, to firmly state that motherhood is not martyrdom, and to acknowledge you might just be enough as you are, then you are certainly on your way to being prepared for motherhood.

A thought before we dive in

Your heroes probably aren't people who have settled for traditional lives. Men and women worth looking up to stand out as something more. They've chosen to step out of the role society designated for them. They've chosen to rise. They've chosen not to settle.

Those people are no different than you. They were ordinary, until they made the decisions that led them to become extraordinary.

So be extraordinary. Choose to be fearless. You don't have to identify as a rebel or even a mother to choose to pursue your truth - but that is when it becomes crucial and far more difficult.

And finally, I'm not a "rebel" because I want to be. I'm outspoken about this because there is something seriously wrong with how our society perceives and pressures women. Rebel Mama was born because Gen Y and Gen Z mothers deserve to know what parenting actually looks like beyond Supermom and the myths of the status quo.

If you take nothing else away from this book, know in your loneliest hour, **you are not alone**. You don't have to settle for the status quo.

My Unfortunate Pregnancy

I sat on the toilet and waited. Rapid breathing. Heart pounding. Holy shit. Is this seriously happening?

I was on the 4th pregnancy test. Positive. There was no mistaking it.

In the tiny bathroom under the stairs at my mom's, I found out I was pregnant. I'd only been back in Oregon a few days, when I realized something was off. I'd slept for the almost the entire three day Greyhound trip back home, and my boobs were huge. A gallon of orange juice drunk with a head nod to Juno later, here I was.

I was pregnant. Going to have a baby.

Right.

-

What could I possibly be thinking?

It wasn't *exactly* an accident. I was quite aware of the implications of having unprotected sex. My birth control had just run out and a couple of margaritas later, caution had gone out the window.

We'd had a pregnancy scare about six months prior, and honestly, my husband at the time and I were both disappointed when it turned out I wasn't. But I kept the thought in my back pocket. It wasn't the right time to have a baby. Things were too unstable, especially with him in the military.

A few months after he was unexpectedly out of the Army and we were living together again, I was, well, miserable. It was the same familiar feeling I'd had about 6 weeks after we'd gotten married. There was something wrong, a dissatisfaction that never seemed to totally leave. *It just didn't feel right.* But I couldn't just leave. Then I'd have to admit how wrong all of the decisions leading up to this point were, something very difficult when you're a people pleasing 19 year old.

And now I was pregnant. *Go me.*

So what was my next move? Even though things had been hard, and I wanted to call him and tell him I was leaving him now that there was a comfortable 2000 miles between us (but who was counting?), something stopped me.

Could I do this alone? Well, yes. Did I want to? Eh, not so much. Single parenthood didn't sound appealing. Better to float along the way I had up until now than make waves with a divorce and trying to hide the fact that I was pregnant from all of our mutual friends. Who knows? Maybe things would get better. Maybe *this* would be enough to spur him into some sort of action.

But I knew I wasn't going to give up this baby. Glancing over the options still available this early on, I knew I couldn't go through with an abortion. It wasn't optimal, but this was how it was going to be.

Digging my feet in, I determined to make this marriage work, because goddamnit my baby deserved to have two parents who loved it. Even if that meant I had to be unhappy for a while. I called him from my mom's house, and I told him.

I was pregnant! How exciting!

And to a point it was. But I didn't feel as excited as much as I did resolve. There was so much to get in order. How could I make this work? I would not be a stereotypical young mom, poor and uneducated. My baby deserved better.

Not long after, I was working two jobs and I started college the same time I entered my third trimester. I finished finals on my due date, and my daughter graciously arrived four days later.

"There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one's self." - Benjamin Franklin

-

Nobody likes the idea of divorce. It's what kills the institution. (Marriage, that is.)

And I was doing everything I could to avoid it.

Divorce meant uncomfortable, excruciating change. **I was admitting failure.** I would have to publicly acknowledge I made the wrong decision. I felt like I was being watched with more scrutiny than the day I was married, laid open to all of the judgments, accusations, and sympathies of onlookers.

And I knew I would be blamed. This had to be my fault since he was such a “nice guy.”

And from the outside, everything looked fine. We never fought. We never even really disagreed, since he would go along with basically whatever I suggested.

But after I'd had my daughter and been flung into severe, undiagnosed depression, I was finished. I could not stay with this person any longer. My pregnancy had been a nightmare. I was getting no support. I was the only one bringing in income. He had been completely useless while I was in labor. I knew I was an idiot for marrying this lazy excuse of a human being. I married the first boy who ever looked at me because all I wanted was for someone to love me since I had to get outside approval because my mother was never around and nothing I ever did was important enough for her to bother showing up.

Oh my god. And now I was blaming my mother.

I was *that* fucking idiot.

Everyone could (and would) blame me for this. And the blame was rightly placed. Because he would have never had the balls to do it. He would have stayed happily married to me his whole life. Too bad I couldn't imagine anything worse. I would not ignore my intuition again.

-

I divorced my daughter's deadbeat father four months after she made her grand appearance, thanks to a winning combination of unhappiness and PPD. Her and I could go it alone.

Except we couldn't. **Not yet.** I had to quit the two jobs I was working while I was pregnant, because of complications very late in the pregnancy, and now I only had very part-time work doing promotional modeling.

Thankfully, after I found out I was pregnant, I had got my ass in gear and started college, even though my due date was woefully inconvenient. It didn't matter what the degree was in just as long as I had it, so my daughter could get every possible advantage. That was the goal.

Next was attempting to come up with a plan.

The odds were stacked against me. I'd gotten married a month out of high school - I didn't even graduate - worked two jobs my entire pregnancy, and started college. Now, I was a 21-year-old, single, divorced, high school dropout.

So much for not being a stereotype.

-

Entering motherhood was a massive struggle for me, but I wasn't about to let anyone see. So I started looking for parenting wisdom in all the books. No one I knew was my age and a parent, and my mom was a train wreck. There wasn't another mother I could turn to for advice, no one to connect with.

But as I started searching through parenting books, I became more and more depressed. As an unconventional mom by society's standards, there was nothing that met my needs. Everything I read just made things worse as it further reinforced that since I wasn't a traditional mom, I obviously wasn't cut out to be a good one.

-

For the next two years, I drifted. My ex fell completely out of the picture and stopped seeing my daughter. I fell in love with my best friend, and we started living together. I kept up my grades in college, worked part-time when I needed to, and did what I had to do to keep our tiny family of three afloat. No matter how low I was brought or how hard things seemed, I *had* to believe things would get better. I worked my ass off to make them better. It would be a lie to say these weren't difficult years.

"There is in every true woman's heart, a spark of heavenly fire, which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity, but which kindles up and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity." - Washington Irving

You'll hear more about some of these stories throughout the book, but it is imperative for you to understand that I did not start this project when I had my daughter. By the time she was born, I was a hot mess. I spent her early years unsure of my relationship to her. I had no idea who I was, let alone how I was supposed to help her flourish when I was so uncertain of my own future. I knew I had to keep us moving forward, and I did, but there were no guarantees of where I would end up.

It would be easy to glance over those years of uncertainty and jump ahead to where I knew what I had to do. **I do not want to sound like I immediately had the answers.** I didn't instantly start soul searching, seeking to find the answers to who I was and what kind of mother I wanted to be. I didn't know how to ask the questions that would lead me closer to becoming that person because my worldview was so limited - because I was so dishonest and out of integrity with myself.

Those years of darkness were trying and formative. At the lowest point of it all, I tried to kill myself.

That was the turning point. I started therapy. My therapist recommended I start keeping a journal. It was like a strange reminder. Journaling was something I'd done for as long as I could write, until the depression became so consuming. Soon, I was blogging publicly about what I was going through. I talked about how I was trying to discover who I was and who I wanted to become, and to my astonishment, people listened. For the first time in years, I didn't feel so very alone. Writing was helping me navigate both an extraordinary and difficult time, and this process of self-discovery was leading me towards a happiness I had never known - a happiness I was in control of.

I need you to understand that out of total darkness, there is hope. There is possibility. Positive change can happen at any time merely by making the decision to begin.

From that point on, I dedicated myself to reinvention. I relentlessly questioned what I had previously taken for granted. I started writing as a side gig while I was still in college. I connected with people who I thought were doing amazing things, both online and in person.

For the first time, I started to feel like I was actually bonding with my daughter. Every step of the way, it was impossible not to feel twinges of regret that it didn't happen sooner. I tried to just be grateful it happened at all.

This was an incredible time of growth. The more I understood myself, the more I realized I could connect with others. As I ensured my needs were met, I could step up and meet the needs of others. The world had opened up in a way I could have never anticipated, and it made me reconsider the way I wanted to live my life in a beautiful, delightfully unexpected way.

Money was still tight, since I was still in college living on student loans. My relationship had ups and downs as continued to change and evolve. Life did not stop being a challenge - but now I at least knew what direction I was heading in. I felt capable of becoming the type of person I wanted to become.

-

Once when Gwenyver was about two, I found myself in the doorway of her room watching her play. She was stacking blocks in the middle of the floor, as happy as could be. That was when I got the Urge.

You are probably familiar with the Urge if you're reading this. First, you get that rush of warmth that comes with a telltale smile.

"Oh gosh, look how sweet she is. She is so big, so self-sufficient playing all by herself. God, I make cute babies. I love babies, maybe I do want just one more... WAIT."

Then, you try to justify the Urge away.

"I know what happens after this feeling. All these gushy, not-well-thought-out instincts lead to unprotected fornicating and pregnancy and throwing up for weeks on end and BABY. Oh god. Baby. Last time, I did that my entire life came crashing down on my head, and I tried to kill myself. Having a baby is clearly a bad idea."

But then the Urge doesn't quite ever go away, and you find it a little harder to rationalize it away everyday.

And why should I? I was in a mostly healthy, committed, stable relationship. My finances and housing weren't, but hey, who knew if that would ever change? I always get by, even if I end up on a couch now and again. Besides, my body was telling me now for a reason, right? Thousands of years of baby-making can't be wrong. So I approached my partner about it. And he brushed me off. So I asked again. And again. And finally we had an actual conversation about whether or not we wanted to have a baby together.

He said no - for many good reasons. But I gave him a timeline because I knew I had one. I didn't want kids more than a few years apart because I'm selfish and want a life after children, so he had 9 months to think about it and decide if fatherhood was in the cards for him.

9 months later, I reminded him about the deadline for a decision. Having him in my life was more important than having another baby was (we'd already agreed on foster parenting one day), so the choice was his. Besides, my birth control was out, and I wasn't about to make an appointment if I could get out of it. (Bureaucracy is the bane of my existence.)

A few days later, my body va-voomed itself into an hourglass figure like I've never had before and will probably never have again. **Decision made.**

But I didn't forget what having my daughter was like. I didn't want to repeat what had happened. I *couldn't*. I was already excited for him, but I was fearful for me. My doctor said from the start I had a high likelihood of getting PPD again, and last time, it destroyed my life. Granted, I had a much better support network this time around. One of my best friends was a doula, and I *wasn't* in a relationship with someone I couldn't stand – progress, right?

There were so many questions I had. Even though I had already went through one pregnancy, and I knew what to expect, much of it felt like I was doing it all for the first time again. What could I do to prepare emotionally for my baby? What kind of mother did I want to be? What did I wish I could go back and change? Who would I be throughout this pregnancy and on the other side of it? Who was I? And what did that mean for me as a mother?

I quickly found myself coming back to one core question.

What makes a great mom?

That was when I set out to figure out parenting on my own terms - a quest to discover what it takes to be a great mom. But book research wasn't enough; I wanted the stories, the nitty gritty experiences of moms from many walks of life. If the transition into motherhood was rough for me, it had to have been rough for other women, too. So I started interviewing the most amazing women I could get to sit down and talk with me.

I interviewed everyone from a successful serial entrepreneur who transitioned out of it to write from home full time and homeschool her kids, to a woman who had her daughter when she was 17 and went on to get her PhD by 25. One woman was a lawyer who opted out of the grueling working-towards-partner firm lifestyle to creating a successful virtual law office that allowed her to stay home with her daughter. Another woman broke the traditional mold in the 1980's by pursuing her skyrocketing career, becoming the breadwinner when her son was 9 months old and switching roles so her husband could stay home. I spoke with a young woman who, at 21, secretly just wants to stay home, start having babies, and eventually work part-time - but she's afraid to because of what everyone around her will think.

Each woman I talked to had a unique experience and a powerful story associated with her shift into motherhood. As I interviewed, researched, and made connections between their stories, it became clear that there were several patterns and trends emerging from the data regarding mothering.

In particular, there are three major issues when it comes to entering motherhood that I will explore: the triple threat, status quo mythology, and the stories we tell ourselves.

There is a clear “triple threat” that comes up for almost every woman who becomes a mother - insecurity, isolation, and identity. From the fears of being like/unlike our mothers, not being as good as the mom next door who seems to have it all together, and doing everything “right,” it’s no wonder we’re insecure about entering motherhood. Even though we’re more connected than ever, most of us have never felt so isolated. With the rise of social networks, we can finally reach out to other. But usually we don’t. Instead, we keep up the illusion of Supermom. We lose ourselves in our efforts to become great mothers, because Supermom doesn’t have time to maintain an identity in addition to everything else she “should” do.

We propagate the cultural myths we've been raised on, like the Myth of Obligation where we can't do X because we're Y – i.e. I'd love to pursue my dream of becoming a writer, but I'm a mom. Or the Myth of the Milestone. If I can just get or become X, I'll finally be happy. Or there's the Myth of the Rescue – where you're convinced someone or something outside of yourself is going to save you. The status quo reinforces these messages through popular media, and we believe it because we have no idea what else we are supposed to be doing. Motherhood has changed more in the last 100 years than it has in centuries, and we will look anywhere we can to find a guide to help us through the transition. (Like reading books that claim they can show you how to handle it. Anyone?)

The more I researched and wrote, the more I connected the dots between the stories we tell ourselves, the ones society tells us, and the heroes' stories we aspire to and *need* to be telling – especially the story of motherhood. The old story and expectation was for moms to sacrifice their dreams and identities because motherhood = martyrdom.

And I can't imagine a less satisfying, more ignorant way to live.

The conclusion I've come to is **the most rebellious choice you can make as a mom is to maintain your individual identity.**

Because if you can't stay rooted in your own identity, how can you help someone else discover and cultivate theirs? How can you take care of others without taking care of yourself? You cannot reach a level of self-actualization that will allow you to be a great parent without giving yourself the space to grow as a human. Sacrificing yourself is selfish, stupid, and sets an awful example for your kids. They deserve better and so do you.

You can choose the cop out. Let go of everything you've ever wanted because you have kids, and you can use them as an excuse not to succeed.

Or you can choose to rise to the occasion. Your kids are another reason for succeeding. You are a better person because you have kids, and you want to be an example worth following. Motherhood is another role in your life, one of the most important you'll ever play, but it is not who you are.

It's easy enough to claim all of this, but what does it look like in practice? How can you act outside of status quo expectations? What can you do to stay rooted in your identity when life feels like it is pulling you in a million directions?

You create your own set of rules, and you learn how to make decisions based on them. The four pieces to creating this structure are:

Live outside the labels. Let me go all Fight Club on you for a second. You are not your skinny jeans. You are not your venti vanilla half-caf latte. *You are more than Aiden's mom.* You are an individual with goals and dreams, and you have every right to have priorities that are not your children. *You are a human outside of the labels society puts on you.*

Define your values. They won't be exactly the same as anyone else's, but knowing what they are makes every choice you make far more deliberate.

Share your story to empower yourself and others. Your story matters. The stories that have built you up to this moment will all influence the type of mother you are. The way you share those stories will, too. You are in control of your perception and the way you interact with your past, present, and future. You can choose.

Pursue your truth. Whether it's writing the novel, traveling the world, gardening, whatever. Do it. You cannot afford to wait - you have exactly one, finite life. How are you spending it?

Through out this book, I'll explore these concepts, explain you how to integrate them into your life whether you're pre or post pregnancy, and along the way, share stories that I hope help you realize...

"You're freer than you think you are." - Danielle LaPorte

While I was interviewing a friend, I asked her how she juggled her self-care needs with her responsibilities as a mom of four kids. Without hesitation, she told me, "My kids are watching. **I'm not going to model mediocrity.** I take time when I need it to reenergize." Powerful. (Also insanely difficult to commit to.)

As we dive into the reality of claiming motherhood on your terms, I leave you with a question and a challenge.

Will you model mediocrity? Or will you rebel and become something more?

Your choice.

Life Beyond Labels

Who are you? Or rather, what are you?

In a culture obsessed with labeling everything, you probably are finding yourself shortchanged with the terminology used to describe who, how, and what it is exactly you are.

Mother, writer, woman, daughter, entrepreneur, poor, awkward, honor student. I could go on. I was born with a fairly damning set of labels. Based on my experience, they are incredibly frustrating to try and overcome.

You'll notice that there are labels, which we attach to things and people in order to categorize, but there is something else you can call many of these labels - roles and jobs. Let me clarify something; **a label is not a role is not a job**. These are not interchangeable words; especially if we want to understand why the way most people talk about motherhood is wrong.

A few quick definitions for your reading pleasure. These are not all of the meanings of these words (obviously), but they are the ones we are going to pay attention to because *there is no overlap in these descriptors*.

Label - a classifying phrase or name applied to a person or thing, esp. one that is inaccurate or restrictive.

Role - the function assumed or part played by a person or thing in a particular situation.

Job - a task or piece of work, esp. one that is paid OR a responsibility or duty.

It's easy to get caught up in words, especially words that categorize. We love creating these hierarchies of information because it makes it social complexities easier for us to understand, but when we start to buy into our own systems too much, it creates friction. We want everything to fit into perfect little boxes, including ourselves.

Come on - how much do you hate answering the question, "What do you do?"

We strive to be understood in the most simple terms possible, no matter how complicated our situations are. The problem with trying to fit into these pre-cut molds is that

when we do manage it, we discover we have limited ourselves to a very narrow point of view and experience of the human condition.

I could tell you about labeling theory. But you don't care about labeling theory. You care about why people seem to think that once you're a mother, you're not anything else.

The short answer is because of the way we talk about motherhood like it is a paid job.

Of course, motherhood isn't a paid job. Let's go through an exercise. Mother, as a label, allows us to make quite a few assumptions, doesn't it? Quick exercise - write down what makes a mother on a piece of scratch paper.

Is it pushing a baby out of your vagina? I think we can all agree there is more to a mother than that. What about stepmothers? How about adoptive mothers? What about women who give their babies up for adoption? Is she still a mother? Is a woman who is raped and has a miscarriage a mother? Is a mother someone who is actively raising

children? What if her child dies before she does? Is she any less a mother for something she couldn't control?

What makes a mother is not a cut and dry scenario. When we assume the terms of motherhood a label bestows, we miss out on the intricacies of what being a mother truly means.

A quick glance at the thesaurus gives us a much broader and more beautiful view of what mothering means.

To mother means to give birth to, have, bear, produce, birth. The mother is the: source, origin, genesis, fountainhead, inspiration, stimulus, wellspring. Mothers raise, tend, nurse, care for, look after. To be maternal means to be *protective, caring, nurturing, loving, devoted, affectionate, fond, warm, tender, gentle, kind, kindly, comforting.*

Doesn't that put you in awe? We invite all of these characteristics upon ourselves by choosing to become a mother. (Granted, it's hard to feel like a devoted wellspring when your children are running around the house like

heathens and all you want is two solid minutes of quiet to regain some semblance of your sanity.)

So labels invite assumptions we can debunk. If the label of mother is false, what is mothering then? A role? Sometimes. We do often act the part of the mother. Whether the kids are actually ours or not, we understand the way a mother often acts, and we use those examples as a template for how we act and react.

But someone who acts isn't someone who is. You can act like a mother without being a mother. A role is another unsatisfactory way of describing a mother.

Is motherhood then a job?

Motherhood invites responsibility and a duty. It's a series of never-ending tasks. It's been argued many times that because women sacrifice so much to become mothers, including their careers, that motherhood is a job and needs to be treated as such, because otherwise it ends up painfully undervalued in western culture.

“Motherhood is a job” is the battle cry of the stay at home mom trying to justify the value she brings to a household, usually only for herself, to defend her decision not to work. It’s the “Hey, I’m not just staying at home all day drinking martinis and watching soaps!” argument.

Especially for Gen Y and Z who’ve been brought up on girl power, “You can have it all!” messages their whole lives, if they choose to settle down and have kids instead of pursuing the high-powered career, they will feel just as ostracized as a working mom did sixty years ago. Don’t even get me started on moms who want to work part time and stay home most of the time (which according to polls is what the majority of women want).

But is motherhood really a *job*?

I’d argue no. Motherhood has aspects that are job-like. Staying home being the caretaker for kids is a job. But motherhood is not a job.

Motherhood is a relationship.

Regardless of how you step into the role of mother, you have *the capacity* to mother based on your ability to build a relationship. If we consider getting pregnant as the preparation phase for inviting a new relationship and personality into our lives, birth then is the beginning of a new kind of relationship – one where the person we are inviting in is unknown.

There is another beginning that happens here, though. In traditional matriarchal societies, a woman moves through three distinct phases in her life: maiden, mother, and crone.

From this perspective, your time as a pregnant woman shouldn't be wasted away on setting up the perfect nursery. It should be spent preparing for the incredible emotional shift you are about to make. Moving from away the maiden phase of your life, your focus changes. You choose a different set of priorities.

When you become a mother, it is the ending of a phase of your life. Someone else depends on you for their very survival. You open yourself to the role of caregiver. *You change.*

This phase is the ending of your life as a non-mother and the beginning of a stage in your life where you are a mother. You are changed, but still somehow the same.

Frustrated with this yet?

By choosing to enter this next phase of your life and do it in a way that accepts you as an entire human being while trying to look at mothering as realistically as possible, you are left with a conundrum. Society is so obsessed with duality and taking a black and white view of everything that we find ourselves trapped under the weight of the expectations these various labels, roles, and jobs.

Judith Stadtman Tucker of MothersMovement.org states it wonderfully in her essay, *The New Future of Motherhood*:

“Such distinctions make our messy human lives seem a little more orderly and manageable, but it’s important to recognize that they are almost entirely arbitrary and culturally defined. Many people, female and male, struggle with this disconnect— because while it’s relatively easy to shift our concentration and actions in response to different social situations, we can’t split ourselves in two. We are always completely who we are every minute of our lives; we can’t conveniently shed selective aspects of our rational and relational selves when we move into a different setting. So if we accept that motherhood is a relationship and not a job, it’s becomes clear there is no sliding scale to being a mother— our motherliness isn’t based on the number of hours we put into mothering.”

Motherhood is not based on an hourly time commitment.

More time does not necessarily equal a better relationship.
What does this mean for you as a woman? As a mother?

Life Beyond Labels focuses on exploring the ways roles, labels, and jobs effect mothering and how cracking those assumptions and stories open can pave the way for reinvention.

Before baby...

I imagine we all have a memory of our childhood where we remember someone breaking a promise to us.

My childhood was a history of tattered promises from my mother. Promising things would be better. Promising she would be there. (Stick with me. This isn't a poor-me pity-grab, it was my reality.)

In middle school, I had a wonderful counselor who wanted more for me than what he saw in the town I was growing up in. There was an arts magnet school in Portland, and he thought he could help me get a scholarship to pay for it. I was thrilled. Half the day spent in music and arts classes? Could there *be* anything better?

At the time, I didn't understand the full implications of what going to that school would have meant for my future. But it didn't matter.

Because my mother told me no.

It wasn't even up for discussion. It would mean too much extra work for her driving me back and forth, and taking the bus was "not an option." She told me that since I already thought I was better than my family, I didn't need to go to some fancy school to reinforce that. That was the day I realized I made better decisions than my mom. I was 12.

It was when I decided to start doing what I had to meet my own needs. I desperately wanted to fit in. I was smart and sort of pretty and... utterly out of place.

I didn't listen to the right music. I asked someone in a class once who their favorite singer was. She said Britney Spears, and I asked if that was a band.

I didn't wear the right clothes, and I was convinced that an Old Navy Tech Vest would magically cure my awkwardness with confidence.

My hair was wrong. The old lady who cut it made me look like a boy trying to look like a girl.

Sure, I was thin enough, since I'd started starving myself alongside my fat best friend the year before. She needed to lose weight, so I was trying to be supportive. But then it became a competition. And I always win.

At any rate, I wasn't normal enough to fit in with the popular kids, I was too pretty for the misfits, and I was too smart to want to hang out with anyone else. I was an outlier. But I'd do nearly anything to fit in.

But I didn't *want* to just fit in. I wanted to be *that girl*.

I wanted to be the popular one who'd be on the dance team the next year who everyone wanted to be around with the rich parents who'd actually be there when you got home from school. I wanted to be the lead in the school play, on honor roll, and prom queen.

Instead, I was awkward and self-conscious. I'd muster up the courage to get up on stage and audition for the talent show, and once I started I shrank back in fear, even though whatever I thought I was risking was already on the line. Clearly, I had a long way to go.

So began my singularly minded quest to be better than my mom. I had to prove them wrong. I was going to be more. Bigger. Best. And I would do *anything* to get there.

I'd be so much better. I'd be successful, get good grades, my teachers would love me, I'd go to college, I'd have boyfriends who weren't sleazebags, and I'd do everything *right*.

So how do you become a successful, independent kid? Or at least a 12 year old who was effectively on their own? Now, mind you, your worldview at that age is limited, and therefore limiting.

I read every book I could find about runaways. How did they make it on their own? How did they survive? It was a far flung fantasy, certainly. But you would be amazed how much a story like Matilda can make you dream of something more.

So if I were going to take on the world alone, what and who did I need to be? What woman would I become? How would I adapt to my surroundings to fit in?

I didn't eat. Eating would make you fat and nobody likes fat girls. Every issue of Seventeen I could get my hands on was proof of that.

Normal kids had parents who cared about them and wanted the best for them. Decent role models were the first notable things missing from my life, so I started collecting them.

But it wasn't enough. It turns out going it alone is harder than it looks. So I took a cue from my mother and did what I knew. I looked around for someone, anyone, who could love someone who already considered herself irrevocably damaged goods.

My boyfriend at 14? His family would become the one I didn't have. Because from the outside, they were as normal as normal could be. A worship pastor and his blended family who lived by the book. And not just any book, but a book that gave me a set rules to work with, a community, and opportunity to rise up.

I didn't just choose a partner. I chose a family. A way of life. Something so far away from my reality growing up, that it looked like heaven.

They were perfect.

-

I've stopped and thought before, "Why him?" I was smart, pretty, and I picked *this* guy. Charismatic and talented but with no motivation to be anything better than he was, it wasn't like I couldn't have done better if I had tried. But at the time, I didn't know that. It was clear to me that if I was working so hard to be something better than what I was, I probably wasn't worth having in the first place. I was lucky, really.

Besides, he was *safe*. It was comfortable. I loved his family. He was just so *nice*.

Nice was more than I'd ever seen in a relationship, especially with my mom's abusive relationships as my only point of reference. By my standards, I was doing pretty well.

Another question: If I was so smart, why didn't I just push forward towards college? That could have been my goal just as easily.

It's a fair question. Honestly, the best answer I have is I didn't know how. At the time, I didn't realize it was in my power to question and to learn how to do these things. It didn't help that I didn't know anyone in college and no one I know had went. Talking with a mentor wasn't an option I saw available.

Plus, I was a teenager who knew everything. That detail seems to take us a long way as kids, doesn't it?

-

By the time I was 16, my mom had kicked me out of the house. (I made the mistake of letting someone know how bad things had gotten at home and a police offer showed up.) I ended up living with my grandma for a year and then a friend the year after.

So I stayed busy. I was an overachiever, unless of course I didn't care and then good luck holding my interest or getting me to show up to class.

I took and passed tests for college prep classes I stopped attending after the first semester. I was involved in theatre, hiding my dissatisfaction behind the veneer of the performer. If I wasn't onstage, I was working at one of my many jobs.

My schedule was rigidly organized and filled from dawn to dusk. Sleep was a novelty. If I wasn't at school or work, I was at my boyfriend's house, borrowing a family and building castles in the sky with my best friend.

By the second semester of high school rolled around, I was fed up with how slow my life seemed to be moving. High school didn't have anything to do with the real world as far as I was concerned. (This may have been the only thing I was right about in high school.) Selectively, I stopped going to classes that weren't moving me towards my goals and attending community college instead. I wanted so desperately to feel in control.

I was so desperate, that I even told my mom I was getting married. It was the first time we had really talked since she had kicked me out of the house. And although I did it cautiously, I really wanted to believe this time would be different. Maybe she wouldn't let me down.

When I told her, she was excited - almost supportive. I'm still not sure if this was some sort of reverse psychology she was trying to pull. I knew she didn't think it was a good idea. How could she possibly when no one else did? (Oh wait. This is my mom we're talking about.)

But it didn't matter what anyone thought about it. Getting married was supposed to fill in the gaps. Those holes that had been there for so long would be filled in, and I would finally have total belonging in at least one relationship in my life. (Except that I wouldn't because more commitment doesn't fix broken relationships, even if it's on paper.) This was supposed to make me an actual part of his family – something I valued beyond almost anything. And it did, but it meant that I got everything else that came with it.

It turns out there is something worse than being alone.

Looking back

It's easy to judge that girl, isn't it?

Wielding religion and love like weapons - can you imagine someone so young being so desperate and manipulative?

This is a less skilled player in Vanity Fair.

(You should have seen what happened once she realized the effect she could have on men. Or women.)

But I wasn't just a manipulative hussy on route to becoming an ironic, pious gold digger. But talking about the victories for a girl like me isn't interesting.

It doesn't matter that I still think that religion saved me from a far worse fate. Or that I never did drugs. Or that I spent late weekend nights playing Dungeons and Dragons with a handful of nerds for years. Or that I skipped the homecoming dance to go to a writing workshop.

That's not to say that I didn't get into my share of mischief. I did end up naked in a bed with five other young women once when I was 16 at a cast party. That was an adventure.

It's easy to look back and judge who we were with little compassion. But the reality of it was my view of myself and what a woman was worth was so warped that making progress towards a positive view of myself was difficult.

I had to have the right body, be the perfect weight, wear the right clothes, and pick the right major. I had to act a certain way with my daughter because that's what a mom is supposed to do. Because if I wasn't doing it right, that meant I was doing it wrong which made me a bad mom.

There were many falsehoods I bought into, because they promised a better life. You're probably familiar with some of them, too.

Myths of the Status Quo

From the time we were little, we were told stories. Many of them were told to entertain or to teach a lesson, but they have done more than that. These stories explained our place in the world, our duty to society and our parents, and the path we were expected to follow.

The power of story to influence our reality cannot be overstated - that's why I've collected some of the most common myths we've been taught to believe through the stories we've read and been told.

Myth of the rescue - Knight rescues princess. Superhero rescues damsel in distress. Cinderella, Snow White, et al. waiting for Prince Charming.

We like this myth because it means we can blame someone or something else when things go wrong. We can glory in our weakness.

Honey, no one is coming to rescue you. You are responsible for your fate. It's in your hands. It's not easy owning our decisions - but it's much more fulfilling. If we own the bad, that means we own the good, too. No one can take that away from you.

Myth of the milestone - When I get X, I'll be happy. When I am X, I'll be happy. When I can X, I'll be happy.

This myth places our happiness outside of our control. More money might relieve some stress, but it won't fix your overspending issue. Getting married sounds nice, but if you're thinking more commitment will save your relationship, you're in for a surprise. Everything you need to be happy, you have in this moment.

I know. I know. It sounds so hokey and ridiculous and if you're in a really rough patch, it's infuriating. That doesn't make it less true, though. If you can't be happy with just you in this space you're in, how can you possibly be happy with anyone else or in other space?

Myth of obligation - I would, but I don't have time because of my job. I'm a mom, so I can't. I'm married, so I can't.

This is a doozy. We use lack of resources as the excuse for why we don't do what we love. We pass over our dreams because of our "sense of duty" to others in our lives. But, when we choose to watch television instead of work on our novel that says something about how we value our time – a precious, non-renewable resource. Everyone has the same amount of time in a day. You do have time. You just haven't made yourself, your goals, and your life a priority yet.

The lies we tell ourselves are creative - but they are still lies. Are these the stories we want to become our reality?

Do we want to convince ourselves of our happiness?
Should we need to validate our decisions and ourselves?

We've been conditioned into thinking we need the labels and certifications of the status quo. And in the process of pursuing them, we have lost ourselves. Our stories have fallen into the cracks and become unimportant as we pursue new cars, more money, and more titles. We have forgotten who we are - and we've lost the ability to tell our stories.

But there's even more to it than all of this. These myths are cross-gendered. Men and women both buy into them, but there's a deeper and darker problem here.

And it has everything to do with you being a woman.

The Problem With Being a Woman

Imagine this scenario.

You're working an amazing job. This is your dream project. It's the kind of work that lights you up, challenges you, and is totally fulfilling.

Now, imagine that you're a mom.

While you're working, your young child is... where? In daycare? With the other parent?

Not with you.

And how does that make you feel? For many of us, it's called mommy guilt. It's the kind of guilt that can only stem from feeling guilty that you don't fit society's idealized image about the mom/wife who stays at home and is completely fulfilled in those roles.

But Dr. Brene Brown, a leading researcher on vulnerability and shame, points out something fascinating regarding so-called mommy guilt – **that we are not actually experiencing guilt at all.**

We're experiencing shame.

Dr. Brown explains the difference between guilt and shame here:

"Shaming is not like "guilting." Guilt says: "you've done something bad" or "You've made a bad choice." Shame says: "You are bad." There is a big difference between "You made a mistake" and "You are a mistake." Guilt can often inspire us to change a behavior, make amends, apologize or rethink our priorities. When we feel shame, our self-worth is so low that there is little possibility for change. Harriet Lerner writes, "How do we apologize for something we are rather than something we did?"

This is crucial to understanding why entering motherhood is wrought with difficulties for so many of us. Our society impresses this need to conform on each of us that is rooted in *what we are versus what we do*.

Oh, you're not breastfeeding? You must be a bad mom. You're six months postpartum and not back in your skinny jeans? You must be lazy and since lazy people are bad, you must be a bad mom. Take any current, frivolous argument about how you choose to raise your child, and it's a slippery slope to the assumption that you are a bad mom.

Dr. Brown goes on to describe the categories women's shame experiences fall into without exception: identity, appearance, sexuality, family, motherhood, parenting, health, aging, religion, and a woman's ability to stand up and speak out for herself. And how do these shame experiences leave us feeling?

While there are no universal triggers, Dr. Brown's work clearly demonstrates that when we experience shame, we feel "trapped, powerless, and isolated."

And if you've ever felt mommy guilt, you know exactly what she's talking about.

A Story about Shame

Tears were streaming down my face with the final push. After 36 hours in labor, I was completely exhausted.

My daughter finally entered this world with a rush of adrenaline and relief, but even so, I experienced an overwhelming sense of shame. Who was I to have these people in here watching me have this baby I had no idea how to take care of beyond diapers and feeding?

My mom - not my husband - had been the one helping me in labor. My mother shouldn't have even been in the room. I made it explicitly clear to my husband she had no place in there, and he understood why.

If anything else prior to having my daughter didn't clinch the deal already, now I knew I was getting a divorce at the end of all of this. Being alone was almost a comforting thought now after the way I'd been treated over the past few months and finally in this hospital. The terror of actually being alone in the world was nothing compared with the reality of being effectively alone, even in a hospital while giving birth.

Except now I wasn't alone. I was lucky enough to have my daughter in a hospital where they had large rooms where you could have your baby in the same room for your stay at the hospital.

And I sent her back to the nursery.

My precious daughter just born, and I sent her back to the nursery so someone else, *anyone else*, could take care of her because they had to be more prepared and more qualified than me. Everything in me felt so entirely inadequate and unready to take on the enormous responsibility of caring for this baby that I hardly had any attachment to yet.

When you leave the hospital, they push you in a wheelchair out to your car while you hold your baby. And I hated every second of it. I felt their eyes on me and this infant, and the shame rose up again in hot waves.

Fuck them for even looking at me. Who were they to look? I just wanted to be left alone. Those two minutes felt like an hour. No one could judge me more harshly than myself, and I felt that judgment reflected in the face of each person I saw. The more love artlessly directed at me, the more my walls reciprocated by rising up in anger.

Looking back on it, it's hard not to be angry with the nurses for not saying anything about how clear a case this was going to be for postpartum depression. At the same time, I can't blame them. Who wants to be the one to say, "Sweetie, the way you just interacted with your baby isn't normal?"

It would be another year of struggling like this before I would discover there was a name for it: postpartum depression (PPD).

-

My mother-in-law accused me of not wanting her after the divorce. She tore me apart on Facebook because she was mad I didn't give her back a wedding ring she'd passed down.

I didn't tell her it was because I'd pawned it off to buy diapers and food. It wouldn't have mattered to her anyway.

It was about who I was, not about what I'd done.

-

A year after the divorce, I was still in college, we'd temporarily moved into my partner's mom's house to help keep her financially afloat, and I still wasn't connecting with my daughter on the level I thought I was supposed to be. Even as I started to research PPD, I was in denial. Depression had never been real to me. I was always so motivated, so happy. And I was okay most of the time. That's not depression, is it? Staying in denial and escaping seemed a better choice than to admit that I had a very serious problem that I needed help overcoming.

Escaping was getting harder. After spending a term working through upper division credits for my major, I wasn't so sure about the major or college anymore. Somehow I'd ended up on track for a science major I couldn't have cared less about. It was the first time I had second-guessed college as an answer to my problems, and it threw me through a loop. College was the only guarantee to a better life I had left.

The term ended, the summer progressed, and nothing seemed to be going according to plan. The living situation became less temporary and ended up having to be extended for a few more months so no one lost their house. It wasn't an easy situation to begin with, and it was growing more unbearable by the day.

I'll be honest; I did not handle any of this well. In fact, I handled it so poorly I had a total breakdown. God, I wish that were an exaggeration. Our finances were tight, so I picked up a job at Starbucks. Here's how that internal dialogue went.

Maybe working there would be the answer. Hell, they even wanted to hire me on as a manager! But would managing at Starbucks make me happiest over time? Could I go to school still? Well, maybe I should pick a solid, steady career to pursue, since I don't know where my major will land me. Being a lawyer! That's a great idea. I'll start as a paralegal, and then pay my way through law school! You know what else would be cool? Working for myself. I have so many goals and things I want to do. Ugh. I'm a failure. I can't commit. I can't do anything. Failure is going to get me. Settling now will alleviate more suffering later. Evie deserves better than this, I can't handle the pressures of motherhood and a career. My boyfriend deserves better than me. How can I possibly keep him happy when I can't keep myself happy? Why am I so lost? What is wrong with me?

That was my summer. I plunged deeper into depression at a breakneck speed. Sometimes, it would occur to me just how easy it would be to walk in front of a speeding bus and just end it. I could end this awful daily pain that I couldn't cope with, because I didn't know how.

I wanted to kill myself.

For any of you who haven't experience what it is like to want to kill yourself, the tunnel vision that happens when you finally get to that point is suffocating. *There is nothing else.* I got as far as picking the knife up off of my desk, when Evie started calling "Mama" from the other room. It was the only thing that stopped me.

That was when I finally got help. I went to a therapist for a few weeks, and she helped me realize what was going on and begin to understand it. We confronted some deep-seated issues I had; we discussed why they resurfaced in this way and how it caused me to act in a way completely uncharacteristic for me. And I finally admitted to being depressed.

I had never believed in depression. Suicide was a sign of weakness. Going through this became a turning point for me in so many ways, because I knew nothing I experienced after that terrible feeling could be scarier or worse.

In the process of exploring why I became so depressed, I began to see wisps of the identity that had slipped away from me. Ever so slowly, I felt my sense of self returning, and with it came the courage to reach out beyond the isolation I'd felt trapped under for so long.

-

Depression That Happens When You're Supposed To Be So Happy

The CDC reports that an estimated 15% of all women will get postpartum depression, but it's important to note that number is the number of reported cases.

What increases the risk factors? Everything from being previously diagnosed with depression which increases your risk by 50% to being under the poverty line which increases risk about 40%. PPD is far more prevalent than that 15% suggests.

And even though there are certain factors that do increase your risk, the fact is that this can happen to anyone. Out of all the women I interviewed, which included an age spectrum of 16-39 for having children and a wide range of incomes, 65% admitted to struggling with depression

This is a serious problem in the United States, but because it's a problem primarily among women, it fails to receive the attention it deserves. Treatment generally consists of support groups, which is both good and bad news.

The bad news is that we really don't understand why PPD occurs. The good news is that most women do recover with a support group. You *could* extrapolate on that and suggest therefore that having an excellent support system in place is the best prevention method.

It turned out that was the case when I had my son.

When the nurse placed him on my chest so I could see him, it was a moment of complete joy. He was so perfect. My partner was standing there next to me, holding my hand, and my sister was on the other side of the room, crying and smiling. It was hard not to think that it happened the way it was supposed to this time.

But I really can't compare the births of my daughter and my son. I was far more deliberate about my second pregnancy and birth. Experience will take you a long way towards figuring out what you want. After you've had PPD once, you're 50% more likely to get it again with your next child.

I went into the pregnancy with eyes wide open, a doula, a supportive partner. I knew I'd probably still have problems, and I did. But the depression didn't feel like it had a chance at winning this time.

I feel like I could write an entire book just on how PPD can affect you. Please, please, please – understand that PPD doesn't mean something is wrong with you as a person. If you think you may be at risk or that you might have it, please seek professional help. You don't have to go it alone.

Depression is a place where it is very easy to slip into shame mentality. If shame is about who we are, not what we've done, that leaves us in a precarious situation.

If we do not conform to society's standards of what a mother should be, which we can't since those standards are impossible and contradictory, what can we do? How should we act?

The Social Stigma Of Being A Young Mom, and Why Having Kids By 25 Will Become The Norm

It's not easy being a young mom for a lot of reasons. But probably the hardest part is having/keeping/finding friends who actually understand what you're going through.

I should know. I've spent the last few years chopping my hair off so I look a little older. Why would I want to look older? Because no one takes me seriously if they find out I'm 24 and have two kids right off the bat. It's better they assume I'm in my late 20's and a young professional. It keeps me from being categorized with young, uneducated moms and all of the stereotypes that go with it.

I went to college. I'm a business owner. I've had lunch with bestselling authors and can namedrop with the best of them. If someone is going to categorize me, I'm going to give them the first impression I want them to have and give information that will cast me in a more socially acceptable light.

Because being a young mom - while on trend - is not socially acceptable.

Our perception of when is a good time to have kids has changed. The average age to start have kids has increased to 25. Why? Good moms wait until they've had part of their career, gotten degrees, etc. right?

I'm not so sure.

At a career level, Penelope Trunk has been arguing for years that putting your career “on hold” to have babies during your core breadwinning years is ludicrous, and I think she’s right. If you want a career and a family, you either need to have kids before your career really starts or have them after you are established.

For me, this is a no brainer. Why would anyone choose to have kids at 40? If the next 20 years are anything like the past 20 that means you’ll be collecting social security, and your kids will still be living at home. That sounds awful. I love my kids dearly. I’m also anticipating that by the time they are teenagers that we will get sick of each other. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all of that. My gift to each of my kids when they turn 18 is going to be an around the world ticket. Not just to get them out of the house, but so they understand that there is life outside their door.

Issues

You're going to take heat for being a young mom. You'll get every underhanded derogatory comment they can think of.

"Oh, where did you keep that baby the past nine months, your purse?" – Something someone actually said to me five weeks after I had my son that I'm going to translate into "skinny bitch."

"But you're just a baby!" – I want to tell everyone whose ever told me this to go fuck themselves. Seriously. Who the fuck are you to say that? I'm an adult. Just because your 25-year-old son is an idiot who can't decide what he wants doesn't mean some of us aren't working our asses off.

(Sigh. I don't actually think your 25-year-old son is an idiot. It's fine to not know what you want. But **I do know what I want**. And I'm going to get it. Please respect that by not calling me a child.)

Another issue you'll run into is who to spend time with. (See the above comments made typically by other older women with young kids.)

So who do you hang out with? Well, you hang out with women who understand you, which means until young motherhood becomes a norm again, you're probably going to have to find women 5-10 years older. As for your unmarried, baby-less friends, plan on needing to make new friends. They are still on the status quo track their parents said they should be on. They can't understand why you would want to have a baby yet, let alone settle down.

You will feel ostracized by your peers.

Some of them will try. They'll try to make you feel included, but it will only remind you of how different you truly are. A friend will invite you out dancing. Oh, can't do that. Can't find a babysitter. At least that's the excuse you gave. The truth is you are so absolutely exhausted and accustomed to going to bed at 8:00pm after your daughter falls asleep that the idea of staying out late, being active, and sacrificing a night of sleep sounds like an act of lunacy.

You will feel jealous.

You'll wish you weren't so exhausted and that you weren't so boring to all of your old friends. You'll rationalize. You have something so much better. And it's true. You do. According to polls, party culture isn't making them happy. But that doesn't change the fact that once in a while, that little voice will whisper to you about wanting an outlet. An escape. Just for a few hours. A moment. A connection. Anything so that you can remember for a split second the person you were before someone else relied on you for their existence.

And sometimes, you will feel shame *because* you are a young mom. Because you are what other people think you shouldn't be.

But the real advantage being a young mom gives you? You don't have time to stay "I don't know" land. Even if you don't know, you take a direction and go with it because you have a child who depends on you. **You will figure it out.** Even if that means you take some left turns now and again.

While your friends are debating on grad school, you've found a supportive partner and started a family. It's not a race by any means, and having kids young isn't for everyone. But expect to see this trend over the next ten years because frankly, it makes sense to most of us.

How do you define yourself?

Nobody likes the idea of putting themselves in a box. You are a complex creature - mysterious, unique, and beautiful in your singular way.

I am a woman. A mother. A writer. But no single label or title defines who I am.

Society has a clear list of labels and titles they approve of. For men, it's often words like breadwinner, father, masculine, husband, etc. Men are associated with these words of power. Even single men can get away with bachelor without too much fuss, their mothers notwithstanding.

For women, words such as feminine, mother, and wife. These words may not necessarily mean weak, but what comes to mind as you stop to consider each word with care?

And just for shits and giggles, go ahead look up "feminine" in the dictionary.

Interesting, no?

How many words are there for single women? Well, there's always the more derogatory choices – slut, whore, etc. Upon reaching a certain age, words like spinster run rampant without any sort of male equivalent, though bachelor is still often the norm. Perhaps even silver fox if you've aged in a Richard Gere sort of way.

When someone calls a man effeminate, what are they really saying? Most would say it in a demeaning way, like the man was less of one for resonating with something womanly. The man may also be called girly or wimpy. **It's an insult.**

And what does that tell us about our own womanhood? Whether it is conscious or not, the idea that our womanhood is an ingrained weakness is a defunct belief from the days when brute strength meant survival at best and a horrid stereotype that devalues women at worst.

So who are you outside of societal constraints and outdated labels? What do you resonate with? What revs your engine? Turns you on? Makes every inch of your being radiate with happiness?

To put it another way, **how would you want your kids to describe you?**

When I was working as a copywriter who specialized in helping others tell their stories, I helped people discover their power words to craft and hone their vision of themselves and how their audience saw them. When I'm working with business clients, we use the term "personal brand" to discuss the process and language of telling one's story. When you call it a brand, it's easier to remember that, yes, **there is more to you than what you are presenting** and yes, that's totally fine.

Your story probably needs a little polishing up. It's difficult to see the heroic journey you've been on throughout your life, because all you can often see are the broken pieces, the inadequacies, and the fears that have permeated your life. You see the patterns of successes and failures in an acute light. And the hardships shouldn't be ignored. They are how you got to where you are today, and everybody loves a good underdog story.

Even if the only school you've ever been through is the School of Hard Knocks, chances are you have a degree in street-smart, ass-kicking chutzpah that somebody out there – probably even someone you know - is jealous of.

If you have ever overcome adversity, you know what the clarity that comes with that feels like. In your moment of greatest vulnerability, you learned, grew, or enhanced your greatest strength.

That strength is at the heart of your story – the roots of a deeper truth waiting to grow into one damn fine looking plant. (No green thumb required.)

Your ability to share your story is vital to your happiness, success, and well-being.

Stories are how we connect with the world around us in a physical and emotional context. If a story resonates with us in a powerful enough way, we'll sense the greater truth that exists within it.

People who share stories that matter inspire. They teach. They lead. By choosing to share your story in a way that allows the listener to win, you win. You feel empowered because you helped empower another.

For an example of powerful stories in action, watch an RSA or TED talk. There is a reason we follow these stories with intense interest, even if the material itself is seemingly irrelevant in our lives.

Stay at Home, Work from Home, Working? (Remember, We Are In Uncharted Waters)

It's hard for us to regard motherhood as uncharted, unexplored territory way since in all likelihood you grew up with a mother who by a simple standard was a nonconformist. Consider for a moment that the terms of mom and wife have a history of thousands of years.

How we parent now? It's only been hyper-connected and advertised and marketed like this for the past 50 years. Anything outside of being fulfilled by "mom/wife" is different. New. Unusual.

We are facing understandably uncomfortable and uncertain consequences around the arguably biggest decision any of us will ever make. How shall we then choose?

Well, society is telling you your kids must be your number one focus, and if you aren't doing *everything* right, your kids will be fucked up, and it will all be your fault because you're the mom. Your needs must wait. You are here to give and give and give. The status quo thinks you should be totally fulfilled in your roles of wife and mother. Because that is the known and understood standard for a woman.

But if you're reading this, you probably really struggled to read that last paragraph because you don't think you can do that.

I couldn't. Can't. And I don't have an answer for you. What I can tell you is having kids enhances and increases your capacity to feel. That is both wonderful and painful.

I can tell you most women want to mostly stay home and work part time. If you know which option is best for you, find a partner and a lifestyle that will make this happen for you. If you're not happy with your choice on this one, it's hard to change because it affects so many other aspects of your life. On the same token, it's nearly impossible to make a choice on this before you have that baby.

The real miracle of childbirth

It has nothing to do with the birth itself. The rebirth that happens to a woman when she becomes a mother is a transformative process that cannot be defined by that moment in a hospital.

Moving from maiden to mother in an instant, ready or not, **there is an opportunity for change**. A new opportunity to love something we made so much, we may finally be able to love ourselves.

That unmistakable love is not born into an environment of fear and uncertainty. But, it can be born out of the ashes of the former self. The person who didn't know what nurturing or self-sacrifice was can rise up and be strong. Shards of an old life can be used as a shining opportunity to create the mosaic of the new.

As for that new, tiny, perfect little person, what can you possibly say that could give the moment more meaning? They are so untarnished and full of wonder and hope, you can't help but want to be better for their sake. You have to be better. Not than anyone else in a comparing manner, but simply better for the sake of being better, more fulfilled, because that is the right thing to do.

Rebirth and reinvention is the right thing to do.

It's what they deserve. It's what you deserve.

Permission:

You don't have to be the mom your mom was. The mom society says you should be. The mom everybody else seems to want to be.

Who do you want to be? What does that look like? So what do you look like as a parent? The person you are now and aspire to be can handle layering the role of parent on top of that. You are capable. Your core values don't just change overnight when you switch roles. Your priorities may adjust, but your values probably won't shift much.

What Makes A Great Mom?

Well, it depends on who you ask.

Watch an hour of daytime TV. Pay attention to the commercials - it's mommy porn. Pick any sitcom with a mom in it. Most of the time, she will be affluent, stay home, and be considered at least kind of pretty. Her problems revolve around being able to "have, do, or be it all," and by the end of the episode, the smart mother will be able to find an answer to the solution. The hot mom cleaning her house while her adorable offspring sit at the dinner table with clean faces as dad walks in the door is as realistic as the ridiculous sounds women make in porn. *It just doesn't work that way.*

Mommy porn is a status quo construct. It's there because we live in a patriarchal society that expects us to sacrifice everything when we become mothers. For the non-mother, these messages hammer in that "ideal" image of womanhood, where at a certain age, every woman must become a mother because it is simply the way it is done.

What I'm saying is, no, "When are you going to settle down, get married, and have babies?" is not an acceptable question to ask any woman. Ever.

A great mom is rooted in her identity and commits to the lifelong journey of learning more about herself.

Birth Story 1

Laying on the hospital bed, gripping my mom's hand, I pushed. Again and again, the doctor, who looked like a used car salesman in a lab coat, told me to push. I couldn't feel anything from the waist down, so I had to assume I was doing it using the muscle memory of what it felt like pre-epidural. 12 hours with no painkillers, 22 hours on double the recommended amount of Pitocin because my contractions weren't strong enough – even though they made me feel like I was DYING, 2 hours of pushing with the nurse, and then the doc came in. I was already completely exhausted.

It was over in 15 minutes, and my eyes were shut the whole time. The doctor said something I tried to tune out about cutting me so the baby could actually get out, since my hips weren't exactly of the ideal childbearing variety. I was about as interested in seeing that as watching the placenta hit the bucket, so it seemed like a good idea to keep my eyes closed and not throw up all over the little bundle of joy.

They put Gwenyver in my arms a moment later. Furrowed brow, and bottom lip protruding, the look on her face said it all.

“Why am I here? And who the hell are you?”

Miracle of childbirth. Pft.

I was so tired I could hardly hold her. We looked at each other, and all I could think was how completely unprepared I was for this experience. It wasn't that, “I love you so much even though I just met you” thing that happens in the movies.

More like, “Well, you're here! I'm exhausted. So now what?”

I had no idea how to be a good mother. Sure, you read the books, the forums, and you try to find all the answers, but deep down, you know it's futile. Reading can't possibly prepare you for this. I'd never even seen myself as a mother. What in the hell was I thinking?

Then, they wanted me to attach that little alien's mouth to my boob. Mind you, she was a very cute little alien who looked like my tiny clone. So together, we learned just how miserable breastfeeding can be. You'd think a "natural act" would be intuitive, until it isn't. Having the nurse grab at my chest trying to explain how to milk myself didn't help either.

It was snowing out. Piling up to a whopping 14 inches – a feat in a valley that hardly sees snow, my tiny family was stuck in the hospital for an extra night before someone could drive us home. As I attempted to get into the car, thoroughly off balance from the stunning amount of Vicodin I'd taken, the vase of wilting flowers my aunt had given me slipped from the top of the car and smashed into the concrete, glass littering the road already marred with filthy snow.

Can you say foreshadowing?

Trailblazer or Traditional?

My friend Justine Musk says, "Women can choose to be traditional (marriage, kids) or trailblazing (anything else, including the attempt to combine marriage and motherhood with a career)."

I think she's absolutely right. Traditionally, a woman's path was fairly straight and narrow, and if you strayed, you were ostracized. Simple. The simplicity of this is often regaled by the "anti-feminist" who complains that women have too many choices, unlike back in the "good old days" where we were simply baby-making property.

However, this brings up an incredibly relevant point. We have more decisions to make than ever. Many of us suffer from decision fatigue. The reason you're probably reading this book is so you can make a decision about motherhood!

So how can you get better at making more decisions faster?

Well, that's simple. **Know what you want.**

But, since I'm not going to assume you know what you want since I some days I have no fucking idea, let's start with your values.

In elementary school, we get patriotism pounded into our heads. They teach us it to us as a value that we should have, even though most of our parents likely wouldn't since it's not one their core values. They are teaching us that it is moral to love your country.

And with that, I'm throwing out the idea that school doesn't teach us morals. Let's take a moment to look introspectively at what your highest values are. Don't rattle off some stupid list that sounds nice. Don't say what you think your god, your family, or your best friend would want you to.

That means you actually found a story worth telling. Some stories require more than a blog post, though.

We all think we know the stories that have defined us. They are often the ones we share at parties, the ones that will make others laugh or think well of us. But those aren't true defining moments. They are just the beginning.

Imagine you have a piece of red string in your hands connected to a ball of yarn. As you begin to pull on the string, the ball begins to unravel. You pull and pull and pull, trying to get all of the string out of the ball. Finally, you give it one final tug, and the ball is completely unraveled. But, tied to the end of string, there is a tiny box.

Whatever is in that tiny box is the truth behind all of the garbled memories, the mismatched thoughts, and the lies we tell ourselves. The events that leave us with this truth can be many, and they deserve exploration. But in the end, sometimes all we have left is that tiny box.

What does yours look like? Describe it in detail. Is it a safe? Is it made of glass? Is it a music box? Draw it if you like. Better yet, actually find or make one. And on a scrap of paper, write down your truth.

Still not sure what it is?

If you were going to die tomorrow, what is the one piece of wisdom you would leave for the world?

For me, it's don't settle.

Don't settle for less than you deserve in every aspect of your life.

Everything else comes down to this core idea. I believe you have a core idea so central to who you are, to your very essence, to everything you do, that if you can find it, reveal it, and make it relatable, you have found your mission/purpose/calling.

Embracing "and"

Meagan Francis of The Happiest Mom explains her struggle with this need to separate work and

*"I suppose somewhere along the way I internalized the message that I'd have to choose between those two sides of my personality. That I could not be both a kick-ass businesswoman and a nurturing mother. That I could not be both a homemaker and a bread-earner. That I would always have to downplay one of those sides of myself, playing either the role of harried, hurried, guilt-ridden working mom or ultra-hands-on, baking, crafting SAHM. **It's perfectly OK to be fulfilled both by motherhood and by outside work.**"*

You are who you are, even as you make the sacrifices necessary to become the type of mother you want to be. It's hard to discuss this without resorting to sentimental or idealized views of mother and personhood, but the reality is the changes you make in your life when you bring another life into the world are still born out of the same sum of experiences. It's still you.

It's just now you're a mother.

So how are we then to talk about motherhood?

It depends. Perhaps a better way to begin discussing it is by speaking from where you are now. The reason that conversations like breastfeeding, schooling choices, diapers, organic, etc. are all so polarizing and cause for argument is because by choosing one side of these dualities, you can be right and pretend you know what you're doing.

The easiest way to avoid this is honesty.

You don't know if you're doing it right or not. Neither do I. We can make the choices we do based on what we think will help our kids grow into the type of people we hope they will become. And I'm since I'm an optimist, I think each of us truly wants the best for our kids and future children.

I think that means we make responsible choices for their health and well-being. It means that we take care of our resources. It means that we are socially conscious and help others.

We will all do those things in different ways – but how much do those tactics really matter? The latest research says they really don't. More than ever, nature is winning in the nature vs. nurture debate.

Economist Bryan Caplan argues convincingly in “Selfish Reasons To Have More Kids” that kids are less like clay we can mold and much more... like individuals born with their own personalities. If you're a parent, I hope you're not arguing because this makes your life much easier. For many of us, the hardest part of being a parent is letting go of control of their lives and letting become the people who, as it turns out, they were truly born to be.

So what's your duty as a parent if your role is more of a producer than a director? According to Psychology Today, the best thing you can do as a parent is to focus on you. Are you the type of role model you want your kids to have?

Have you dealt with your baggage? In other words, being you really is the best choice for your kids.

Who Do You Think You Are?

What right do you have to break tradition? Why should I have to question my way of doing things, when you are the one doing something different?

You need answers to these types of questions because you are going to get them. Most people won't be so upfront or aggressive about it. They'll subtly question your ability as a parent with snide remarks and undercutting asides because *by you choosing to deviate from the norm, they then have to question their own reasoning*. That makes anyone trying to live the status quo dream very, very uncomfortable. It's far easier to attack you than ask questions.

This is an important distinction that you are making with the way you live and make decisions. You are constantly seeking new information, fresh discoveries. You don't accept that just because it is the way your mom did it that it must be the almighty right way. You are choosing not accepting false idols. Anticipate that you are an easy target because of this choice.

And because you're a trendsetter in your questioning, you have to know your values and your patterns of behavior. This knowledge of what you value most will allow you make decisions based on what you know is true for you. Since your way hasn't been done before, you will need this foundation. Otherwise, you're going to lose yourself in decision fatigue and in choices that don't match up with the vision you have for your life.

I used to hate the word "values." It sounds like I'm about to be fed a line of bullshit. Corporate. Church. All of the groupthink monstrosities that are allegedly formed around "values" kept me from writing about the philosophies that I live by for a long time.

Your values are your filter. They are your built-in, decision-making tools. Making decisions and taking effective action becomes much easier when you have clarity around why you are doing something.

Ex. Does this job satisfy at least 4 of my values? Does saying yes/no to this project fall in line with my values?

If you haven't gone through a values exercise before, I highly recommend it. In fact, I think it's so important, I'm putting one in here. This is loosely based on the values exercise in Molly Mahar's *The Joy Equation* (highly recommended), with a few elaborations from me to get you more specific.

Values Exercise:

1. If you knew you wouldn't fail, what dreams would you pursue?
2. If no one cared how you spent your life, what would you do?
3. If money wasn't an issue, how would you spend your time?
4. Circle any repeats.
5. After considering these dreams and desires and why they are important to you, go through the list of values below and circle the ones that pop out to you.

6. Now let's narrow it down. Group words you chose that are close in meaning, and choose the word that feels most right to you. You don't have to stick to these either. Pull out a thesaurus. Question your words. Is it actually something you value or something you're supposed to value?
7. Narrow it down to 6-8 words, and write your personal definition of each. Rank your values in order of importance to you.

Acceptance - Accomplishment – Achievement - Adventure
Alignment – Altruism – Authenticity - Awareness
Beauty – Calm – Charity - Community - Compassion
Connection - Consciousness - Consideration - Contribution
Cooperation - Courage - Creativity - Daring - Delight
Dependability - Discovery - Diversity - Education
Effectiveness - Elegance - Empathy - Encouragement
Energy - Enlightenment - Entertainment - Equality
Excellence - Experience - Expertise - Fairness - Faith
Family - Fitness - Freedom - Friendship - Fun - Generosity
Gratitude - Happiness - Harmony - Health - Honesty
Hope - Humility - Imagination - Improvement
Independence - Influence - Inner peace - Innovation

Integrity - Intelligence - Intuition - Inventiveness - Joy
Justice - Kindness - Laughter - Learning - Love - Loyalty
Mastery - Order - Originality - Peace - Perception
Performance - Play - Pleasure - Positivity - Power
Presence - Radiance - Recognition - Relaxation
Reliability - Resourcefulness - Respect - Responsibility
Responsiveness - Risk - Safety - Self-awareness - Sensations
Sensuality - Serenity - Simplicity - Spirituality - Stability
Strength - Support - Tranquility - Trust - Truth
Understanding - Vision - Wealth - Wholeness
Wisdom

Identifying your values is crucial. However, it's important to note that this list isn't your be all, end all. There are values that aren't on this list. Values can shift during major life events - like motherhood, for instance. *Priorities change.*

Here are a few helpful questions you may want to ask yourself from time to time:

- Do I like these values? Are they serving me?
- Would I like to incorporate/aspire to a new value?
- Do my dreams fall in line with my values?

Why/why not?

- What needs to change, the value or the dream?
- What will it take to put my dreams and values in alignment?

Why Sharing Your Story Matters

If you've ever overcome adversity, you know what clarity feels and looks and tastes like - because in your moment of greatest vulnerability, you learned your greatest strength.

I am convinced your ability to share your story is vital to your happiness, success, and well-being. That's a big statement, so let me break it down.

People who share stories that matter inspire. They teach. They lead. Watch any RSA or TED talk. The reason we follow with such interest – the material itself could be irrelevant in our lives – is because the line of story is one that carries a greater truth to it.

TED talks are about the power of human innovation to make our world a better place. They touch at the deepest roots of our humanity. These wispy ends of story combine with our innate love for a good story where the hero, in our case the human, wins.

We want to see the hero of the story win. It's empowering to the individual to think, "If they can do it, I can do it."

By choosing to share your story in a way that allows the listener to win, you win. You inspire, you teach, you lead. You feel empowered because you helped to empower another.

Stories are the key to your empowerment. Empowerment is not something any one person can give you. It's the result of reflection and action taken on the basis of what you discover. By sharing your stories and collecting the stories of others, we find a greater sense of belonging in the world.

Your story is the sum of your experiences. It's why you believe what you believe – and although it may not be justification in the strictest sense, it does give context to why you are where you are in this moment.

So why were we never taught to share these stories? Why do we hold on to and hide these tiny pieces of wisdom?

Because it makes us vulnerable.

“What if someone doesn’t like what I say? What if someone disagrees?”

Funny thing about stories, though – there is nothing to disagree with because it’s your story. If you want to remove fear, because you’re afraid of the stigma that may surround your story, remember that. We don’t share because we were told it was impolite. It’s rude. People don’t care.

But, that is the biggest fucking lie of all.

People do care. We *desperately* want a reason to care. That’s why marketers have jobs. Empowerment lies in our ability to share and accept stories. Who we are depends on how we define ourselves based on those experiences.

Implications of Sharing Your Story – Handle It Like Hester Prynne

I loved *The Scarlet Letter*. Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale of romance amidst the constrained puritanical society of 17th century New England is timeless (which should be enough to terrify most forward thinking women).

The book itself was a fine read, but the book's main character resonated with me in a way that unnerved and delighted me. Hester Prynne was an incredible woman, fighting the status quo as she carved out a life for herself and her Pearl. I always admired how she carried on through her public shame.

Redesigning her punishment into the beautiful piece of embroidery the world saw on her chest. Dressing her child in matching shades of scarlet. *How brazen.*

Jessica Rabbit, take a step back. Hester Prynne *embodies* what it means to be the bad girl. A young, lively, and attractive single mother cast out to the edges of civilized society because she refused to conform to their idea of repentance and shame? *How beautiful.*

This book is supposed to tell you about the stories that have shaped my life so you can relate your experiences. But this story is an unfinished one. It's an evolving tale. Dealing with the aftermath will likely be an interesting process in the small town I live in.

I could choose to hide away in the shadows, ashamed I expressed an opinion others think is wrong. That I'm living a life that they don't approve of.

Or I could handle it like Hester Prynne.

I am proud to start a conversation that I pray with every ounce of my being will generate a reaction. The picture I'm painting is one of grays. Not a true black or white to be found anywhere. But this picture will be judged according to a myriad of self-determined black and white values systems.

But even while I hope for conversations that further women's issues because I am more or less telling a story, and explaining why I think the way I do, it doesn't matter what anyone thinks. Getting agreement and support for my choices isn't the point. The point is to generate a dialogue where we can question our assumptions.

Storytelling is rarely easy. We can choose to share the bright side alone, but then we create imbalance. We miss the part that makes the lightness matter so much. Besides, you would be bored.

Labels change. They evolve with each of us. The way we personally define them matters. Like feminism. It's a good thing there isn't a feminist creed I signed explaining all of my duties and obligations to the world by embracing the term. Belief in this mystical document could be part of the reason for words like "feminazi" making it into the mainstream. If we assume everyone who uses a label is the same, then we ourselves adopt an attitude of "isms" we never signed on for.

Creating a joyful life doesn't mean you're always experiencing joy. You have high and low points like anyone else – the difference is, you know the darkness isn't permanent. Ignoring the tough decisions is playing the ostrich. You're smarter than that.

Our world is full of gray areas we cannot ever be informed enough to know the right answer to. That's why philosophy even exists. Each must choose for themselves why they think what they do.

And I'm unrepentant for my choices.

Bad girls are used to being the subject of derision. Especially the ones who understand what being bad means in a more modern sense – a woman who refutes the norm in favor of what she wants and needs. The thing is we are torn apart for it. (Men in the same position usually aren't.) A bad girl is selfish in the best way. Because she knows in the end...

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words are great free marketing.

If you ended up here, and you've read this far, I have a feeling you're a Hester Prynne sympathizer as well.

You refuse to settle for status quo. You can't help but rebel. You know what it feels like to be labeled "bad."

And you still want more than the status quo.

You want to embrace your inner bad girl.

I talk stories and branding because the story we tell ourselves changes everything. Being a bad girl doesn't have to mean you're bad. The stories we tell ourselves matter so much. If we call other women bitches and let ourselves be called bitch in a way that is anything less than empowering, that's what we live. That's the story we tell ourselves. And you know better.

Reclaiming your inner bad girl isn't hard.

Wear something daring. Make eye contact. Don't apologize.

Handle it like Hester.

Pursuing Truth – Here's Mine

We are more than mothers. We are more than wives. How is it that after all of this time we are still not enough because of our sex?

And how can we change this?

The United States is one of four countries in the world without paid maternity leave. This is a travesty. A few other quick facts on motherhood.

- The estimated number of mothers of all ages in the United States: 80.5 million
- Globally less than 40% of infants under six months of age are exclusively breastfed. Adequate breastfeeding support for mothers and families could save many young lives.
- The most important relationship in a child's life is the attachment to his or her primary caregiver, optimally, the mother. This is due to the fact that this first relationship determines the biological and emotional 'template' for all future relationships.

When I had my daughter, I had three weeks of maternity leave. And when I say maternity leave, what I mean is there was a three-week break in between fall and winter term at the college I attended.

My first year as a mama, I tried unsuccessfully to breastfeed, suffered from debilitating postpartum depression, got divorced, and struggled in almost every aspect of my life. Left reeling from the rapid changes of entering motherhood, I wondered if I'd made a mistake – my daughter deserved so much better than me. Working, putting myself through college, and figuring out the mom thing, it was a rough year.

The core problem here is clear. **I had no support.**

Regardless of what was healthy or what I wanted for my baby, the lack of financial, emotional, or any other type of support, meant I had to keep living my life in a way that almost didn't acknowledge my new role as a mother.

I can't help but wonder how that year would have been different if I had been able to stay home with my daughter for a few weeks without worrying about my rent getting paid? (In my case, with my school grants, which forced me to return to school immediately unless I wanted to go back to the working life of a barista.)

That made me consider a greater question.

What if every person in the United States had six weeks of paid parental leave?

The United States is one of four countries in the world without paid maternity leave.

This reaches beyond political platforms. Your wives, sisters, friends – most will be mothers at some point in their lives. And they will have to decide.

Do I stay home with my new baby? Do I give myself the time I need to heal? Do I breastfeed? And what about those mothers who can't choose? Can I *afford* to stay home with my new baby? Can I *afford* to give myself time to heal?

What a tragedy.

Concerns

The argument I hear forming already is that against the mythical “welfare mom.”

Because poor women have no right to time to heal or time with their infants? They don’t deserve consideration.

Because a woman is poor and likely uneducated, her ability to bring children into the world – which is considered a blessing in other circumstances – is looked down on as a societal problem.

How many women do you honestly believe don’t want a better life for their children?

And what about those children? What will become of them?

I have a confession.

During my 2nd year of college, I was on welfare for six months.

That money made a huge difference in mine and my daughter’s quality of life. By the way, do you know what a cash cow welfare is? **We were living the high life there with that \$400.**

\$400.

That was enough to cover my portion of the rent and utilities in the tiny, two-bedroom apartment I shared with 3 other people. And I was immensely grateful. Normally, if you're in college, the state won't give you any help. (Which makes sense, right? You're in college, which means you *must* have access to money.) My wonderful caseworker found a loophole so she could help us, because she saw how committed I was to making a better life for my daughter and I.

If it weren't for that money, I would have had to find a part-time job. I would have seen even less of my daughter, who at the time was eight months old. *And there is nothing I regret more than how much of that first year with her I missed.*

How will we pay for it?

This question needs reframed because it's costing us a massive amount of money not having paid maternity leave.

If 90% of American mothers were to breastfeed exclusively for six months, the U.S would save a staggering \$13 billion dollars per year.

Breastfeeding alone would clearly make a huge difference in our national and global health. The World Health Organization (WHO) says: *Many mothers who return to work abandon breastfeeding partially or completely because they do not have sufficient time, or a place to breastfeed, express, and store their milk.*

Breastfeeding also benefits mothers. It reduces risks of breast and ovarian cancer later in life, helps women return to their pre-pregnancy weight faster, and lowers rates of obesity.

Beyond the immediate benefits for children, breastfeeding contributes to a lifetime of good health. Adults who were breastfed as babies often have lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol, as well as lower rates of overweight, obesity and type-2 diabetes.

The important caveat here is that **breastfeeding has to be learned** – and many women encounter difficulties at the beginning. Nipple pain and fear there isn't enough milk to sustain the baby are *normal*.

We need to take an active role in providing women the support they need to enter motherhood effectively and in good health.

The Truth of the Matter

I believe paid, secure maternity leave is crucial to improving the health and well-being of this country and the world.

It's impossible to quantify the value of a mother. But because women still bear the majority of childrearing and household duties, we have an obligation to honor that and the immeasurable value of a woman having the time she needs to bond with her baby.

A child deserves to have a loving caregiver, whether it's mother or partner or family member. Finances should not be the dictator of that decision. It is our responsibility to make sure everyone can take the leave necessary.

Conclusion

You must commit to self-discovery no matter what, because you cannot possibly do your great work without knowing who you are and what you are about. Too many mothers fall into a self-sacrificing trap because they've spent their entire lives looking for approval on the status quo approved treadmill. If you do not dedicate yourself to understanding why you are the way you are now and why you want to be who you want to be, you will not have the capacity to be a good mother.

I didn't. I had the ability to care for my daughter and meet her physical needs, but I was unable to be fully emotionally present with her because I was too busy trying to find approval. I needed the world to approve of me, to like me. And the status quo does not like young mothers because they are defying the cultural norm of the past 50 years to wait to have children.

Young mothers take the status quo track and ignore it because it is out of date.

Why should you rush your way through a degree and into finding a job that you're going to work your way up into until you're 30 and then quit to have babies? You will not be able to overtake someone else's experience who decided not to have kids at the same age, and you're certainly not going to be able to find a fulfilling, relevant job that values your experience from oh, six years ago, when you left the work force.

It's okay not to make money. Our power driven culture says otherwise, but the fact is when you're young (and assuming you're lacking a trust fund), you're used to bootstrapping. You'll figure it out. You don't have a lifestyle that requires oodles of cash.

It's okay to not want a huge career. It's okay to "just" want to have babies and not worry about making money. Guess what? It's still what most of us are raised to do, since we start playing with dolls and putting on makeup. Besides, having kids is way more challenging than anything else you could possibly do since you have no time off, no benefits, and no pay.

I get it. I'm a feminist. I hate that we have such ingrained gender roles. But the fact is, some gender roles are the way they are because of biology. I'm going to go out on a limb and say biology has the trump card here. It's not any different than marketing. We don't buy things because of what they do, we buy things because of the way they make us feel.

It's strange to think that not so long ago I was a bikini-clad model standing at the front of the expo section of OSCON, and now I'm an attendee. Someday, I might even speak there just so I can tell this story. Because I want everyone in that room to walk away knowing anything is possible, and your roots don't matter.

You are becoming a better mother by becoming a better you – and I hope you understand what a gift that is.

Acknowledgments

This book couldn't have happened without the love and encouragement of so many people. First, I have to thank my partner, Andrew Akers. He was there throughout the entire process as I cried, retreated, ventured forth, and finally wrote this book. It's been a difficult journey and being present for so much of it, he was incredibly supportive.

Thanks go to Nina Nelson, Karen Mossbarger, and Alicia McCrea for helping me keep my sanity as much as one can while writing anything with a spec of memoir in it.

To Charlie Gilkey, who helped me see the different implications of this book and helped connect me to those who would make it even better, thank you.

To all the incredible women I interviewed, thank you. Your input while bringing this together was invaluable. To all of the women I discussed the book concept with who said, "Yes. This is exactly what I need." Thank you.

References

"The New Future of Motherhood

http://www.mothersmovement.org/features/mhoodpapers/new_future/0505_3.htm

Postpartum Depression Statistics

<http://www.postpartumprogress.com/how-many-women-get-postpartum-depression-the-statistics-on-ppd>

How To Be A Good Parent

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/compassion-matters/201011/how-be-good-parent-it-s-all-about-you>