

Show—Don't Tell

Courtney Weber

At the end of fall semester in 2016, I brought my five-month-old daughter, Addy, to class during final presentations for my research writing course at Bay Path University. A motherhood show-and-tell of sorts, brought upon by young women undergrads (Bay Path is one of the few remaining institutions with a women-only undergrad program) and their mutual love for tiny babies. Throughout the semester, my students had “oohed” and “ahhed” their way through many pictures of Addy that I projected onto the whiteboard from the desktop computer in the front of the room. But these digital photos weren't enough to flatten their curiosity about my baby. They wanted to meet her. To hold her, talk to her, smell that powdery baby smell that nestles itself in the delicate folds of an infant's skin, right where the neck and the collarbone meet. I resisted the idea for weeks, mostly because I was nervous about showing them a part of my identity that I still struggled with every day. Motherhood hung awkwardly on my shoulders and I didn't want them to know. I didn't want to show them. They would look at me differently, see me as a failure. But they were relentless in their requests and I always had trouble saying no to people.

I carried her in her infant car seat through the door of my classroom, careful to not bump her against the doorjamb and startle a wail from her. The crook of my elbow ached from holding her up by the hard-plastic handle of the car seat. It was the only class I had that day, so I hoped my daughter would be a good baby for an hour and fifteen minutes. If she could make it through the class acting like the ideal child, then maybe I could feel stronger about myself as a mother. We made a deal. I should've known five-month-old babies do not make deals. A quiet snow flurry danced around the air outside of the classroom windows as my students gushed, telling me how cute my baby was and how fun it must be to be a mom. I'd made an effort to dress her in clothes that matched—floral pants and a dark gray tunic with a matching flower applique by the collar. She was even wearing shoes that matched the clothes, not the usual pink and blue Walmart sneakers but her light blue and pink Mary Janes given to me by a colleague. Stamped in gold foil on the bottom of her shoes was the name “Stuart Weitzman.” In other words, the shoes were too damn expensive for a baby, especially a baby who couldn't walk yet. Her head was bare, and sparse wisps

of strawberry blonde clung to her skull and revealed small sections of yellowish cradle cap that I thought I had combed out last night. No bow headband stretched around her forehead. Those things pissed her off and weren't part of our negotiated contract, the contract she would tear into tiny pieces half an hour into the class period.

I pulled her from her confinement in the car seat and settled her against my shoulder, her large blue eyes absorbing everything in silence. Five minutes of "awwws" and one turn around the room with my baby in my arms finally settled everyone down enough to begin the research presentations.

* * *

Show, don't tell. The writer's mantra. The mother's mantra, too. At least, it should be. People tell you having a baby is hard (it is). They tell you you'll be tired (my right eye hasn't stopped twitching since she was born—my daughter is now two). When I told someone I was pregnant, she proclaimed, "Now your life will have meaning." Just as with writing, sometimes you're told—but you need to be shown. Telling only gets you so far, only lights a spark of empathy. But when you are shown something, with all the senses swelling around it and none of the "this is the greatest thing you'll ever do's" flying at you, now that is something. Now that is an inferno. But I wasn't shown—even my closest friends sugarcoated it all. They told me that as soon as my baby was in my arms, the raw love I would feel for her would detonate my heart with its intensity. But that didn't happen. This is what it was like when I first held Addy: My morphine-soaked veins numbed my body, my mouth had flecks of dried vomit embedded in the corners, and my abdomen was sutured and sore. Everything was fuzzy. I didn't even get to see her come out of my body because a blue tent-like fabric blocked my view. My husband saw her gory body pulled from my uterus. "Her eyes are open," he told me. When I finally held her an hour later, her eyes were closed. My heart didn't explode. Does that make me a monster?

Whenever you start a writing project, it's painful. Finding the words, the time, the energy—all of it hurts. When I started the mother project, it was also painful. Physical pain makes sense, no surprise there. Especially during labor. The body expands, bones detach and adjust, skin stretches and tears. But emotional pain? No one told me, not really, that when you become a mother, a huge part of you must die. Your individuality, your autonomy—dead. Some women, I'm sure, are graceful in this transition. Some writers, I'm sure, do not find writing painful (though it is often work, a labor). I am not a part of that "some." My former self, my pre-mother self, was still attached to my skin, like

a phantom limb. Just the sensation of a self that no longer exists today. That self will never come back. And I mourned that self often: at night, when I woke up from naps, on a drive to Starbucks, when I changed her diaper and watched her twitch her limbs as my eyes filled and spilled around her. This ache of sorrow and loneliness burrowed into my sternum and echoed around the halls of my body.

There is loneliness in the research process. We are locked inside ourselves and inside our research, shutting out the world for hours at a time to finish writing—to meet the deadline. There is loneliness in motherhood—specifically breastfeeding. The deadline for breastfeeding is that magical one-year mark that few women meet. Most hand in that assignment early, unfinished, often with tears of frustration smudging the work. I breastfed my daughter for almost two years, though I thought about quitting approximately 1,000,304 times. When I began my breastfeeding journey those first few hours in the hospital, I cried, inundated with stress and hormones. The pressure to be the main food source for a tiny human suffocated me. Nipple shields, nipple butter, cracked nipples . . . that was my language for months. Lactation Linda was my savior, my “editor” of sorts, those early days and I hated her at first. She often visited my hospital room to lecture me about breastfeeding, asking me how much I produced and tsk-ing that it wasn’t enough. My milk didn’t come in right away, a result of giving birth via C-section instead of vaginally. I won’t say “naturally” because that would mean I didn’t give birth to my daughter, that she was torn from me unnaturally because my body wasn’t meant to have a baby. Yes, Addy from my body was “untimely ripped” but she was of woman born, regardless of what the Macduffian prophecy states. She was two days old before I produced colostrum, more precious than gold for a newborn, thick and light-yellow liquid plump with nutrients. It wasn’t much, but Linda assured me it was enough.

When the nurses said they would need to supplement the colostrum with formula, deep shame vibrated through my body, triggering my eyes to water. Before giving birth, people told me over and over again that formula wasn’t the best for my baby—“breast is best.” Formula is the other f-word. When we finally left the hospital, the nurses gave us bags of formula samples, three-inch-long plastic bottles with a light brown liquid sloshing inside of them. These bottles sat in our kitchen and met their expiration dates, though more than once I was tempted to crack one of them open and just stop torturing myself with breastfeeding. But the masochist within me refused to stop breastfeeding.

Most writers aren’t confident in their work. I write something down and immediately think, “What trash. No one will see this thing.” Most

women who breastfeed aren't confident in their work. Not many are proud to showcase their work to the critic's eyes. I wasn't the kind of person who unabashedly whipped out a breast and fed her child in the wide open, eyes darting around and daring someone to say something. More power to those women, but that's not me. I hid when I had to feed my daughter outside of the home. I struggled with positioning her while in the backseat of a car while a bus of tourists buzzed by and most likely saw some skin. I propped her on a couch pillow at my friends' house while I fed her inside during a barbeque, laughter sifting through the open windows from outside while I sank into my own stifling darkness. Once I fed her in a restaurant bathroom, praying that no one pounded on the door while I hunched over my daughter, my forehead soaked in nervous sweat, while sitting on the toilet. I christened my baby's head with drops of tears and sweat from my face in all of those scenes. In the name of the mother, the breastmilk, and my old self's ghost. And every time I fed her, voices seeped from outside through the doors and the walls, reminding me of the life I was missing. What I had lost. My new identity as a mother didn't quite fit me yet, and I mourned my child-free self constantly. Shouldn't I be happy breastfeeding my daughter? Why aren't I glowing with joy when I hold her? That's what I was told would happen, from television and movies and friends. From the breastfeeding class where I held a plastic baby and a pair of foam breasts. When do I get that experience? The narrative I read before was fiction.

Finding time to write is a challenge. Sometimes I can carve out hours to focus, but usually I need to squeeze in my work in tiny increments of time. Ten minutes here. Fifteen minutes there. Power writing. Working mothers often master the art of the "power pump." Breastfeeding changed for me when I went back to teaching. I was one of the lucky ones with an office, so finding a clean, private area to pump was not an issue. With only fifteen minutes in between classes, and a stretch of four one-hour-and-fifteen-minute-long classes in a row, sprinting to my office and power pumping was a daily occurrence. I'd hunch over my pump, flanges awkwardly suctioned to my breasts, and look at pictures of my baby, willing my body to fill up those tiny tubes drop by drop. My daughter needed enough to get through the day at daycare and my supply was less than ideal. The distinct wheeze of the pump echoed around my office and more than once I worried someone could hear it in the hallway. I was often late to meetings because I had to pump. My cheeks heated, my face a bright red when I explained why, for the tenth time that month, I needed to leave a meeting early to pump again. What I wore to work mattered, too. Everything needed to be easy access, a

quick snap away to remove fabric and reveal skin in record time since time was a precious thing with only fifteen minutes between classes and four classes in a row.

* * *

All semester we talked about current issues and one day my sleep-deprived brain threw out the topic of breastfeeding in public and the idea stuck to one particular student. The day I brought my daughter to class was the day this student presented her paper to us. She talked about the lack of breastfeeding accommodations and education for mothers, of people who shame women brave enough to breastfeed their child in public. Of the pain and guilt and tears and sweat and mind-rattling frustration of being the main source of nourishment for a tiny infant for months. Of how many women have to stop breastfeeding because of all of those reasons and more. Of how those women are ruthlessly judged for “giving up” and not putting their baby’s health first. For being selfish. She was halfway through her PowerPoint when my daughter started to scream. Embarrassed (why was I embarrassed?), I cradled her tiny body in my arms and rocked her. I pulled her up to my shoulder and rubbed her back, my fingers sliding over the pearl-shaped bumps of her spine through her onesie. The screams got louder, and her voice rattled my bones. Maybe she was tired? But the rocking didn’t work. It always worked. Sweat popped across my forehead, hands, and chest. With each piercing wail wrenched from her tiny body, I realized, with a crawling terror, what she needed. I couldn’t leave—I couldn’t take her outside of the classroom and jog to my office for privacy. Cowering in the bathroom down the hall wouldn’t work, either. I had to quiet my daughter down and listen to the rest of the presentation where a student told us of the importance of breastfeeding in public.

And so, I showed. As my student wrapped up her defense of breastfeeding in public presentation, I shakily announced, each word thick in my mouth, “My baby is hungry. I have to feed her.” Angling my body away from my students, I pulled up my gray cable sweater and unsnapped my white nursing bra tank top. She latched quickly; the action hushed her screams and filled her tummy. Everything trembled within me as I held her and surreptitiously looked around at the classroom, bracing myself for the negative reactions I was so certain would be there. But nothing happened. No one stared, or laughed, or fought a grimace of disgust. No one threatened to tell my dean about nursing my daughter in class or that it was inappropriate or gross. Surrounded by eighteen- and nineteen-year-old women writers, fearless and smart and empathetic, I finally felt my new identity crystallize. My daughter

slowly drifted off to sleep, her eyes glazed in a milk-drunk haze, her mouth lazily suckling at my breast. As my epiphany lapped at the edges of my conscience, the student ended her presentation amid her peers' claps. As the question and answer period began, I looked down at my daughter. Her eyes closed.



Courtney Weber teaches at Bay Path University.