

Reclaiming the art of breastfeeding

Lessons from Mexico

My breastfeeding journey started almost twelve years ago in Mexico, my home, and heart, country. Over the years with my three children, it has become an essential ingredient in my mothering.

Although the bottle-feeding infatuation has begun to take hold in parts of Latin America, breastfeeding is very much part of our culture, our roots and traditions.

My Mexican grandmother breastfed her eight children, and my mother breastfed her five children. In fact, every woman in my family, as far as I can recall, has done so. Thus breastfeeding was honoured in my family tree, and I have always felt it was natural to carry on with this powerful feminine family legacy.

Within my Peruvian husband's family, the story is similar. There is no recollection of bottle-fed babies or women "not being able to breastfeed". And, even though breastfeeding is a unique privilege for women, we know it is crucial to count on our partners' unconditional support and understanding in order to successfully breastfeed our children.

As a child, I remember seeing breastfeeding mums everywhere: in the streets, in public places, in the plazas and mercados, in buses, on the pavements, or even queuing at the bank. I recall vividly and colourfully the flower seller by the market, and how she breastfed her baby in between serving customers. Nobody would even notice, let alone give her strange looks.

Breastfeeding newborns and toddlers is done openly without covering up in most Latin American countries, like an integral and beautiful part of a landscape painting. So I grew up with the feeling that breastfeeding was engrained in our hearts. For women, it is simply an act of love. Thus it rarely becomes a thinking decision; instead, for the vast majority of Latin American women, it is an instinctual and natural response. It is something our grandmothers did, our mothers did, and hopefully our own daughters will do one day too.

Back in Mexico, my grandmother always stressed the importance of the *cuarentena* (or quarantine) in relation to the successful establishment of breastfeeding. It is a precious time when new mums are released from any household duties and are fully taken care of by family members. With plenty of family support, a new mum is meant to stay at home for approximately forty days in order to bond with her new baby, breastfeed and rest. Coincidentally, it takes approximately four to six weeks for our milk supply to be fully established – more or less the length of a normal *cuarentena*.

Breastfeeding is even contemplated in traditional religious practices all over Latin America. Several years ago, I came across La Virgen de la Buena Leche (the Virgin of the Good Milk), whom many women turn to if they are experiencing

problems with breastfeeding. Aside from prayer, we have many other traditions to support breastfeeding mothers. There are many galactagogue¹ herbs, as well as home remedies such as rubbing the new mum's back with almond oil to help her milk come in, and keeping her warm, and foods such as *atole* (made with cornflour) in Mexico, or *cocido de quinoa* (a broth made of quinoa) in Peru, which are used to encourage lactation.

My journey

When I was pregnant the first time in Mexico, I did not think about breastfeeding much. I never wondered whether I would be able to breastfeed, nor did I read any books on the topic or attend any classes in preparation. I felt intuitively that it would be fine.

My daughter's arrival into the world was a beautiful, powerful, unmedicated birth. Like many 'drug-free' newborns, in the first hour or so after birth she was highly alert, participative in her own way, and making eye contact with my husband and me. With a bit of encouragement from my doula, my baby found the breast and fed happily for several uninterrupted minutes that felt like a blissful eternity. In the next few days, even though I experienced slightly sore nipples, there were no words to express the pleasure and joy of holding this little creature to my breast.

Over the years as a doula and a La Leche League leader in the UK, I have heard so many pregnant mothers say, "I will give it a go, but lots of my girlfriends were not able to breastfeed." As if breastfeeding were like flipping a coin and seeing on which side it landed.

Overcoming cultural barriers to breastfeeding

The "not enough milk" complex seems to be an increasing epidemic in the world. Yet people don't seem to realise that physiologically only a tiny minority of women will truly not be able to breastfeed or will experience milk supply problems. Several decades ago, Gabriella Palmer had already spotted this discrepancy: "How is it that in some societies, 100% of poor, marginally nourished women can all breastfeed successfully, while in others, groups of privileged, well-nourished women cannot?"²

One essential component for successful breastfeeding seems to be an awareness of many successful happy breastfeeding stories. When women are surrounded mainly by negative experiences, doubt can creep in like a dormant serpent.

At the first International Nurturing Conference, held in London, in October 2008, Ina May Gaskin, the author of

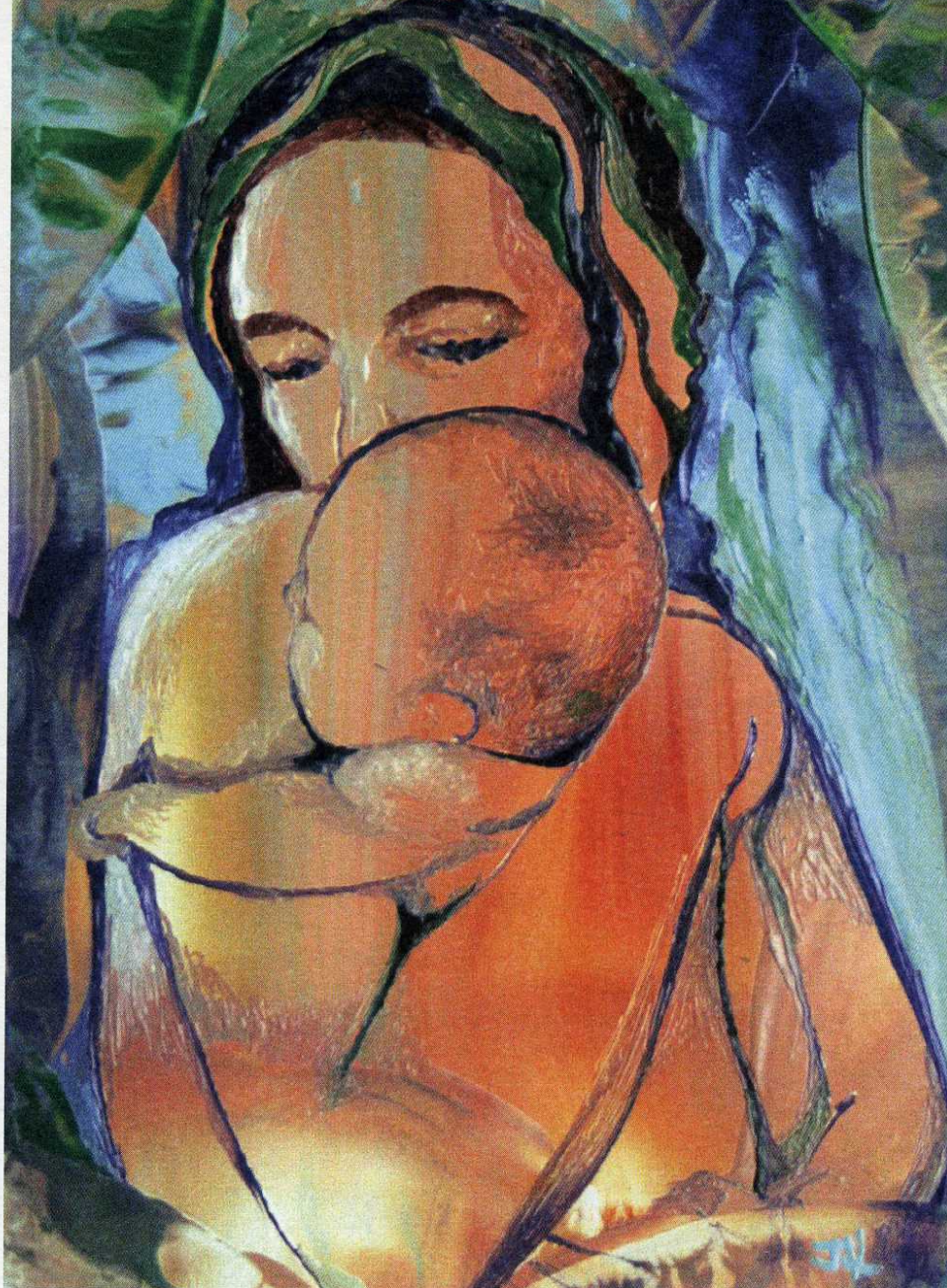
Spiritual Midwifery, said: "The best preparation in the Farm (referring to her community) for new parents is to have contact with breastfeeding mothers, make nursing babies visible and exchange positive stories and experiences."

Having supported many mums, I have also come to the conclusion that there seems to be a pervading "too posh not to bottle-feed" phenomenon going around. Psychology can play a detrimental role when women look into breastfeeding. Are we comfortable with our bodies, our breasts and breastfeeding? Are people around us supportive and comfortable with breastfeeding? That is the bottom line behind the decision many women seem to face nowadays. Thus the question becomes: "Do I really want to breastfeed, or not?"

Similarly, in my experience, what a vast proportion of new mums need most is just reassurance. Having someone whisper to their heart (while shushing their mind): "You are doing fine. Yes, that is absolutely normal. Don't worry!" That is probably why Suzanne Colsen's Biological Nurturing research and findings have become so useful and popular in certain developed countries where perhaps women tend to think too much about breastfeeding. Once they lie back and relax, they are able to switch off the neo-cortex or thinking brain and allow the right cocktail of hormones to be released, and then breastfeeding improves dramatically.

In addition, there doesn't seem to be enough family support in countries like the UK. So, for the vast majority of new mums, fitting forty days of blissful pampering, resting and baby bonding is simply impossible. The pressure to go out, keep the household running or socialise in order not to feel isolated in the early weeks is quite common. Knowing that a *cuarentena* is generally difficult, in my doula capacity I always encourage my new mums to learn to prioritise: "Stay in bed with your baby for at least a week after giving birth, if you can." It's the best start to getting breastfeeding on the right track, bonding with their newborn baby and getting plenty of rest to recover.

Not many countries in the world will be immune to the "too posh not to bottle-feed" phenomenon or the "not enough milk" complex, and Latin America is no exception. Thus it has become crucial today to celebrate breastfeeding as a powerful feminine legacy, by reclaiming it as the most natural, healthy and beautiful transition into and through



Breastfeeding is an act of love

motherhood. In this way the art of breastfeeding will never be lost and will be passed on genuinely from heart to heart, to our daughters and theirs, in perpetuity. ●

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Image by Judith Kuegler

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Footnotes

1. A galactagogue is a substance that increases the production of milk in humans and other animals. It may be synthetic, plant-derived or endogenous (produced by the body).

2. Gabriella Palmer, *The Politics of Breastfeeding*, 1993, 2nd ed. London: Pandora Press, p 20.

www.biologicalnurturing.com