The Milky Way: Navigating Breastfeeding in Today’s Social Universe

O, thou beautiful damsel, may the four oceans
Of the earth contribute the secretion of milk
In thy breasts for the purpose of improving
The bodily strength of the child
O, thou with the beautiful face, may the child
Reared on your milk, attain a long life, like
The gods made immortal with drinks of nectar

~Sushruta, an ancient Indian physician

Consider the Milky Way. According to Greek mythology, the great god Zeus placed his infant son Heracles upon his wife Hera’s breast while she slept, seeking to bestow immortality to his little demi-god. When Hera woke suddenly, she pushed Heracles away, and the milk that spurted from her breast created the Milky Way. In actuality, the Milky Way galaxy was most likely formed through a slow, methodical consumption of other, smaller galaxies, a process known as hierarchical clustering. Or, as we moms prefer to call it, cluster feeding. The term Milky Way comes from the Latin “Via Lactea:” The Road of Milk, which is itself derived from the Greek word for galaxy “kyklos galaxias:” milky circle.

Is it a coincidence that the web of an exploded Milky Way star so closely resembles the network of ligaments and sinew and muscle and milk ducts that make up the breast? Think of the worlds we carry within us. As Carl Sagan famously declared, “We are made of star stuff.” 99% of the human body is comprised of oxygen, hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus, which existed generations beforehand as stars. When we breastfeed, we deliver that
4.5 billion-year-old power and potential to our children. We feed them knowledge, and health, and tradition, and comfort, and love. We feed them our history, all that came before. We forge an intrinsic bond, a bridge that connects generations throughout the space and time continuum. Motherhood is universal and true, a marriage of science and spirituality. When we breastfeed, we are the tree of life. We are Mother Nature.

The beautiful Joyce Kilmer poem, Trees, comes to mind here. “I think that I shall never see A poem lovely as a tree. A tree whose hungry mouth is prest Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast…” There is, in our current culture, a movement afoot to normalize breastfeeding as a whole and public nursing in particular. In 2015, the word “brelfie” entered our vernacular and spread like wildfire across the landscape of social media. There was a new app called PicsArt, which transformed the “brelfie” into an art piece by depicting a mother’s breast as a root system branching out as a tree into their feeding infant’s mouth. Isn’t that divine? I want to glorify that. I want to romanticize it. And I’m not the only one.

Breastmilk has been revered for time immemorial, surpassing other bodily fluids like urine, sweat, and tears. It should come as no surprise that snot came in last. Poor snot. Snot fair. Breastfeeding has always been accepted as the most natural way to feed a baby. From historical documents and artifacts, we know that most women in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome breastfed their children. Ceramic vessels depicting women breastfeeding have been unearthed from the Moche civilization of Peru, which flourished from 100-700 AD. In traditional Japanese culture, women delivered their babies at home and breastfed sometimes until early adolescence. The Qur’an of Islam states that “mothers may breastfeed their children two complete years for whoever wishes to complete the nursing.” And what about Mother Mary?
Baby Jesus at Mary’s breast is one of the most enduring artistic images. In my book, she must have been divinely favored if she got to skip the whole pangs of childbirth thing. But I digress.

History tells us that as our ancient societies evolved, breastfeeding began to be seen as too “common” a practice to be done by royal mothers, so wet nurses came into favor and only lower-class women would breastfeed their own infants. In 1600s Europe, over 50% of all women, regardless of class, paid for their babies to be wet-nursed. In 1780, a whopping 90% of women did not breastfeed. Why? Because husbands felt breastfeeding ruined their wives’ “maidenly bosoms.” Because breastfeeding impacted a woman’s fertility, and men wanted HEIRS. MALE heirs. Because there was an old wives’ tale that said sexual intercourse tainted breastmilk, and obviously men could NOT be denied their ability to fornicate. Because insert mansplaining here.

And then the tides turned. So much so that in 1793, France denied welfare to women who didn’t breastfeed. In 1794, Germany made it a LAW that all able-bodied women breastfeed. The reform movements of 1800’s Europe and young America saw a mandated return to in-home breastfeeding of babies by their own mothers. “True feminists breastfeed!” was the banner du jour!

After WWII, the US saw a dramatic increase in formula feeding, primarily because women had stepped outside the home and into the workforce, and infant formula was being touted as a convenience item which allowed for a freer lifestyle. By the time the 1970s rolled around, only 22% of American mothers were breastfeeding, and most only for the first few weeks after birth.

I think of holistic doctor and mother Christine Northrup, who said, “When we trust the makers of baby formula more than we do our own ability to nourish our babies, we lose a chance
to claim an aspect of our power as women. Thinking that baby formula is as good as breast milk is believing that thirty years of technology is superior to three million years of nature’s evolution. Countless women have regained trust in their bodies through nursing their children, even if they weren’t sure at first that they could do it.” Where did I find this quote? On the internet.

In today’s digital age, with information being more widely accessible than ever before, breastfeeding rates are once again on the rise. According to the CDC, in 2015, 4 out of 5 infants born in the US started breastfeeding. At 6 months, 58% of them were still breastfeeding, and at 12 months, 36%. These numbers suggest that American mothers may not be getting enough support from their doctors, family members, and employers to maintain optimal breastfeeding.

Now, I am obviously not a breastfeeding expert, but it seems to me that a mother who is at her physical and mental best is more equipped to care for her newborn. Healthy mother, healthy baby. If our ultimate goal is to support breastfeeding mothers, we need to address the barriers to breastfeeding, like cultural stigma, a mother’s feelings of embarrassment, newborn allergies, lactation problems, returning to work and finding childcare, etc. What were my barriers? Premature babies. Lack of latching. Lack of confidence about breastfeeding in public due to being a public figure, and after the birth of my second son, postpartum depression. In other words, I struggled. A lot. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Journey with me back in time, to April 18, 1982. The stork dropped me off 4 weeks early, but the doctors declared I was practically perfect in every way, except for the fact that my breast tissue was also premature. Fast forward to 1997, and puberty and my mother finally confessing that no, my breasts will not be getting any larger. Cue my love affair with padded bras. May 15, 2012. Pip and Squeak become the little boobies that could. It seems, regardless of being cursed with “premature breast tissue” at birth, that I could in fact produce milk. I even
became a C cup! My cup ranneth all the way over my itty bitty titty bras and I cried (a lot) over spilled milk. But secretly? Even though my skin was stretched tight as a drum and I thought my chest cavity would burst open from the built-up pressure, I LOVED having boobs. The prophet Moses performed a miracle when he took water from a stone. I also performed a miracle: I got milk from two diamonds. And even though it hurt like a mother, I actually loved breastfeeding. I miss it.

I remember the LA-Z Boy chair. Its comforting sage color, its covering of velour. Honestly, it was hideous, but it held us in the wee hours of the night and in the peak afternoon sun. It was soothing, like a hug. I told my husband I didn’t want one. I didn’t care how much his family enjoyed them. I wanted my baby’s nursery to look like a perfect painting, down to the Anthropologie wallpaper I picked out and paid for with our apartment’s entire security deposit.

I remember the Madeline L’Engle writing pad, a gift from my mother, which I would use to draw tick marks each time I breastfed, left side, then right side… marking how many times my little man had peed and pooped. I remember the way he would smile in his sleep and his tongue would flick and twitch on my nipple as a dream moved its way across the landscape of his tiny translucent face.

Ah, the joy of suckling! She lovingly watched the fishlike motions of the toothless mouth and she imagined that with her milk there flowed into her little son her deepest thoughts, concepts, and dreams. ~Milan Kundera

I remember wondering at the way his pinkie finger curled just like daddy’s and how his brow was almost always furrowed, deep in thought, contemplating the cosmos. Sometimes I would nap with him in that sage velour chair, gently swaying back and forth, in our own little sage velour boat on a calm sea in the middle of Queens. There was an IKEA rug and an antique
Beatrix Potter Peter Rabbit print and a small trash can because I don’t believe in diaper pails.

“Look at me! I can hold 40,000 soiled diapers! Aren’t I incredible?” Yes. Incredibly disgusting.

I remember the fear I felt during Hurricane Sandy. As a first responder, my husband was on-duty and I sat on the 6th floor of our apartment building listening to the wind howl and the building moan, watching the lights flicker on and off, and praying that we didn’t lose power. Because I had a two month supply of pumped breastmilk in the freezer, and it was a hoarded treasure I couldn’t comprehend losing.

I remember when life got busier. I went back to work, so I began living and breathing this ritual of moving breastmilk from pumping backpack to freezer to fridge to bowl of hot water… I would take that backpack and all its paraphernalia with me. The plastic storage bags, the Look Ma No Hands pumping bra, the bottles with their bright yellow caps, the cleaning wipes, the cooler, the icepack, the extra small breast shields we had to order specially from the beyond section of Bed Bath and Beyond… Oh the places I would pump – the car, the bathroom, the airport, a corner, my dressing room…thankfully my trusty backpack had a built-in battery. So I could pump unplugged.

I remember when he bit me. We were in our faithful sage velour chair. I was hovering on the precipice of blissful half sleep and chomp went those teeth. I roared like the lion of March and my nipple shrank in pain. Perhaps this was how Hera felt when Zeus performed his subterfuge? As it was, Pip the nip was not a fan. And Squeak played a sympathetic hide and seek behind her nursing pad. And I didn’t know it then. But it would be the last time I breastfed him. I made it 10 months.
(The following is an excerpt from my chapter in “The Unofficial Guide to Surviving Pregnancy Without Losing Your Mind.”)

“I watch you breathe. Tiny hat and tiny swaddle encompass you snugly, where, mere moments ago, that was my job. We were strangers sharing space. Blood strangers spooning, you in my womb, bunny in my burrow. And now, here you are, sprawled before me, tiny stranger who I’ve somehow known my whole life. We’ve breastfed a couple of times now, your little mouth rooting for my nipple, my jaw gritted with determination, grimacing every time you succeed. It hurts so much. I remember this with your brother. I remember being chapped and raw and bloody and calloused and hard. But my will was harder, and I persevered. I silently promise I will with you, too.

But my heart burns. It threatens to burst from its ribbed barrier, for I am so in love with you, you see. It is this instantaneous thing. How strange. With your brother, I did not feel this love-at-first-sight imprinting of souls. My devotion burned steadily. With you, it is hungry, ferocious and wild, the growing pains an all-consuming conflagration. I seek to feed it, to sew you to me. But you won’t latch. I can’t satisfy you. You eat as if it bores you, casually grazing, luxuriating. You mock my battle with insomnia, as if you instinctively grasp that sleep is an elusive mate but 2 am is friendly. I find myself defeated, my heat snuffed out.

I recant my silent promise to nurse you and I pump instead. You are now “bottle-fed.” My companions become a hard kitchen chair and a pink pumping bra and a black granite counter and a crushing sense of guilt. Your father holds you shirtless, skin to skin, bonding you to him, and I sit with my feet on the cold tile floor. I connect with a machine that evicts my milk and squishes my nipples with a relentless errr eeee errr eeee errr eeee, its reverie only broken by the thrum of the aquarium filter. I am lonely. The cold creeps up like the serpent of Eden,
beckoning me to slip under, calling me to darkness. Sometimes, I eat his dark fruit. Sometimes,
I think it would be so easy. Sometimes, I lose myself in nausea and cellulite and ovarian torsion
and sleepless nights and blood sugar spikes. I overflow with self-loathing. Water pools in my
ankles, feeding the root systems of purple trees. My hair is a field of dry wheat. With your
brother, it fell out and returned lush and soft, new growth, a new season. But it’s brittle now, and
it won’t fall out. It just hangs there like chaff, like ash spaghetti. The night’s negative spaces
hang the moon.

But mornings come, and coffee helps. A fresh pot brews, the beans bitter and strong. I
pour in some almond milk and contemplate the fake coral in the aquarium. The tank needs
cleaning; the dog needs fed; your brother’s lunch needs packing. Tasks beg my attention. But I
pause and take stock of me taking up space. The landscape of my corporeal form is new. My
hips have shifted; there are new dimples, new hills and handles with which I retain water and
hold you. New pale stretch marks have broken ground, as if some sharp-nailed witch drew spells
down my buttocks with white chalk, tattooing protective lines of maternal instinct into my skin.
Gravity has pulled my breasts further down like small mountains after a mudslide. My areolas
bend in awkward angles, broken tilt-a-whirls. They still spit milk sometimes, as if they seek
your lips. How strange.

The sky is ablaze with radiant color; a laser beam of sunlight streams through the kitchen
window, temporarily blinding me, and it reminds me: the soul that breaks open contains the
whole universe. It is there in the golden ratio swirl of your hair and the logarithmic spiral of
your fingerprints. There are Fibonacci-sequenced galaxies in your eyes and constellation
freckles scattered across your nose and your fingernails are crescent moons and your skin is
made of star stuff. And I tell myself I’ll soon shave with ease. I’ll soon sleep for 5 hours
straight. I’ll soon see you smile, new teeth breaking forth like crocus shoots in spring. I tell myself it’s okay to be sad. Picasso painted miracles during his Blue Period. And I tell myself it’s okay to be tired. Even God rested on the seventh day. I tell myself it’s okay.”

We contain miracles. We’re women, and we can do hard things.

I am a mother. Being a mother is the hardest role I have ever played. There’s a reason you hear that phrase all the time; it’s the truth. I am not sure anything could have prepared me for the emotional onslaught I face on the daily as a mother. The shock and awe tactics, the manipulation, the frustration when my oldest lashes out in anger, then belittles himself for doing so, the hurt when my littlest one always chooses Daddy. When I go to read him bedtime stories and place his little chicken legs in their sleep sack and he screams in protest for daddy. He seeks Daddy’s arms for comfort, not mine. But I’m lucky. I’m lucky because Daddy is actually home, being the greatest partner I could have ever asked for. Daddy graciously took his paternity leave and is the stay at home parent with my second son. And I am the working parent. I chose to return to work, because although I could have taken off as much time as I needed, I would not have been paid. There is no sick time or maternity leave in my line of work. I was actually supposed to film the day my water broke, and Tom Selleck, bless his heart, rewrote our entire scene. Frank and Garrett exit the elevator and walk past Baker’s empty desk, on their way to Frank’s office. Garrett asks, “Where’s Baker?” And Frank, not breaking his stride or missing a beat, says, “In labor.” So cheeky. When I was in triage, I received a text message from one of our production assistants. It was a photo of Tom, frozen at the door to his office, not knowing what to do since I wasn’t there to open the door for him.
I’m lucky. I’m lucky because even without maternity leave and sick time, I had a job to come back to. A job that supported my need to pump every few hours, giving me the space, privacy, and time to do so. A job that made sure nursing pads were at the ready, in case I experienced an unexpected letdown. A job with people who gave me confidence by way of Spanx and Uggs and made my coffee just the way I like it, and kept the donuts coming after I was cleared of gestational diabetes. A job with people that have tissues on hand, because I cry a lot now. All the time. I cry at Geico commercials. Who’s with me?

I’m lucky. I’m lucky because I have all the support in the world, at home and at work, and I still feel like I failed my second son.

Here’s a prime example. There was a photo I posted on my private Facebook page of myself feeding him with a bottle. He was about 4 weeks old at the time, and I had been exclusively pumping for about a week. I was knee deep in guilt and shame that I couldn’t give him the same experience I had given my older son. The icy fingers of post-partum depression had started to curl their way around my heart. Facebook was my escape, a mindless way to find the silver lining. I think I captioned my photo, “When your mom posts so much on Facebook she drives you to drink.” A friend made the unsolicited comment, “I sure hope that’s breast milk in there. #breastisbest!” Here’s the thing. It WAS breastmilk in there. But regardless of the bottle’s contents, or my personal situation, she judged me, and the way I was feeding my son, in a public forum, one where the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

I joined Facebook in the first place to streamline my sharing process, because texting photos of my kids to all my friends and family had become a Herculean task. (Full disclosure, I also wanted to stalk the mean girls from middle school.) I wanted to share every gas-driven smile. Every triumph and small victory. He pooped! He only projectile-vomited once today! I
went quickly from privately posting once a week to several times a day to my career and my life being publicly driven, if not dictated, by social media. Now, studies have shown that even when our phones are in the other room, our ability to focus and our productivity falter. Our smartphones are (gasp!) making us dumber. That being said, I think social media is the fastest and easiest way for us to exchange information, not to mention engage in “sharing.” There’s a reason we have to “connect” to the internet – as humans, we need connection. Here’s the problem: open book means open season. You’re damned if you do, and you’re damned if you don’t. Especially if you’re a “celebrity.”

While at Coachella, Victoria’s Secret model Behati Prinsloo posted a photo of herself, captioning it "#pumpanddump" and writing, “More like cowchella lol, Jamiroquai was sooooo worth the pump and dump" on her Instagram Stories. Cue the trolls and their judgmental remarks: “Nooooo…such a waste of milk.” “Disgusting…what kind of mom pumps and dumps?? Just so you can drink?? Gross..get a life!” Myself personally, I’m pretty sure her enjoying a date night with her husband is the definition of “getting a life.”

And the judgment doesn’t just happen online. I remember taking my firstborn son out for a morning walk in our local park. It was June. It was hot, maybe 80 degrees climbing to 95 later in the day. I took one of those lightweight Muslin blankets with me to keep his delicate pale skin in shade; I still felt he was too young to wear sunscreen. Plus, I was only going out for a little while. Just a short walk, from one end of the park to the other. You know who did have sunscreen on? Me. Vampire. Hi. I brought a bottle of Similac with me, one of those 2 oz ones that comes with a rubber nipple. Unscrew the cap, screw on the nipple, and voila! A gourmet meal! I remember two older women, coming up to me as I sat down on a park bench to feed my son his snack. “Shame on you.” I looked up in alarm; were they speaking to me? Oh yes, I had
their full attention. Their faces were contorted with disgust. “Shame on you. You should be breastfeeding. You are a young, capable woman. What you are doing is not good for the baby. It’s not natural. And you should have that baby inside – he is too young to be out in this sun.” I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry, to defend myself. “I don’t want him to ingest any sunscreen! I don’t want him to eat my sweat from the walk. My boobs are bleeding. I needed a break!” Instead, I blushed and said, “I’m sorry. I’m new at this.” That was the day mom guilt blossomed inside me. There’s got to be a better way. One that doesn’t engage our fight or flight response and cause us to raise our hackles and go on the defensive.

There was another time I took my older son out for a jog in the same local park. Before I began my run, he decided he was hungry. I hadn’t brought anything for him, as it was about to be his nap time, but even the most well-intentioned of babies tend to run on their own schedules, so he naturally protested with every fiber of his little body. “FEED ME SEYMOUR!” Welp. Ok. So I sat down on the same park bench, lifted up my sports tank and started feeding him. Not two minutes later… a young woman walked by WITH A BABY: “There are children here. You should cover up or do that at home.”

I mean….this was a fellow MOM. I was instantly filled with rage and wrath from the gods. But instead, I took a deep breath and looked at her and said, “I am feeding my son. He was hungry. It happens. I am doing my best, just like it seems you are. You’re out for a walk with your baby on this beautiful day, just like me. Good job. We’re both just trying to survive. Take care.” She stood there, mouth gaping like a fish out of water. Awkward silence. Then, a very meek “You’re right.” We shared a smile.

So how do we overcome this judgement that is part and parcel with breastfeeding?
I think of my village. “The moms.” My village is a melting pot of tough mothers. When it comes to breastfeeding, I think we all had great expectations. We read books and magazines. We over-gogled. We asked our doctors. We looked to social media and our celebrity influencers. But I am convinced that our truest and most immediate source of information and support remains each other. So, when I found out I would be speaking to all of you, naturally, I reached out to “the moms.” The ladies who’ve lived it. “I survived breastfeeding and all I got was this lousy spit-up laden t-shirt.” I craved their stories and words, knowing they would fill my bucket with their stereotypical candor and humor, like this gem: “People need to get over thinking breastfeeding in public is gross. Amen and I’m out.”

Their breastfeeding journeys are as different as they are. They breastfed for as much time as never to as long as 2 years. They expected breastfeeding to be easy natural blissful instinctive organic empowering. In reality, they found it stressful painful brutal confusing frustrating work. But they also discovered it was: healthy bonding nurturing powerful and my personal favorite: fascinating but hard as f--.

I sent them the now-viral image of Rachel McAdams in her pumping bra, dripping both diamonds and milk, to gauge whether their responses to it would be as visceral as mine. To me, this image evokes all the feral beauty of breastfeeding and slams it together with the practicality and inconvenience of it. To them, this photo also speaks volumes: “A woman can embrace her womanhood in multiple ways without sacrificing different parts of herself. She is empowering, inspiring, honest, playful, and frank.” “What a badass. She’s totally unapologetic for her decision to use her breasts for their scientific purpose of nourishing her child and sustaining life.” “Powerful and sexy, owning all the things that make her a woman. My grandmother always told
me that the biggest mistake a woman can make is to hide the things about her that make her female.’” Rachel put it all out there, and these women are here for it.

But they’re here with a grain of salt, because although seeing celebrities promote breastfeeding is helpful, in the words of my mother, “You must be strong in your own personal convictions and not be swayed by others’ feelings towards your choice.”

When it comes to breastfeeding, we must boldly go where we’ve never gone before, but in the meantime, we are still playing “catch-up” with women’s equality. Women can do it all, and honestly, we are doing it all…but it comes at a price. We are outpacing our own bodies. And we’re exhausted. In America, the focus is still largely on the baby – not the health and well-being of the mother. For example, why do we only have one 6 week postpartum check-up? Without support and constant care, of course breastfeeding rates will plummet.

We should take a page out of Japan’s book, where postpartum centers are gaining popularity. Mothers with young babies can stay overnight and receive care from therapists and midwives with everything from breastfeeding support to mental health counseling to pelvic floor rehabilitation. We should recognize the value of China’s “sitting the month” rest period, where new moms don’t wash their hair or drink anything cold. Or Mexico’s “la cuarentena” – the 40-day rest. France provides all new mothers at least 10 sessions of physical rehabilitation for their pelvic floor. Each new mom in the Netherlands is given a “kraamverzorgster,” who makes in-home visits for a week and a half after delivery. This care worker is not only trained to provide healthcare to both mom and baby, but also assist with shopping and cooking.

These countries acknowledge that the mother’s well-being affects her child’s future health. A depressed mom is less likely to stimulate her child. An exhausted one is less likely to breast-feed. The US must do more. We must go beyond providing physical spaces to express
breastmilk and granting six weeks of maternity leave. Breastfeeding should be discussed at prenatal, postpartum, and pediatric visits, so that mothers are prepared and know their options when their expectations do not meet reality. Lactation consultants should always be covered by insurance, and every mother should get a personalized visit from one during that crucial first week they are home from the hospital.

That’s not to say we’re not making strides. Girl Scouts of Greater Iowa’s newly implemented Infants at Work Program allows all new parents to bring their infant to work with them every single day up to age 6 months – this is in addition to already established benefits like 8 weeks of paid parental leave. “We want to normalize a reality where having children and advancing your career are not mutually exclusive.” A new community wellness center called WowMoms just opened near me on Long Island. It merges parent’s self-care needs with the care needs of their children, bringing a sense of family community, and that “it takes a village” mentality. These are concrete steps to combat barriers to breastfeeding. Little steps to help new moms cope and embrace the connection of motherhood without sacrificing their sense of self.

What more can we do to encourage women to breastfeed? How can we use our diverse platforms to do more, to reach and teach more? We know breastfeeding is a universal solution that gives every child a fair start in life, one that improves the health, wellbeing, and survival of women and children across the globe. We know human beings are fickle by nature, so let’s add our ever-shifting cultural norms into the equation… sprinkle in the controversy and judgement surrounding women who can and cannot breastfeed, who love and loathe the act of breastfeeding, who nurse for a week and nurse forever, who combine breastfeeding with formula feeding, who supplement… Seems to me, most of us fall squarely in the middle, right? We aren’t 100% fruitarian coconut oil-pulling deodorant-shunning yogis, and we aren’t straight up
Velveeta-slamming, Twinkie-downing chemical GMO pushers either. What we ARE is bombarded by digital projections of perfection – the definition of which seems to change at the whim and mercy of a Facebook algorithm or a celebrity tweet or some misguided online “study…”

Social media is wonderful. Social media is empowering, but your social network is all around you. So look up. Look out. Look up to. Look out for. Find the connective tissue. Put your phone down. Social media is not going anywhere. Your breastfeeding network is all around you. In the grocery line. Next door. Pumping gas. At the bus stop. At the gym. On the train. In front of you, behind you. BeSIDE you. And for those of you whose breastfeeding journeys are over… remember your hard days. Find that mama who is struggling with a screaming toddler while juggling her newborn and smile at her. Smiling costs you nothing. But it could buy her a spark of hope. Send her solidarity. To quote Jared jewelers: Dare to be devoted. Be ready and willing. Be available. See those other mothers who are so desperate to be validated. Who just need a dance partner. A high five. Be their village.

What if our little by littles became a force to be reckoned with? For the first time in history, our Congress is actually representative of who we are as a nation. We have more women in office than ever before. More women means the issues that matter most to us become the issues that are addressed by our lawmakers. Let’s boldly build our longer tables. Even if no one joins us to break bread, we will have created space for ourselves to breathe.

C.S. Lewis once said, “You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.” My breastfeeding journey is over, but I have a responsibility to be an advocate for those women who will walk down that same “Via Lactea.”
So consider the Milky Way. It is winding and wild, ever-shifting with the cosmic wind, ever-varying with our vantage points, ever-changing with time of day and presence of light pollution. Breastfeeding remains a polarizing subject, one whose success depends on where in the country you live and how it is viewed by those in your immediate circle of trust. But as our world gets smaller and our minds expand, I have no doubt breastfeeding will continue to thrive. Statistics are just that – statistics. It is our individual stories, collected and shared, that shape our current culture. Fear of the unknown and fear of failure can be tackled head on with facts and faith. That may sound corny: I don’t care.

My postpartum depression and anxiety clouded my judgment, but the evidence that both of our sons are benefitting from my breast milk is right before my eyes. My sons are strong magnetic souls I get to steward. My 6.5 year old is an inventor, a code maker and breaker, a mad scientist whose ideas flow out of him like lava, hot and heavy and immediate. My 2 year old is a wildling who devours books. Literally and figuratively. He rips them to shreds, but only after he reads them to pieces and tastes every word. My volcano and my tornado. They play; my husband and I pray.

In John Steinbeck’s classic novel, The Grapes of Wrath, Rose of Sharon, after giving birth to a stillborn baby, recognized the life-saving liquid she possessed and breastfed a starving man, uttering these three simple words to him: “You got to.”

We got to. We have got to welcome other mothers, as they are. No matter how they’re feeding their babies. Because every mother counts, not just the like-minded ones. Consider the Milky Way. It is not an island universe – rather, it is a member of a cluster of galaxies called the Local Group. Our Milky Way is not an island, and no mother is an island. So I challenge you to not just think global. Think galactic, and act local.