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First Month with My Newborn Was Both the Fastest and the Longest of My Life

By Leandra Preston-Sidler
UCF Forum columnist
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I haven't slept more than two hours straight in a month. Showers elude me. The house that used to be filled with wine and planned dinners is now filled with diapers and frozen pizza.

No one told me it would be this hard. I don't think it's possible to prepare anyone for the dramatic and unimaginable life change that new parenthood brings. From labor to the first month of life with a newborn, some experiences cannot be summed up, articulated or overstated.

The moment I found out I was pregnant, I cried. Tears of joy laced with utter fear.

Google immediately became our best friend; my husband and I searched for everything "and pregnancy," took childbirth classes, read books until we felt fluent in newborn parenting and assumed the occasional warnings that folks shared could not possibly apply to us.

I thought waiting until I was older would protect me from the inability to deal with the stress of a baby — that being more established or mature would secure my sanity. I thought that perhaps all my years of teaching Women's Studies might have provided extra insight or preparation. I could not have been more wrong.

Our culture romanticizes parenthood from an early age — the baby dolls I played with as a child did not wreak havoc on my home or make me cry uncontrollably. There were no hormones or marital strife to contend with. Financial concerns did not exist, and I did

not need anything to fulfill the lifeless glass eyes of the dolls who sat still until I moved them.

Our baby is a completely different story than those I crafted as a little girl. I thought babies slept more and ate less.

I imagined writing my dissertation and grading papers as I looked over my sleeping child in the cradle next to my desk or glancing at the video monitor as she breathed quietly in her crib upstairs. My husband would rock her as I cooked dinner (or vice versa) and we would stare lovingly at her as we prepared to drift off to sleep.

Naïve is an understatement. I cannot even open a book, much less write a chapter or research. I am writing this with one hand, the baby in the other.

Some days I don't even make it outside. One particularly rough day, my husband and I realized at eight o'clock at night that we had done nothing but rock our crying baby. Emails go unanswered for days, visits promised to friends are passed up to avoid the trouble of dressing the baby and ourselves and grocery shopping is a luxury left to our parents as they bring us bread, eggs and another pack of diapers.

Though mothers commonly shared horror stories of their painful labors during my pregnancy, I rarely heard about the overwhelming challenges of caring for a newborn. The pictures my parent friends post on Facebook do not tell the whole story because we do not typically share the misery of parenting with others; who wants to see a new mother crumbling underneath the stress of sleep deprivation and an inability to satisfy a crying infant? We do not talk about tears shed in the rare shower or the endless piles of laundry covered in sour milk and spit-up. Articles preach the benefits of breastfeeding but few emphasize the utter selflessness required and how little else can be accomplished when attached to a baby who must eat every two hours or all hell breaks loose.

With all that said, I feel guilty about complaining so publicly about the best experience of my life. I mean, this is the best experience of my life, right?

I also feel guilty telling my own truths about new parenthood, especially when I look at her sweet face. How can I complain when blessed with a beautiful, healthy baby? However, when I stumbled upon a blog post sharing the frustration of new parenthood while feeding the baby at three in the morning and tears burst forth, I realized that telling the truth about parenthood is the greatest service we can offer one another.

Everyone I vent to says it will get better, that figuring it all out is the hardest part. They also warn about wishing this time away; “It goes so fast,” they say. Paradoxically, this has been the fastest and longest month of my life. I know they are right. I don’t want to regret anything but can’t help looking forward to her sleeping through just one night.

Last week we took our one-month-old baby to meet Santa Claus. We tried to time everything perfectly — when to wake and feed her so she would be open-eyed but not screaming. As we approached the elaborate setup, my misty-eyed husband said, “Can you believe we are taking our baby to meet Santa Claus?”

“I can’t — let me take a photo to post on Facebook.”

Momentarily, I was a parent reveling in the beauty of parenthood rather than crushed beneath it and I realized, even if a bit reluctantly, that these are the moments I will remember one day, these are the truths about parenthood I, too, will be most eager to share.

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