Parenthood
A Bridge of Empathy

When my daughter was born, all 6 pounds 9 ounces, I felt deeply responsible for her but not deeply connected to her, at least not in the way I thought I would. After years of seeing social media posts from friends who were new moms, making statements such as “Love at first sight!” or “The deepest love I have ever known,” I felt like a monster. “Why didn’t I feel that? What was wrong with me?” The doubt about my capability as a mother began to seep in.

And then there was breastfeeding; a feat I thought I would easily master. I even took a breastfeeding class, diligently keeping notes during the entire 3 hours. Piece of cake. Wrong. So wrong. Nurse after nurse would come into my postpartum room, shove my breast into our infant’s mouth and say “See? Just like that.” “Right, okay, I’ve got this,” I would think, only to wince in pain every time I attempted breastfeeding on my own. The pain grew until I was crying through feeds at home, my husband desperately trying to help but, I suspect, consumed by his own sense of powerlessness. The doubt and anxiety kept sinking deeper and deeper.

Her cries were difficult to understand. “Was she getting enough milk? Is it me? I can’t calm her. I am not nurturing enough. I don’t know how to do this.” The sleep deprivation and the cascade of hormones left me in a delirium-like state, unable to control my emotions and constantly trying to hide from the sting of my own dark thoughts. I began to panic any time my husband would leave the house, terrified that the baby would start crying, and I wouldn’t be able to soothe her. “Was this postpartum anxiety? Depression? Or was it normal?”

I grieved the loss of my old life. I missed my career, and the meaning my life had when I was at work. I missed uninterrupted Netflix marathons with my husband and carefree outings with friends. And most of all, I hated myself for having these thoughts. “How did my life become a fog of baby drool, screams, lactating, and unlatching? Would it ever take on meaning and order again? Why couldn’t I just be thankful?” The self-judgment precluded me from seeking help or therapy, as did the lack of community or transparency fed by social media images and societal expectations.

Slowly, the fog lifted. After 2 months, she started to recognize day vs night, and the 4-hour stretches of sleep rekindled a sense of clarity and calm in my central nervous system. I never thought I would see the day when I latched her to my breast and felt little to no pain, and a feeding session took only 7 minutes, but it finally happened. I began to accept that I could not always fix her cries, but I could sit with her and hold space for her suffering. She started to smile and tell me in her own way, “I love you. You are doing okay. You are not a bad mom.” And slowly my love for her emerged out of a place of darkness and doubt and became a source of warmth and light.

In retrospect, motherhood has been a lesson in humility, uncertainty, and grief, long before I found gratitude and joy. In some strange and unexpected way, becoming a parent connected me to the roller coaster of emotions my patients and their families go through. There is no way I could have prepared for it. There is no way anyone could have warned me how it would utterly destroy me and build me up again.

Fortunately, I have never lost someone close to me or personally battled through the uncertainty of long-term serious illness. Like many high-achieving women, maintaining a sense of control always felt central to my identity and to my history of success. But becoming a mother felt like a deep loss and process of surrendering before it felt like the biggest gift I have ever received. As a palliative care specialist, I am called to help families and patients through the most difficult experiences in which control is lost, hope is sometimes hard to find, and grief is all consuming. I never thought my daughter’s arrival would provide a bridge of empathy into these experiences, but it has.

At first, I struggled to put this in writing because how could I compare something so beautiful as the birth of a child—a blessing that so many long for—to the experience of illness and death? But I have seen similar beauty in such hardships; beauty in finding a strength one didn’t know they had, in mending broken relationships, in finding closure, in mourning the loss of an old self and finding meaning in a new one, and in learning to sit with suffering rather than trying to fix it.

Perhaps this essay resonates with some and brings judgment from others. But in sharing my own experiences, I hope others may feel emboldened to speak openly about theirs. As a palliative care chaplain has taught me, it is never hope or loss, fighting or letting go. It is always and. Gratitude and grief. Fear and love. Learning to be a mother has helped me to be a better palliative care physician, to be present for my patients in the way I have now learned to be present for myself, and for our daughter.