



Motherhood Lesson #987: Worry is a Misuse of Imagination



E X P E C T F U R L E N T H S / C E Q U I D - C A R E
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Near the end of summer my husband and I were on a morning walk, our 5-month-old daughter strapped to my chest in her carrier. We were probably talking about something baby related (as we do) and I was looking down in awe at my daughter's face (again, it's what we do) as she started to drift off to sleep. I tripped. The next thing I knew my daughter and I were on the ground.

It was all a blur.

Except the part where I watched my baby's head hit asphalt. That part was clear.

Let me say right away, she is ok.

No parent should ever have to see this. Our babies' heads are meant to land on mattresses, play mats, pillows, and maybe the floor as they are learning to walk, not asphalt, and not while strapped to the person they trust most in the world.

Intuitively, I knew my baby was going to be ok. My body took most of the fall. But I panicked and she cried. A look at her blonde little head revealed only a tiny red mark. Within ten minutes she was back to her smiling self.

I was not.

I insisted we take her to the pediatrician's office. She checked out fine.

The doctor turned to me, "but how are YOU?"

"Me? I'm fine."

"I think you need to go have a margarita."

Was it that obvious?

In lieu of drinks at 11AM my husband and I opted for double scoops of Van Leeuwen's vegan ice cream. It was the perfect distraction.

But soon my mind was replaying the fall. Over and over I watched my daughter's head hit the ground. Had it hit harder than I thought?

I no longer trusted the doctor, my memory or my intuition. I became paralyzed with fear.

That night I wanted so badly to check out. I was ready for that margarita, or twelve. I would have consumed those along with a good amount of Xanax had I not been exclusively breastfeeding. I couldn't continue in such an anxious state. And since I couldn't check OUT the only thing I could do was check IN and face all that I was feeling.

Instead, I checked on my baby every 10 minutes.

The next day I tried to stay busy, to distract myself. But I could not stop my mind from looping back to the moment of the fall, from imagining the worst in vivid detail. I broke down multiple times. I wanted to escape my life and be the person I was before I knew about this kind of worry.

I told my husband, who was holding our daughter, "I just don't feel safe."

Out of nowhere my 5-month-old angel starts laughing.

"Oh Mom, you are SO SILLY."

Wow, she was right.

I had been carrying around fears that something bad might happen to my baby since pregnancy - from miscarriage to stillbirth to whooping cough, to SIDS and now the latest worry du jour - brain damage.

I remembered a quote - "Worry is a misuse of imagination." I had been putting all of my energy into imagining an event that didn't happen and ignoring the reality that was right in front of me. As I stared in awe at my bright and healthy daughter how could I think - in this moment - that we were anything but safe?

A friend shared something interesting. Apparently, after a woman gives birth her brain actually gets bigger. A new mom's amygdala - the area in our brains that's responsible for anxiety, fear and stress - increases in grey matter. No wonder I was feeling so overwhelmed.

I needed to find a way to work with these emotions so I started to think of fear and worry as evolutionary tools for making smart choices, not entertainment for a creative mind.

Finally, I was able to let go. I took a breath, looked at my daughter and released the thoughts and images that were keeping me from being present in the world with her. Where we are safe.

It's become my daily practice.

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