

Motherhood & Millet

The Transforming Power of Beauty

By Meghan Isaacs

"Congratulations! You've survived the hardest part." These well-intended words from my son's pediatrician at his two-month checkup fell flat at my feet. In those days, I felt less like a survivor and more like a casualty.

In the months leading up to our first child's birth, my husband and I felt prepared for the lifestyle changes ahead. We had witnessed our friends' children's colicky cries, spit-ups and diaper disasters, and thus we had established excellent plans for dealing with the various obstacles ahead. But by 5 a.m. the first night home from the hospital, with our jaundiced, insatiable newborn who wanted to nurse far more often than "every 2-3 hours," we realized that we actually had no idea how unprepared we were.

Going Through the Motions

In those early days, our son struggled with breastfeeding and bilirubin levels, and sleep deprivation hit me like a brick. The hardest part was the stark realization that motherhood did not come easily or naturally for me. Before he was born, I imagined myself blissfully nursing him in the wee hours while praying the rosary and selflessly offering up the loss of sleep. Instead, I scrolled through

my phone, angry at God for giving me a baby who did not sleep well. Instead of being filled with warm tenderness for this perfect baby, I simply kept him alive—not out of feelings of affection, but just to keep him as quiet as possible for my own sanity. I was told this was love, but it did not feel like love at all.

I certainly experienced flashes of awareness that my son and motherhood were great gifts, even if these were not feelings of pervasive, overwhelming gratitude. The moments of joy, though, were usually overshadowed by all of the challenges and general exhaustion. Having never really suffered in my life, and recognizing that the suffering I was experiencing was relatively minor in the grand scheme of things, I wondered how people could not only endure much worse, but maintain a joyful faith in front of it. These mysteries of suffering, which fascinated me before, were now suddenly tangible—and impossible to understand. It took an unexpected encounter for me to discover myself again.

Awakened by Beauty

When my son was about five months old and I was at the height

of this crisis, I was asked to revisit an exhibit on the work of Jean-Francois Millet, a nineteenth-century French painter. Millet is best known for his depictions of peasant life in the countryside. In a time when his peers were painting landscapes, he focused on the poor, hard-working lives within the beautiful scenery. In my first encounter with these paintings, which occurred before I was a wife or mother, I was drawn to his subjects who toiled in the fields day in and day out. Millet managed to capture the looks of exhaustion, pride, dignity and hope that accompany hard labor. While I had never worked physically as hard as his subjects, I had felt the mental weariness of a long, mindless day at work with another on the docket for tomorrow.

While I was still struck by Millet's depictions of field laborers, now, revisiting these works in my current vocational state, his paintings of mothers completely captivated me. When I had previously studied these domestic scenes, I would see peaceful moments of a woman diligently sewing next to her sleeping baby. I had idolized this rural domesticity as idyllic, pure and—most ridiculously—attainable. Now, I see an



exhausted woman trying to fit in her chores during her child's too-short, twenty-minute catnap. Millet does not shy away from the hard realities of peasant life, but neither does he hide the moments of tranquility and the dignity of his subjects.

There was one painting in particular, *Peasant Woman Breastfeeding*, that hit close to home. The details in this painting are remarkable. He must have relied on a live model, because unless you have breastfed a baby you would not understand this woman's slouch, her hiked leg or her awkward arm placement. Before these details, however, I first notice how this woman is so beautiful and well-rested. Impossible! Upon reflection, this must be Millet's artistic eye: he sees a beauty in this moment that I do not. This is the goal of

the artist—to show their viewer something they may not be able to perceive for themselves. Millet revealed to me a beautiful woman and not just a sore back. Somehow, this scene of rural peasant life 200 years ago, has something to do with my vocation as a mother now.

Gift of Newness

This is exactly the beauty I need to remind me of who I am and Who I am made for. It is a beauty I am invited to choose. This beauty puts my heart in a disposition to be able to recognize Christ more clearly when He comes—even in a baby's midnight cries.

This encounter with Millet provoked me to intentionally and deliberately seek out some form of beauty every day at home with my son. Be it poetry, a piece of music, a delicious new recipe or

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even just gazing out the window for a few real moments—I wanted each day to open myself to the Mystery as He reveals Himself in authentic beauty. While I still often find myself unable to pray, I can *seek* beauty, even in my most sleep-deprived days.

These moments of beauty bring a newness to my vocation as a mother that I would never be able to cultivate internally. It is a newness that allows me to look at my son as his own little person with his own heart that also has the boundless capacity and desire for beauty. And this Artist's gaze on my son is more beautiful than any painting.