



The Paradox of Natural Mothering

C H R I S B O B E L

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of
Natural
Mothering

Chris Bobel



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Advance praise for *The Paradox of Natural Mothering*

“Motherhood in America *is* a paradox—sentimentalized and devalued at once. The ‘natural mothers’ Bobel researched show us not just their particular resolutions of the paradox, but also clarify the larger problems of mothering in this difficult world. Bobel has made a wonderful contribution to our understanding of American motherhood in all its forms.”

—Barbara Katz Rothman, Professor of Sociology, CUNY, and author of *Recreating Motherhood*

“Through respectful interviews and thoughtful analysis, Chris Bobel has produced an intriguing study of mothers who engage in home schooling, alternative health care and other ‘natural’ maternal practices for the sake of their children and in the hope of bringing about political change. A fascinating and disturbing book.”

—Sara Ruddick, author of *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*

“As most women search for ways to balance family life with pursuits outside the home, what happens to those who opt to devote themselves full-time and overtime to their children and families? With insight and passion, Chris Bobel shows how ‘natural mothers’ struggle to justify choices that may seem rebellious but are nevertheless socially constructed. By uncovering the paradoxes facing women who adopt traditional definitions of motherhood, she illuminates the tensions, contradictions, and limitations facing all contemporary women. This is a finely crafted, timely, and fascinating study.”

—Kathleen Gerson, Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology, New York University, and author of *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood*

"The Paradox of Natural Mothering is a well written, insightful and in-depth exploration of natural mothering, which is characterized by extensive mother/child contact, breast feeding, and natural health care. Reconciling natural mothering with feminism is just one of many fascinating themes discussed by author Chris Bobel."

—Linda Breen Pierce,
author of *Choosing Simplicity: Real People Finding
Peace and Fulfillment in a Complex World*

"An engaging, insightful, and compassionate account of yet another group of women attempting to carve out a solution to the time bind that goes along with the devaluation of motherhood, home, and family life in modern society. In addition to providing a first-rate ethnographic account of women who have embraced devotion to family, *The Paradox of Natural Mothering* uses feminist theory as a bridge to social movement theory to reveal the political implications of the identity-oriented and embodied strategies used by many activist groups attempting to redefine dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity. The book is a must read for students of gender and social movements."

—Verta Taylor, Ohio State University

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Acknowledgments

Ironically, as I was writing my dissertation-turned-book about families and some women's efforts to strengthen theirs, my family fell apart. It was hard writing about intact, nuclear families while mine was splitting. Nonetheless, contrasting my experience with others' gave me a perspective on how we all do the best we can with the resources we have. Mothers do not have the luxury of waiting until we feel stronger or wiser or saner before we act. We have kids, and the kids need us now.

But if we are lucky, we have people in our lives who can help us keep moving, and I have lots of those to thank here. It continually amazed me that the people surrounding me had much more confidence in my abilities than I did. In spite of my doubts, each believed I could produce not only a finished work, but a good one. For that, these individuals earned more than a mere mention on this page, but this acknowledgment is all I can offer for now.

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Finally, I wish to dedicate this book to the one person who will surely never read it: my father, John Bobel (1924–1992). I know he would be proud of me, and imagining his pride and his pleasure (in another bit of irony) was often the only thing that propelled me forward. Thanks, Dad—this is for you.

Contents

	Acknowledgments	vii
1	Introduction: Five Women, Five Stories	1
2	Female Moral Reform and the Maternal Politics of Accommodation	35
3	A Closer Look: The Ideological Components of Natural Mothering	48
4	Interrogating the Ideology of Natural Mothering: Choice, Nature, and Inevitability	73
5	Resisting Culture, Embracing Nature: Natural Mothering and Control	104
6	Natural Mothering: Social Change or Narcissistic Retreat?	141
7	Conclusion	165
	Appendix: On Being a (Quasi) Natural Mother Studying Natural Mothers	175
	Notes	199
	References	207
	Index	217

1 Introduction

Five Women, Five Stories

Paradoxes are the only truths.

—George Bernard Shaw

In the aisles of the local food co-op, the waiting room of the town's only homeopath, or the children's area of the public library, you might meet her. Some are inclined to label her "earth mother" or "retro hippie," but she defies categorization. One thing is certain: this woman is different. She gives birth to her babies at home; she homeschools her children; she grows much of her family's produce and sews many of their clothes. She seems at first glance an anachronism, recalling a time when women derived their identities from raising their large families and excelling at the domestic arts. But unlike the women of the past, whose domestic lives were responsive to society's dictates, today's "natural mother" resists convention. While her contemporaries take advantage of daycare, babysitters, and bottle feeding, the natural mother rejects almost everything that facilitates mother-child separation. She believes that consumerism, technology, and detachment from nature are social ills that mothers can and should oppose. This book is about these women, a population of mothers who embrace values that many would consider old-fashioned, even backward. For reasons that will become apparent as this work unfolds, I have named them "natural mothers."

As a feminist interested in women's experience, I wonder why such women hold this unique vision of motherhood when many American women are trying to "have it all" and break free from a gendered division of labor. Clearly, given the contemporary sociocultural context, the natural mother is radical in her approach to parenting, deviating from the majority of her cohort who are typically engaged in the struggle to combine career and family life.¹ Less obvious are the answers to questions like *why* she embraces this particular lifestyle, what motivates her to "live alternatively," what explains the origins of her commitment, and, finally, what are the implications of this style of mothering at the start of the twenty-first century.

Before I address these and related questions in depth, I want to introduce five of the 32 natural mothers I interviewed during the course of this study: Theresa Reyes, Jenny Strauss, Michelle Jones-Grant, Grace Burton, and Betsy Morehouse (all pseudonyms). Each tells a different story of coming to and sustaining a life as a natural mother. Their differences capture the range of natural mothers within my sample; their commonalities reflect the ethos that unites them. Together, their stories illustrate the themes embedded in natural mothering ideology and practice.

Michelle Jones-Grant: Reconciling Feminist Identity with Subordination to Hearth and Home

When I ring the doorbell at Michelle's house, I can see her through the window. She is barefoot, dressed in a casual jumper and holding newborn Abby in her left arm while adeptly maneuvering a vacuum over her plain wooden floors with her right. As she shuts off the vacuum, I ring the doorbell again, and Michelle heads toward the door with a

toothy smile. She greets me warmly. I notice a huge bag of organic flour on the counter; it must be baking day. I comment on the quiet. She has taken her two boys, Simon, aged six, and Zeke, aged three, to her mother's nearby so we can talk uninterrupted, she explains with a wink. As we settle onto the tapestry-covered couch, Abby begins nursing, and I switch on the tape recorder. "You're gonna have loud nursing noises on your tape!" Michelle warns me good-naturedly.

"That's okay," I reply. "How did you get to this place, Michelle?"

"I have been thinking about this for the last couple of days, and I haven't come up with anything," she laughs. "You know that Talking Heads song? 'This is not my life. This is not my beautiful house. This is not my beautiful house?' I heard that song the other day, and I thought, that's me!"

As Michelle's story unfolds, I can see why her present life contradicts her original vision of the kind of life she would lead. Michelle attended a large state university, where she explored environmental politics and feminism. A "seminal" experience during that time, she tells me, was a camping trip with a boyfriend near a lake at the Canadian border. Describing the significance of her trip, Michelle seems transported:

It changed my life. I went with a guy that I was crazy about and it was just the two of us, alone in the boundary waters for a couple weeks. And we were just completely self-sufficient. I was carrying this pack that weighed as much as I do. And we were just man and woman in the wilderness. I thought, wow, this is really cool! That could be the seminal experience. . . . There's something about just being able to take a cup, stick it in the water, and drink it that makes you feel very much like a animal. You can do anything if you can carry a canoe that weighs more than you do. It was a really powerful experience.

Around that time, Michelle began canvassing for Greenpeace and giving talks throughout the city. At one of these talks, her description of the inhumane practices of the tuna industry converted one audience member to vegetarianism. That convert was Franky, who later became Michelle's husband. While still in college, Michelle lived in a cooperative house, where she deepened her interest in vegetarianism, environmental activism, and feminism. She eventually earned a degree in women's studies. After college and marriage to Franky (who completed degrees in German, philosophy, and physics), the pair moved to a farm in Pennsylvania, where they worked as tenant farmers for three years. It was wonderful—really hard work, Michelle informs me, but “living off the land” appealed to both of them. “When it was time to make dinner, I would go into the garden and pick a tomato, pick an eggplant, and pick a green pepper and make dinner,” she remembers. She made nearly all their food from scratch—bread, pasta, crackers, everything: “We bought almost no processed food.” But the simple, close-to-the-earth life had its limits for the young couple. The seasonal work required odd jobs in the off-season, and their annual income of \$6,000 was inadequate. After three years, Michelle and Franky returned to their home state in the upper Midwest.

Soon after returning, Michelle applied to graduate school in English, and Franky began pursuing a teaching certificate in history. But when Michelle learned that she was pregnant, she postponed her studies for a year and “just hasn't made it back yet. But if I do, I certainly won't study something as esoteric as English,” she adds.

“What, then?” I ask.

“Well, probably child and family studies. Something like that. It would need to be practical.”

Franky got his teaching credentials, but after a semester he discovered that teaching was too much of a psychic drain for an introvert. He decided, with Michelle's moral support, to join a friend and start a natural landscaping business. The business has been in operation for over a year and is doing quite well. Franky and his partner design, install, and maintain English-style gardens (with a minimum of pesticides) for private residences.

Although Michelle does the bookkeeping for the business at home, she identifies herself as a full-time mother. She has always worked for pay since her children were born, but never outside the home. When Simon was young, she worked as a home-based music transcriptionist (inheriting the business from a relative). "Tedious, boring work," Michelle informs me, "but it kept me right where I wanted to be, at home with my kids." She is quick to point out that she and Franky decided together that his role would be full-time breadwinner and hers full-time mother. Now that Franky is finished with school and has launched a growing business, the couple are fulfilling their "contract." At the same time, Michelle admits that her life is incredibly chaotic and stressful:

My needs aren't getting met with my present lifestyle. My values, ah, . . . I'm living by my values, but I'm not there. I'm not in my life right now. I'm just surrounded by, just having three kids and having a newborn baby, it kind of means that you have to be gone for a while, I feel like. . . . And now, although life is really frantic and really stressful sometimes—I told Franky the other day, I feel like a blender. Somebody keeps turning me off, opening the lid, chucking something else in, and turning it back on. . . . But I still feel like I'm doing everything on my own terms, and my values are right there in front.

When I ask Michelle how she reconciles her feminist politics with her present lifestyle as a stay-at-home mother

supported by a bread-winning husband, she cites her changing view of feminism:

Well, I guess my idea of what a feminist agenda is has really changed. I still think that things like safe, reliable, affordable birth control are really important. But I also think that being able to raise our children should be, and is for a lot of women, *the* feminist issue of the day. We want to be able to have careers, but we also want to be able to raise our own children and do things, I dunno, I guess we want it all but not, I don't know . . . I just . . . think my definition of feminism has changed just enormously. And I still feel like a feminist, although I think that, you know, to see me trooping around with my three kids, with no goal really before me beyond getting through the early years with my children, I don't look like much of a feminist.

For Michelle, raising healthy, well-adjusted children holds the best promise of making a difference in the world. Doing a good job at parenting (and for her that requires the presence of a full-time stay-at-home mother) is "the thing that's going to have the most impact on the world." When her children choose peaceful solutions to conflicts, show respect for all living creatures, and reject material measures of success, she has succeeded at "making the world a better place." But full-time, intensive, natural mothering exacts its costs. Michelle speaks of feeling isolated, feeling freakish. She wonders aloud, "If this is a movement, where are my sisters?" She felt like an "outsider" when her family chastised her for refusing to allow her first child to "cry it out." She felt alone when the hospital staff accused her of starving her baby because she insisted no bottles be given him in the nursery (to avoid "nipple confusion" and undermining her production of mother's milk).² And when the conservative Christian mothers in her homeschoolers group didn't understand why she doesn't attend a local church, she felt

as if she “just doesn’t fit anywhere.” But in spite of feelings of isolation, Michelle maintains that her lifestyle, which she wholeheartedly believes she chose in the best interests of her family, is a source of power and satisfaction, endowing her with a sense of wonder at the uniqueness of the maternal–child bond:

And you look at an entirely breastfed child who’s six months old. You think, this is an amazing thing, and I did it! I am responsible for every cell of this other human being’s body. Wow. Nothing compares to that for power and satisfaction. I mean, this creature, I did it. Wow! And they’re perfect, you know? I created it; I made perfection. Nothing else compares.

And it is this awe that seems to move Michelle through what she herself describes as her crazy days and nights. With three children under six, she feels overwhelmed and out of touch with her own needs. But that is the *choice* she and Franky made, she reasons. Michelle’s narrative reveals several key themes that run throughout the discourse of natural mothering, intersecting and informing one another: a feminist identity, the perception of choice, or personal agency, as foundational to natural mothering, and a view of natural mothering as a deliberate means to social change.

Home is where Michelle wants to be even if her role as a full-time, stay-at-home mother contradicts some of her earlier feminist notions. Because the contradiction pales in comparison with what she regards as the awesome power of motherhood, Michelle is willing to table her own needs, at least temporarily. She sees her focus on the best interests of her children as a service not only to them, but to humanity itself. Michelle’s observation that “she may not look like much of a feminist” suggests that she is aware that, at least superficially, her family-centered life reaffirms patriarchal notions about the proper role for women. But, she contends,