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Lauren Harkawik: Sally Pennington, Compassion Personified

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Editor's Note: With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." This is the 13th, also honoring World Breastfeeding Week. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

By Lauren Harkawik

I was a week into the uniquely raw period that is postpartum when I first asked Sally Pennington to come to my house. We'd never met before. Within minutes of greeting one another, she was checking my breast.

"There isn't enough milk," she concluded quickly. "The baby will resist if there isn't milk. It's instinctual."

Of the many acts of compassion Sally showed me in the days and weeks that followed, that first one, her speaking in terms of blameless acts of nature rather than human fault, was one to behold. But then, Sally is something to behold.

Sally is a lactation consultant. During pregnancy, I had eagerly looked forward to breastfeeding as my earthbound duty. But when my daughter was born, she wouldn't latch. In desperation, I called Sally for help. Her focus was unwavering and her expertise clear. But, to my surprise, it wasn't milk or a latch I most remember her for. Instead, it's what she did for my soul, and how she helped me transition from the hopeful naivety of pregnancy to the grounded reality of motherhood.

It's difficult to explain the desperation of trying, but not being able to breastfeed. It made me feel alienated, incapable of providing something that was supposed to be natural. It pushed my very being to its limits. As I waded into those waters, Sally visited often, teaching me how to encourage milk production and a healthy latch. I found stability in her skillful guidance and her spirit: the way her voice expressed sympathy but not pity; the way she interrupted her vacation to talk me through an excruciating plugged milk duct; the way she continually acknowledged my anxiety. At a time when my spirit's tides were in tumult, she was a beacon of calm.

Though the early days of motherhood were when I had expected to need a lactation consultant the most, it was later that I received my most precious piece of wisdom from Sally. Months in, I was stuck. Despite all my efforts, my milk supply was still diminishing, and my every thought was of what I couldn't give my daughter. I hoped Sally might be able to help me reverse my milk supply's downward spiral.

We met in an empty playroom near her office. In the dim sunlight, we sat on little toddler chairs surrounded by toys, and I, quiet and feeling broken, told her what was happening. She paused, and then, so delicately, she said, "You may need to say goodbye to the vision you've had for yourself as a 'breastfeeding mama.'"

Saying goodbye, she said, may feel like a death — one I should be open to grieving. She acknowledged both the discord between my dreams for motherhood, the reality in which I'd found myself, and the intensely personal journey that incongruence had created. And then she said the words my inner being so desperately needed to hear: breastfeeding was not motherhood.

The ability to bare one's soul, to care, to show unlimited, unconditional love: that was motherhood. Motherhood was mine, and I was its.

Though I already loved my daughter deeply, I think that until that moment, focusing on my perceived failures around breastfeeding had been keeping me from offering my full heart to her. I'd let a shell grow around my spirit. That day, in that darkened playroom, a pinhole poked through that shell, and light was able to peek through. Before long, the brittle exterior began to crack away, birthing a luminescence that let my soul open itself to my daughter in ways I hadn't even imagined. I began to truly discover the multi-layered gift that is motherhood: the joy, the grief, the strength, the nourishment of spirit, and the need, sometimes, to pivot from dreams to realities.

For those who experience it, difficulty with breastfeeding can spur a season of crestfallen frustration. It can make mothers feel alienated, confused, and betrayed by their own bodies. At that fragile, and often lonely crossroad, Sally is a much-needed partner. For many women, she helps them achieve their hearts' desires. For me, she helped me let go, and she helped me find myself — a mom! And for that, I will forever be grateful.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.

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