The Mother Heart of God

by Nancy Hicks

My daughter started crying almost immediately after she emerged from me, but as the nurse laid her on my chest she stopped crying. Instantly. She was home. She knew me. As I gazed in wonder at this sloppy little bundle of humanity, my motherheart was born. With the first wave of emotion I knew that this was my baby, and I knew instantly that I would defend her with every fiber of my being above my own life.

This was my first child. Before she was born, I had been a jumble of emotions and fears. The pregnancy had been unexpected and I had had little to no experience with babies. I agonized in fear and prayer as the delivery drew closer: I wasn’t afraid of the labor--I was afraid of failing my child as an unloving mother from her first moments on.

As the days unfolded after her birth, I was amazed at the amount of delight and sheer joy that this child stirred in me--the smell of her pure baby breath, still carrying the scent of heaven (although my sudden sprints across the room to stick my nose in her mouth every time she yawned started to alarm my husband, so I only did it when he wasn’t around!); the incredible softness of the back of her tiny neck; the toes and fingers that moved like tiny autonomous creatures.

In the same way that I delighted in her, I was also eager to help her. She didn’t even know how to ask for what she wanted. “One cry fits all” was her persistent motto. I watched for every sign of need--was she hungry? Did she need to be changed? Was it time for sleep? Slowly I learned to interpret her needs--sometimes I interpreted them before she knew what she wanted: she was sure she didn’t want to lie down, but I knew she needed rest; she was sure that she had to have candy, when I knew she needed a real meal. I remember thinking one day, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26).

I was suddenly aware that God is a good, nurturing mother. He knows what I really need and really desire. I thought back to the protective love that I had felt at my daughter’s birth and to the delight I felt towards her. I was thunderstruck at this new idea of God’s thoughts and feelings of motherly love and delight towards me as his child.

For three decades I have participated in a variety of denominations and “movements,” seeking community and knowledge that will shed light on my relationship with God. Often in that time I have heard people lament, “I have a difficult time relating to God because I had such a bad relationship with my Father”--rarely have I heard similar comments about relationship with mother. “God as Father” is a common and well-addressed analogy, but as I have experienced motherhood for the past eleven years, I have been struck by the increase of my understanding of God through my own mothering.
Because my girls are only ten and eight, I have not yet weathered the harrowing experiences of teenage angst and anger; I also haven’t written books on parenting, and I don’t have a degree from a seminary. But I do know what I have discovered about God’s “mother nature.” I believe this awareness is vital to all of us as we seek to fill the voids our earthly mothers have willfully or inadvertently left in our souls.

Many people have had distant, or abusive mothers. Some want to be mothers who aren’t, some don’t want to be mothers who are. ”Mother” is a loaded word. My hope is that we can lay aside the wounds caused by imperfect mothers in a broken world long enough to catch a glimpse of God’s perfect mother heart.

There are many interesting parallels between the Holy Spirit and the image of a mother: birth, nurture, and comfort. Scholarly and thoughtful books have been written on the subject (most by men, interestingly). John 3:3-5 recognizes the physical and spiritual birth of a child of God--“born of water and the Spirit.” The image of baptism in water is one strongly associated with the Holy Spirit (as in Jesus’ reception of the Spirit as a dove immediately after His baptism) and reflects the similar experience of the physical birth waters.

Initially, the sole sustenance for this sweet-smelling silky, fat baby came from my body alone. Nursing was one of the most intimate acts I have ever been allowed to participate in, and what joy to be utterly depended upon! But a nursing baby is a demanding baby, “Pick me up NOW! Feed me NOW!” And when she fell asleep in my arms I felt needed, but not really appreciated for anything other than my capacity to satisfy hunger.

Then she was weaned. Now, when she crawled into my lap it was for relationship and comfort and intimacy. I understood God’s delight at the psalmist’s words, “Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; Like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me” (Ps. 131:2).

Would that this was the end of the picture: silk-screened images of nursing mothers and angelically peaceful babies. But the Holy Spirit is also a comforter, and comfort isn’t necessary without the presence of pain of some kind. The Holy Spirit is not primarily called “The Life-Giver” or “The Nursing One,” He is called “the Comforter” (John 16:17), and the mere name speaks volumes to the pain of our condition. Paul reinforces and reiterates and repeats this quality of God in 2 Cor. 1:3-4: “. . . the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we have been comforted by God.” I don’t know that personal experience is the only way for everyone to consider comfort deeply, but for me, crisis and pain have been my most poignant tutors.

When my youngest daughter was three, she suffered third degree burns on her face, neck and hands. Those words are so tiny in the face of the storm of agony and pain that they represent. Three times daily I had to “debride” her raw burns. This entailed scrubbing the exposed burns with a cleaning solution and reapplying ointment. Four years later, I still struggle with depression any time I burn myself on the iron or the stove; I still can’t
bear to imagine the pain she suffered. She would scream and lash out, often repeatedly screaming “I hate you, Mommy.” Then the cleaning would be over for a few hours, the ointment would begin to soothe the searing pain, and she would collapse into my arms, sobbing herself to sleep, often saying, “I’m sorry Mommy. I really love you. I just don’t know what else to say when it hurts so much.” After carefully putting her into bed, I would go into my room, shut the door and wail into my pillow. I often screamed “I hate you God! How can you let a child suffer so much? Why didn’t you intervene so that this never happened?” I would sob myself dry, curl into a ball and reach to the same God for comfort. He was my mother as I was my little girl’s.

This experience changed my relationship with God forever. I watch the news infrequently because when I do, I am overwhelmed with the knowledge that God feels the pain of each of those victims and perpetrators and family members and friends . . . I can’t begin to comprehend the suffering that he allows himself to experience in order to provide comfort for each of us as his children. I ache to carry some of that grief for him—or at least with him. I am reminded that, as a mother, some of the greatest comfort I received during those painful months came from people who simply and quietly cried with me. And so I try as often as possible to sit with him and cry with him—both as child and as fellow mother. This is what I have to offer the mother heart of God who delights in me, nurtures me and comforts me.