

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 a 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).<sup>2</sup> 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,

because she freely chooses to devote her energies to full-time, intensive mothering, her lifestyle is not a site of surrender, but one of resistance. For Michelle, natural mothering is social change in progress.

### **Theresa Reyes: Mothering the Way Nature Intended**

Theresa's subdivision looks like many other suburban neighborhoods in the Midwest: ranch-style homes positioned along curvilinear roads punctuated by early-growth trees and an occasional backyard swing set. The Reyes home is modest, situated in a bedroom community populated by many families fleeing the crime, congestion, and costs of the city. I later learn that she and her husband built their home several years ago after a period of renting, and that Theresa was tenant-manager for part of that time. As I drive up, I see few people outside. Perhaps everyone is at work or school, rendering the area a virtual ghost town from nine to five. But Theresa is home, as she usually is.

I pull into the driveway wondering how this suburban residence fits in with the commitment to simplicity central to natural mothering. Once I am inside, the answer reveals itself in the relaxed feel of her home. It is clear that while space and location may be a value for the Reyes family, state-of-the-art decor and orderly living are not. The house is sparsely and modestly furnished with couches, chairs, and tables dating to the 1970s. The household furnishings are surrounded by a degree of clutter easily associated with busy people who are comfortable with piles of things. I wonder if a cluttered life contradicts the credo of simplicity. However, it appears that La Leche League's adage "people before things" is in action here, and perhaps that explains what I see.



When I pose my usual interview opener—"How did you get to this place as a mother who practices alternatives?"—Theresa replies confidently and quickly. Obviously she has considered this question before. Perhaps I am not the first to ask, or perhaps she learned long ago that those who practice an alternative lifestyle are wise to have an account prepared. Living alternatively in the context of conventionality necessitates a firm grasp on one's reasons for living outside the mainstream, and these reasons must be clear and accessible. Mothering is not something she takes lightly, after all.

After chatting briefly about her family of origin (a large Catholic family of eight) and her mother (who "tried to nurse me, but could not"), she fast-forwards to her college years. When Theresa needed a break from her graduate studies in biology at a prestigious university, she often retreated to the city's museum of art, where she wandered from painting to painting. She found herself especially drawn to the paintings of the Renaissance, in particular those depicting babies and mothers. Standing before them, she would ponder the love, serenity, and intimacy these paintings communicated. She thought, "I want that someday. I want that closeness, that bond, that unconditional love." Immersed again in her studies of human evolution, she encountered a viewpoint that resonated deeply with her experience. She distills it into a concise maxim: Whatever humans did throughout our evolutionary history and prehistory is a need programmed in our genes. For Theresa, this is an indisputable truth.

Drawing on art history and biology, Theresa crafted a scientific and emotional theory in which to ground her mothering practice. Her knowledge eventually led to a new life. Disgusted with the sophistication and dishonesty of the academic world, Theresa "went exactly opposite" and married a

Portuguese man she describes as a “simple, nice country boy.” Once married and nursing the first of her four children, she tells me, she realized her dream. But sustaining her positive experience of mothering required some adjustments, suggesting, ironically, that living naturally did not come naturally. Throughout her pregnancy, Theresa had planned to continue her work outside the home after the baby was born. In fact, she and her husband secured an apartment closer to her workplace so she could get to and from work more easily. But once the baby arrived, Theresa abruptly changed her mind. Mostly through nursing, she feels, she experienced a closeness to her baby she had only imagined as a graduate student. It was clear to her that she needed to be home with her baby. So the couple forfeited the security deposit on their new apartment (not a small sum for them at the time) and decided to rely exclusively on her husband’s wages as a janitor and the free rent Theresa earned by serving as tenant-manager for their (new) apartment complex.

But her life as a natural mother was difficult. Her husband refused to share the household labor, believing that such tasks represented “women’s work.” His roles, in Theresa’s words, were “companion for me, financial provider, and TV watcher.” Once their fourth child was born, a desperate Theresa staged what Arlie Hochschild (1989, p. 173) has termed a “sharing showdown” and demanded that her husband either wash the nightly dishes or put the children to bed. He chose the dishes (“because that was considered the easiest of the two”), relieving some of her burden. But Theresa does not regret her life as a natural mother. Although she may not have planned to subordinate her needs to her family’s, she did so because it “felt right.” Above all, she believes in the “beauty of doing it the natural way” and is willing to make the sacrifices necessary to live in accordance with “nature’s plan.”

Theresa's is the story of a woman who struggled toward a particular vision. Natural mothering enabled her to realize her dream of feeling the close maternal-child connection she observed in Renaissance paintings, a connection she considers intrinsic, derived from nature, and therefore indisputable. Theresa expresses a twofold theme central to the ideology of natural mothering: an enduring conviction that nature is a force to be trusted and respected, coupled with steadfast deference to the "natural" bond between mother and child. In this view, nature is preeminent; in fact, nature shapes behavior. And, in this biologically determinist view, those who resist nature suffer. But in spite of these convictions, some natural mothers, like Theresa, had to make a series of adjustments so that their lives as natural mothers would "work." The fact that natural mothering doesn't "just happen" suggests that the natural life does not come "naturally." For Theresa, the necessary adjustments took the form of an apartment forgone, a job turned down, and a "sharing showdown" with her husband. And for her, it was all worth it; being a natural mother is precisely what she wanted and precisely what she got.

Michelle Jones-Grant's and Theresa Reyes's stories reveal themes that interact and produce a certain tension or ambiguity—the first of three theoretically important tensions that I will discuss. The notion that omnipotent, omniscient nature (or, more specifically, biology) shapes behavior is challenged in two distinct ways.

First, when the natural mothers speak of their *decision* to mother naturally, consistent with their identities as feminists and activists for social change through alternative living, they claim to exercise their personal agency. But certain factors mitigate against the enactment of natural mothering. To "pull it off," they make adjustments and accommodations.

But why? If this particular style of mothering were truly ordained by nature, would it not flow more freely from bodies and encounter less practical resistance? Furthermore, and more importantly, the natural mothers who characterize themselves as agents invoke a biologically determinist explanation for their particular style of mothering. The impulse to be a natural mother is intuitive, even instinctual, they assert. It is not something that can be easily explained; rather, it is the product of “just knowing” what feels right. Paradoxically, natural mothering is the choice that chooses you.

### **Grace Burton: Politicized Devotion to Family**

An early informant told me that Grace “would be great for you to talk with” because she “is a real pioneer; she has been doing alternative stuff long before most everyone, and I am sure she has a lot of stories to tell.” When I first contacted Grace to introduce myself and invite her participation, she seemed skeptical and even a bit wary. It wasn’t until I mentioned my own affiliation with several groups to which Grace herself belongs that she appeared to relax. Remembering her reticence, I expected our face-to-face interview to present a challenge.

Grace meets me at the door on a cold, still winter morning. It is just before 9:00 a.m., and her small, sturdy house has the feel of a place where the morning rituals of Grace, Martin, her husband of 29 years, and their two children, Jake, age 21, and Cindy, age 16, are just getting underway. The house is cluttered, but neat. My eyes are drawn to a hammock slung between two walls. It holds a collection of twenty-something stuffed animals. A small dog—a multi-colored mutt—inhabits a large cage. I marvel at how peacefully the dog rests even as I disrupt the quiet kitchen with

my entrance and the noisy setting up of tape recorder and microphones. The kitchen is plain. There are no decorations on the walls and few appliances on the counters. I do notice at least 15 bottles of vitamins, homeopathic remedies, and herbal supplements sitting on one counter.

When I ask Grace why she has chosen to live alternatively, she pauses, relaxing her broad, remarkably smooth face, and then responds confidently, "Well, I guess I am at this point in my life because I had children. I have an almost 21-year-old, and as a result of birthing that child, I began to look at the world differently." Grace tells me about attending her first La Leche League meeting. "I went for my cousin, who thought nursing might be a problem; I didn't think it would be a problem for me. I was going to nurse my baby." These were pivotal experiences, she tells me. The mothers she met at that first meeting exposed her to a style of parenting, "a nursing relationship with their children," that she could see she wanted. She became a devoted League member (reading only League-approved literature at first, she remembers, until she developed enough confidence as a mother) and later became a League leader. She laughs, "I never considered myself an organization person, and here I am, well entrenched in many organizations. . . . But I don't like organizations. My kids laugh about that."

Through her association with League, Grace began exploring practices like "family bed," homeopathy, and extended nursing.<sup>3</sup> She and Martin adopted the first practice: "Historically, we have slept with babies. In India, they sleep together until they leave the family." Frowning and shaking her long, straight, blondish-gray hair, she adds, "So why [family bed has] this Puritan stigma—it's really too bad." League also influenced how she birthed her second child. In 1980 her daughter was born at home, "a

wonderful experience for our whole family,” Grace remembers with a warm smile.

I ask what is the most radical practice she has adopted. She answers without hesitation: “Homeschooling. Why? Because it is very obvious.”

You can do long-term nursing discreetly, you can have a family bed without other people knowing, but when you say homeschooling, not only is it public, but it’s public for 12 years. . . . It’s there every day, and it’s there for 12 years, and it’s there in front of your neighbors, your parents, your siblings, the entire public school system, everybody.

Grace’s story of homeschooling begins with her son’s approach to kindergarten age. She had always felt that there must be some alternative to conventional schooling, but she felt compelled to send him to kindergarten at the start of the school year. But while he was off at school, she spent her free time researching homeschooling. She began with John Holt’s *Teach Your Own* (1989). Her husband was incredibly supportive; in fact, it was his idea to homeschool. But it was clearly Grace’s responsibility to put the idea into practice, and knowing absolutely no one who homeschooled, she lacked confidence. Martin encouraged her by saying, “How can you blow first grade? If you want to do this, do it!” So she did, and she has been homeschooling ever since. Grace remembers harsh criticism from friends, especially those who were teachers, as well as her parents and in-laws. Some chastised her for withdrawing from an imperfect school system, asking, “Wouldn’t it be better to work in the system and improve education for all kids?” To that, Grace responds:

I wouldn’t be real good at trying to work with the system to change the system. I’m not a very assertive person. The other thing was that I had my experience through home birth. I just

didn't have the time to wait for the system to figure out how to do it right for my child. You know, people said, "Well, why don't you just work within the system?" I didn't have time to do that. . . . It's my child we're working with here!

Grace's sense of urgency and the premium she places on the immediate well-being of her family come through loud and clear during our conversation. She is passionate, growing agitated when the topic is especially meaningful to her. As we talk, I watch her prepare a loaf of raisin bread to bring to a potluck that evening. She kneads the dough, pounding and tugging at it as she explains her frustration with impersonal social services (she recently took her elderly aunt to apply for state assistance), her disillusionment with a women's movement she thinks forces mothers to work outside the home, and her impatience with social labels of all kinds. As she folds a cup of raisins into the kneaded dough, she reveals her exasperation with the ways in which the Reagan-Bush years impoverished American families, especially middle-class ones. Grace believes that special tax credits for households where mothers stay home with the children would help families channel their energies back to home and hearth. Part of the problem, she suggests, is that we, as a culture, evaluate our worth against a materialist standard:

Parked in front of the public elementary school down the street, I see these smart little energy-efficient economy cars with baby car seats strapped in the back, and I think those mothers probably feel they are doing everything right—conserving energy, serving schoolchildren, bringing money into their families. But their babies are not with their mothers, and that's not okay.

Grace asserts that parents and children are forced apart to satisfy the parents' needs for material gain. She and Martin have resisted the compulsion to live beyond their means. For

instance, when the young couple house-hunted many years ago, the realtors continually pressured them to purchase the kind of house whose mortgage would require two incomes. But Grace knew she didn't want to spend that much money on a home. She wanted her flexibility: "I knew people who got caught in those kinds of traps, where they had this big, expensive home. We tell people how much money you need for a family of four to survive, and then that's how much you need. And if you don't have that much money, you can't."

Yet Grace seems sympathetic to families who find themselves trapped in a unforgiving and relentless cycle of work-consume-work. From Grace's perspective, parents are too overworked and exhausted to prepare a meal from scratch or spend quality *and* quantity time with their children, so they order takeout and hire babysitters—spending money that has to be replenished through more of the work that exhausted them in the first place.

At this point, Grace falls silent as she expertly separates the dough into three equal parts, rolls them into three long snakes, and braids them into an elegant twisted loaf. A dusting of flour is swiped across her blouse, and there is a bit on her cheek. I try to imagine her as a college student and as the woman who worked in corporate banking and accounting for eight years before she had children. "You know mothers and babies need to be together," she continues, "and I think mothers can heal themselves by being with their babies. When you hold your crying baby, the crying baby inside yourself can feel held."

She has heard the critics of her attached style of parenting, who worry that such a child-centered family practice makes women invisible because they are continually subordinating their needs to her children's. "Ideally, if we had a community of women who shared mothering and sup-



ported one another, mothering wouldn't seem such a drain, such a burden," Grace offers in response. But it's a matter of perspective. "Sure, mothers need to meet their needs, but they don't need to be separated from their babies to meet those needs." Our society expects parents and children to be separate at public functions, but Grace and Martin accommodated conflicting parent and child needs differently: "We took our children everywhere we went, and if the children were not welcome, we didn't go." Her priority, she reiterates, is and always will be the well-being of her family.

Just then her son, Jake, appears, and Grace introduces us. He is tall and lanky, wearing wire-rim glasses and sporting freshly combed shoulder-length hair. Dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, Jake heads for the refrigerator as Grace points out the stack of sandwiches on the top shelf and the bag of apples in the crisper. She turns to me, "He is going on a retreat overnight." Turning back to Jake, she adds with a smile, "And there's oatmeal cookies on the counter."

"Okay. Thanks," replies Jake. I wonder to myself if she typically prepares his sack lunches; he seems accustomed to her care.

We continue talking about what she believes new mothers need (food and support, not fancy things for the baby or high-tech medical care) and how people regard her as a deviant for choosing to treat her family's health-care problems with alternative therapies, like herbs and homeopathy. "We are considered quacks," she confides, "and I realize that virtually every choice I make is political. I consider myself a real radical, a radical feminist." Just then, the doorbell rings. It is Jake's friend (and his ride to the retreat). Grace abruptly excuses herself and jumps up to say goodbye to her son. I hear whispers exchanged between them, then an audible, "Goodbye. Have a good time."

When she returns and settles back into her chair, we talk about my impressions of alternative families as *led* by mothers. It seems it is the mothers and not the fathers who typically initiate homeschooling, I suggest. Yes, Grace agrees. Mothers tend to be at the forefront of change in the context of the family. By virtue of being home more than fathers and unshackled from the oppressive workplace, mothers are freer to open themselves to alternatives.

As we shift to the potential of natural mothers to reshape families and shuffle cultural priorities, Grace speaks of the small-scale, person-by-person mode of change in which she puts her own faith. Eight years ago, a reporter from a local paper—pregnant at the time—interviewed Grace regarding some pending homeschooling legislation. Grace, with her characteristic passion, imparted her philosophy of education (you can't make a person learn) and the benefits of homeschooling (it allows children to learn at their own pace). Later, she learned that the reporter quit her job to stay at home with her new baby, joined La Leche League, and became a leader. Now she is considering homeschooling—"All as a result of that interview."

"How did that make you feel?" I query.

"Kind of scared," Grace replies. "But neat also, because I just talked with her, the same as I am talking with you, and obviously it was something she must have wanted to do, and I just supported her."

And supporting others in "doing what they want to do" has been Grace's goal during her mothering career. But before she could extend her reach to others, she first had to find her own "truths"—truths she ultimately located in nature. Grace forged ahead as a rare homeschooling parent in the 1970s. As her children grew, so did her conviction that children and mothers should remain together, consistent with nature's

plan. She faults a contemporary culture tragically seduced by consumption for setting in motion the relentless spend-work-spend cycle that alienates mothers from children. In Grace's view, she and her family stand proudly as an exception to this rule. Grace's critique of consumer society (reminiscent of similar critiques expressed by other natural mothers) represents another important theme. Throughout our interviews, mother after mother implicated the social fixation on "big-gering and bettering" (as one mother put it) as the root of societal dysfunction and individual unhappiness. The natural mothers, on the whole, believe that their disapproval of hyper-materialism sets them apart from mainstream culture—a separation of which they are proud.

### **Jenny Strauss: The Sequenced Life of a Stay-At-Home Mother**

Leaning over the kitchen counter in her bright and cluttered kitchen, Jenny, clad in a nylon jogging suit, is putting the finishing touches on a key lime pie. She chuckles to herself:

I am taking this to a birthday party tonight. I just got off the phone with the guest of honor because I don't know her very well, but I had a hunch that her crowd would be a very organic, vegetarian one, you know? And I didn't know if she would want to have a birthday cake, or if anyone would bring one. She was so happy I asked and is really looking forward to my bringing this pie. You know, I go to these functions all the time, and there's never any dessert! I went to a summer picnic not long ago, a home birth picnic—all these kids there—and not a single dessert. Where are the brownies? Where are the chocolate chip cookies? It's interesting the way my life has evolved.

Jenny's evolution as a natural mother has been slow and steady. Unlike others I spoke with, she had not planned on

having children, much less on raising them alternatively. When Jenny and Dave began their courtship as mere 14-year-olds, they resolved that they would never have children. Together, they imagined a life defined by satisfying careers—physical therapy for her, engineering for him—free from the constraints on spontaneity and mobility that invariably come with parenting. “For a long time in my life I was sure I was never going to have any kids. I was dead certain of that for probably 10 years out of my life,” Jenny recalls, describing the period from her high school courtship with Dave until her mid-twenties. But if you look at Jenny and Dave’s life today, it is clear that the child-free plans of their youth gave way to a different vision, one not only populated with three active boys, ages 14, 11, and 6, but *defined by* their commitment to their children. Dave is an engineer who designs air-conditioning systems; Jenny, a proud self-defined stay-at-home mother who runs two businesses out of her home while her children are at school. Obviously, something, or perhaps someone, changed their minds about children. Jenny is not sure what. She only knows that slowly she and Dave decided that they would like to have children after all.

When they began their family, Jenny recalls “starting from scratch,” since having children was not anything she had planned on doing. Looking for guidance, Jenny turned to books, where, among other things, she first encountered the notion of family bed—“a totally new concept.” Later, Jenny found her way to a meeting of La Leche League so that she could meet other women with babies, since she didn’t know a single nursing mother. Pregnant with her first child, Jenny knew she wanted to breastfeed. Her family had a significant history of allergies, and she had read that breastfeeding would reduce the child’s chances of having them.