

The Pram in the Hall 3: Changing Times

I think you can probably forget creative output in your early days of maternity leave. However experienced you are with babies, each one presents its own new challenges, so your household will be turned upside down, you'll grapple with feeding (my first baby latched on no problem, the second seemed to 'forget' between feeds what she had previously got the hang of...) and all around you will pile up stupid amounts of washing, obligations (thank you cards and guests to say the least) and sleep deprivation. So no, I don't really suggest you knock out a novel or a volume of sonnets whilst your new arrival makes themselves at home.

But once the dust has settled you may be lucky and still have maternity leave left, offering a golden chance for creative output. First of all, after thinking of nothing but a baby, it can feel very freeing to turn your mind to your own thoughts, your own creative output again. All the recent experiences of pregnancy (a storing-up of new experiences) and birth (an often cathartic experience on many levels) may be ready to rush out into your creative work. To get you started again you may want to go 'back to basics' and do Morning Pages, writing 3 pages of anything you like, so long as you don't stop to consider what's coming out. It may be sleepy drivel, but it may also turn into a torrent of pent-up emotion and experience being finally given the space to emerge and new creative ideas ready to be expressed.

Night feeds can frequently be exhausting and tedious, but once you're into a vague pattern and squeezing in some sleep at other times they can become a place for dreamy thinking. Sat by a window that looked out onto a deserted street, I saw foxes trot along suburban streets when only I was there to see them and watched the stars travel the sky, unsure of the real time until I saw the dawn break. It was a poetic time even for someone who doesn't write poetry and sometimes a good time to slowly mull over ideas for my writing and for my life. The dark (and no doubt the lack of sleep) conspired to make me think more slowly, the lack of pen and paper or being able to see what I was writing forced me to hold ideas in my own head and develop them further rather than too quickly committing them to paper. And I read. They say that to be a good writer you must be a reader and I ordered a huge stack of books before my second child was born, remembering how much I had read the first

time around. Reading at night in small bursts was a different experience: the stories and words seemed to stay with me for longer than usual and seemed to intertwine with other stories I had read, creating new narratives in my mind. If you have night-time feeds to do then reading is a good way to get through them and just 'being' in the night is also a place to find new ideas.



Robert Campin: The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen (National Gallery London)

If your baby finds a rhythm for sleeping during the day then make the most of that time. To sleep, of course, if you are tired, but I never got the hang of day-time naps and I was jealous of what seemed like 'my' time vanishing into oblivion. Instead, I designated the baby's naps as my creative time and spent them writing, thinking, developing new ideas. I ignored anything and everything else that I 'should' have done (the house looked like a pigsty, I swear) and attended only to my writing. Tiny bits of time here and there do actually add up. I wrote a book, 100 Things to do while Breastfeeding, in just four months while doing just that: scribbling notes while breastfeeding, then typing them up and developing them further while the baby napped, yet I was never at the computer for more than about thirty minutes. So if you have a project you

want to crack on with (especially one that can handily be broken into very small parts) then see what can be done in tiny work slots. The good thing about maternity leave was that although the writing slots were tiny they were very regular, which kept up a flow of work and avoided the stop-start blocks that can occur when there are big gaps of time between one writing session and another.

As your maternity leave comes to an end it is likely that you will have to consider your priorities and timings, how much work you need to do to pay the bills versus what you want to do, how cooperative your workplace is versus how much time you feel your children need and so on. Sadly, the Equality and Human Rights Commission released data recently showing that 54,000 new mothers lose their jobs across Britain every year because of maternity discrimination, which sounds shocking but pretty much tallies with my own experience of pregnant women around me, from friends and family and my NCT group. Some of it not as clear-cut as 'good grief you're pregnant, get out of here,' it is more insidious. I earned close to double the average wage as a business consultant yet figured out that with two children under school age my going back to work would basically amount to paying childcare so someone else could look after my kids. There would have been no other money left over. This is where, in a role where I mentored entrepreneurs, I saw a pattern of women becoming entrepreneurs during their maternity leave, in an effort to find a better working balance and to allow for new priorities in their lives, not least the desire to follow their own creative ideas that had been put aside for the sensible choice of a 'proper job'. There is a wonderful piece by Gayle Johnson on how motherhood made her 'unemployable' and led to a career change where her writing could take centre stage.

I was lucky enough, when made redundant during my second maternity leave, to be able to choose to stay at home and focus on my writing and my kids. Having gone down the writing route I now notice the same pattern in many other creative people, where mothers decide to make their writing or other creative work their career rather than their hobby. Interestingly in my own case (and anecdotally from others) I found that as soon as I declared myself a 'writer' the opportunities to write multiplied beyond all expectation. So if your return to work is not the smooth transition you expected, allow yourself to imagine and create another future, one in which your creativity is given a leading role rather than a minor part.