As I sit here with my new one-month-old daughter, all I can do is remember back to five years ago to those first weeks after our first child was born. Her birth was far from anything I had imagined. I was induced at 41 weeks and from the first doses of Pitocin, my labor was not under my control. My labor became completely controlled by my doctors and nurses who were more concerned with the monitors and clock than letting labor progress at a slower pace. Like many moms I ended up needing a c-section. This was after 16 hours of Pitocin driven labor, two failed epidurals, and a dislocated hip. Needless to say we were both exhausted after that ordeal, but our tiny 5 lb. 13 oz. little girl was finally here. And it was a relief to have the difficulty of the previous day behind us. My relief was short lived.

As I laid in the recovery room shaking and shivering from my anesthesia wearing off, I was too afraid to hold this tiny infant in my unstable hands. I kept telling the nurse I was shaking too much to try to feed and the nurse would go away for a few minutes. Finally after about an hour I was ready to try. It was intimidating to say the least, her head was half the size of my breast and I couldn't figure out how to fit a huge nipple into such a tiny mouth and she wasn't a willing nurser. My Ob nurse was great, she came over and helped her latch and we sat in our recovery bed as a new nursing couple as my mom and in-laws came back to welcome our new family member.

Over the next few days we continued to struggle with feeding. She wouldn't want to latch. The hospital’s lactation consultant, who would grab my breast and shove it into my little infant mouth like it was no big deal, visited us frequently. It gave me hope that we would figure out how to nurse better when we got home. When we got home the struggles continued and I was scared. In desperation, I called the hospital's lactation consultant only to find out that they don't make house calls. I was told to pump and feed her or supplement. I had my mother drive me to the hospital pharmacy to rent an intimidating monstrosity of a breast pump and we rushed home to finally feed my baby. My mother-in-law stayed at the house with the baby until we returned. I set up the pump in the kitchen and hooked up the intimidating horned-shaped breast shields to my breasts and turned it on in full view of my mom and mother-in-law. I pumped about 10mls or 1/3 of an ounce after about 10 minutes to which my mother in law stated, "Well no wonder she's not nursing, there's nothing there." I was heart-broken. I gave the bottle of pathetic inadequate milk to my mother to feed the baby and went to my room and cried.

The next day we had our first weight check appointment. Everything went well, we were at my family doctor because I didn't know any of the Pediatricians in town and I trusted him. I explained my nursing issues and he just said to keep an eye on the number of wet and dirty diapers and pump if I need to. I was happy, I nursed when she would and pumped and fed her when she wouldn't. The next morning the baby was very sleepy, I couldn't wake her for any length of time and she refused to eat from breast or bottle. I called my doctor in a panic, they tried to assure me that everything was fine, but this baby had screamed at every diaper change since birth and now was sleeping through them. I knew something was horribly wrong. I had my in-laws drive me back to the doctors and we waited in the waiting room for an eternity with a sick infant. I finally burst into tears and had my mother in-law tell them we need to see the doctor **now**! They brought us back and he unwrapped her and agreed after seeing that she was completely lethargic that she was ill. He ran to get his colleague who was able to have her admitted to her hospital immediately. We got up to the pediatric unit and they whisked her immediately away for examinations. They brought her back to the room and the phlebotomist came in a few minutes later to draw blood but couldn’t. The nurse then came in to start her on an IV because she was so dehydrated. They tried several times to get a good vein to hook up the IV which is a difficult task with a healthy infant, and nearly impossible with a tiny dehydrated one. After several minutes of poking my newborn daughter with needles, they took her away. They told me that they didn’t want to not upset me, but they may need to put the IV in the more accessible veins in her head. The thought of my tiny baby getting a needle in her scalp made me break down into tears again. I felt like a failure for being unable to feed my baby, and now for not being able to protect her from these needles. I sat and cried in my husband’s arms until they brought her back with the IV, which was in her hand– *thank goodness*!

The doctors came to examine her and they said they believed that she has a viral infection, but they need to get her blood work back to make sure. In the meantime they would start antibiotics in case it was bacterial. I was instructed to pump for her and weigh her before and after each feeding and note the weight difference to know how much she ate and weigh her diapers at each changing. So that's what we did, I pumped what I could, and we fed her the breast milk and then gave her formula afterwards to make sure she had as much as she possibly could to eat. Pumping was still a struggle, but I was exceedingly proud of each little ounce I was able to produce for her because I knew it would help her fight whatever nasty infection had taken such a toll on her little body. (I later learned that pumping is not as efficient as a baby of removing breastmilk from a breast.) The next day, my in-laws came to visit us and to see how we were all doing. They gave us some time to go eat something and go home and get showers. I told them that if she woke to give her the milk I pumped and then a formula bottle. When we came back all the milk I had pumped was gone! I was shocked that the baby ate more than one whole bottle. My mil said "of course not, she are the first bottle and seemed hungry still so I mixed the rest of the milk with the formula, but she only had an extra ounce." I was beyond furious! I left the room before I would start yelling. All the rest of my milk I pumped had to be dumped because it was mixed with the formula she drank from.

When my in-laws finally left and I sat hooked up to my pump, again sobbing. I explained to my husband that I was angry at my mother in-law for wasting all my milk. Because now I would have to give her formula for the rest of the day until I can pump some excess. I didn't even know how to explain to him why this was so important to me, that the baby gets as much breastmilk as she can. Producing breastmilk is hard work, and being hooked up to a breast pump is not the most pleasant experience. Going through that to see it wasted is just hurtful, but it is hard for someone who never experienced that to empathize with that hurt.

I know now why my mother in-law had no idea why her comments and actions hurt my feelings. My mother in-law had been a preemie, and when her mother was unable to breastfeed and they hired a wet nurse to provide pumped milk. My mother in-law never nursed my husband, her only child. Her sister and her nieces chose not to breastfeed their children either. To my mother in-law formula was just how you feed a baby. She liked the ability to measure everything that the baby was eating. As a matter of fact, she gave me the log she kept in the early days after my husband’s birth. The papers meticulously noted each and every ounce of formula he ate for his first week’s home. In my family it is almost unheard of to have an exclusively bottle fed baby. I have family photo albums with pictures of my mom nursing me, my aunts nursing my cousins, cousins nursing babies at family gatherings. Breastfeeding is so common in my family that there are only a handful of pictures with baby bottles among our hundreds of family photos. Breastfeeding is just how you feed your baby, nothing to measure or take along or and its certainly not something that has to be hidden behind closed doors.

I didn’t know that this difference existed until weeks later. In the mean time after each struggle to get my daughter latched on came with the comment "just give her a bottle" or when my daughter refused to nurse I was told by my mother in-law that it was because I didn't have enough milk or it didn’t agree with her. I wish I would have known about her attitude toward breastfeeding before I was in the middle of struggling to learn how to nurse my daughter. I would have avoided a lot of self-doubt; I know now to never take breastfeeding advice from someone who has never done it. Looking back now­– I don't know how I held my tongue, but I think it felt to me that each time I tried to convince her that nursing was better, I was also reaffirming to myself that I would be able to feed my baby, just like all the other women in my family before me. Each time she shooed my father in-law out of the room so I could nurse was a little victory; that while his leaving was totally unnecessary, she was giving me the space to nurse in peace. She rarely left the room after those first days, although whether it was out of curiosity or support I’ll never know.

After my daughter finally came back home from the hospital I was able to wean her from bottles back to the breast. She took to breastfeeding so well after her illness that she eventually refused bottles completely, which was a whole other challenge since I was back at work. My daughter was a happy breastfed baby until the age of three, and while we had our challenges with my husband’s family discomfort with breastfeeding, I learned to not let it bother me as much. I dealt with postpartum depression after my daughter’s birth, and I know now that not having support with my breastfeeding struggles definitely contributed to my depression. I am having some similar struggles with my new baby, which brings back some of the same worries, but I have the confidence in my body and parenting skills to know that we’ll make it over this hump and she will to be a health, happy, breastfed baby.