

## Finding Myself on Google

By Emily Milner

THERE ARE THREE ACTUAL REFERENCES to me on Google. The first reference to Emily Milner, me, is on page six. Before that I waded through pages of references to not-me Emily Milners: genealogy charts, a talented high-school violinist, a devout Catholic from Georgia, a fourth-year physics major. The first two actual references to me are from a forum I haven't posted on in years; the last one comes from my husband, who e-mailed something to a political website last fall using my e-mail address. It's on page seven.

Most of the time I am grateful to be where I am, at home with my children. It is my season to be a mother: to watch my toddler's dandelion fluff hair spread out, halo-like, from static electricity; to see my son figure out how to blend one letter's sound into the next letter, and watch the delight on his face as he reads the words. These are my rewards for the daily diligence motherhood demands.

But sometimes, I wish I showed up on Google.

I have done nothing worthy of mention on Google for years, although it doesn't take much to be listed there: a page referencing employees at a business, a brief line in a newspaper article. In spite of the ease of appearing on Google, however, my presence there is almost nonexistent. I could set up a self-promoting website: Googling "Emily Milner" could yield results such as "brought dinner to her visiting-teaching sister on the same night she had Enrichment, even though she is on the planning committee and was swamped." If you clicked on the link, you would see a picture of me holding a bag full of hot breadsticks in one hand, and baked ziti casserole, my potluck special, in the other. The next result might say, "did not lose patience when her four-year-old wet the bed on the same morning that her two-year-old decided to strip off pajamas and diaper and pee all over everything." The link would be to a picture of me doing laundry with a resigned smile.

These are my accomplishments right now, and none of them is Google-worthy.

I don't remember much about the time right after I had my first child, Scott. Most of it runs together in a haze, except this conversation with my father. I had gone several days with very little sleep as I tried to nurse my baby, and I was frazzled when I answered the phone.

"How's my grandson?" he said. He sounded too cheerful. I could not handle cheer right then.

"I can't do this!" I sobbed. "I can't do this! I can't keep trying to nurse him! I can't go without sleep! I am a terrible mother! Why am I doing this?"

Dad stayed mostly quiet and let me cry it out.

“You’ll make it through this,” he told me. “You can do this.”

But could I? All the books and magazines I had purchased during my pregnancy, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, *Your Pregnancy Week by Week*, *Baby Talk*, and *American Baby*, had failed to prepare me for my complete inadequacy when presented with an actual baby. I couldn’t feed him, couldn’t get him to sleep, couldn’t even experience that mythical mothering bond that was supposed to make all my sleepless nights worthwhile.

But Dad was right. I did it, because I had to, and every day I got a little better at diapering and feeding and entertaining. Eventually I even got a good night’s sleep. But I was right too: the person I was when I had Scott could not be a mother. I had to change. I gave up a part of myself to be a mother that I have never seen since. It’s the part of me that wrote “A Translation and Commentary of Manuel Cañete’s *Prologue to the Obras Completas del Duque de Rivas*” for my honors thesis. It’s the part of me that checked my grades online every so often, just for fun, so I could see the rows of approving As. It’s the part that loved school; every September I still get nostalgic for new pencils and crisp notebooks. And it is the part that, if I had played my cards differently, would have been right there on Google.

When Scott was seven months old I sang “Eensy Weensy Spider” to him for the first time. He sat up, still a bit wobbly in his balance, and laughed as I made the hand motions. He had never laughed like that before. I sang it for him over and over as he laughed and waved his arms. I wrote about it in my journal, as I wrote down other such mommying moments: little snippets of time that made me feel like a mother, instead of someone just filling in for the real mother, who would arrive any minute to take over and return me to my previous life. I have a list from Scott’s first year: the time he held up his head and deliberately looked all around, very proud of himself; the time he stacked ten board books up in a row; the time he laughed at a bouncing Winnie-the-Pooh ball. I cataloged them for myself. I didn’t have a report card anymore, no neat rows of letters announcing my performance level, but I had a few scrawled memories that meant I was trying to learn how to mother.

Scott was almost one when I first heard Sheri Dew’s talk on motherhood, “Are We Not All Mothers?” The talk left me discouraged and uplifted at the same time. She said: “In the Lord’s language, the word mother has layers of meaning. Of all the words they could have chosen to define her role and her essence, both God the Father and Adam called Eve ‘the mother of all living’—and they did so *before* she ever bore a child. Like Eve, our motherhood began before we were born.”[\[1\]](#)

I wept as I listened to Sheri Dew speak, from a combination of the Spirit witnessing truth and my own feelings of inadequacy. If, as Sheri Dew said, my essential nature was that of a mother, and if I didn’t like being a mother sometimes, what did that say about me? I felt like a terrible human being because Eve’s mothering heritage was not my natural gift. I had to work at enjoying mothering, giving myself mommy pep talks. I missed the Googable side of myself, and sometimes I resented my new job. I had no natural mothering in me! Every bit of mothering skills I had were ones I worked and prayed and sweated for. I was not Eve, not even close.

And yet—the uplifted side of me gained a better understanding of what it meant to be a mother. I read many books and magazine articles on mothering before I had Scott. I had listened for years to talks on the importance of mothers and their influence. But until I had him, I did not realize how much of motherhood was being in addition to doing.

There was a lot of doing involved in mothering: tidying, feeding hungry tummies, wiping noses and bottoms. There was so much doing, and so many voices telling me how to do things the right way, that doing obscured being. Sheri Dew was telling me that I needed a vision of my eternal nature, my eternal being, as a mother. She said: “Motherhood is more than bearing children, though it is certainly that. It is the essence of who we are as women. It defines our very identity, our divine stature and nature, and the unique traits our Father gave us.”<sup>[2]</sup> If, as Sheri Dew explained, I was in essence a mother, whether or not I felt like one, then I needed to humble myself and repent. I needed to discover the mothering side of me, and find joy in it.

I had Sheri Dew’s words echoing in my heart when Scott turned one. That, to me, was a deadline: I’d had a year to get used to this baby, and now, as a righteous woman, as someone who wanted a row of celestial As, it was time for me to have another baby. This was because, I told myself, it was wrong to use birth control for too long. There were so many spirits waiting to come down, and it would be selfish of me to refuse them. This was my role now: I gave up being a student, and I was now a mother. I might not be naturally good at mothering, but perhaps what I lacked in quality I could make up for in quantity.

That’s what I told myself when we started “trying” again.

A few weeks later, Matt was going to put Scott to bed. “Do you want to say good night?” he asked.

“I have a terrible headache,” I told him. “It’s just throbbing. I’m going to say good night from here.” Scott gave me a hug and kiss and went off to say prayers with Matt. I lay on the couch flipping through channels. My head hurt. I had never gotten headaches like that before. I expected it to be gone the next day.

But it wasn’t. After a few weeks I had seen my doctor, gotten a CAT scan, seen the doctor again, and ended up in front of a therapist so I could try biofeedback to control the pain, since other painkillers did not work.

“Before the biofeedback,” he said, “I want to talk about what’s going on in your life. Is there anything that could be causing the pain? Any stress?”

“Oh no,” I said. “I have a one-year-old, but he’s a good baby, and my husband’s great, absolutely no complaints.”

“So you’re doing well then?”

“Yes, and we’re even . . .” Here, baffling myself, I started to cry. “We’re even trying to have another baby, our next one, because we’re ready for that.”

I did not realize how not ready for another baby I was until I untwisted all my convoluted logic in that therapist's chair. I had read various general authority quotes concerning birth control that made me feel like it would be sinful to prevent children from coming naturally any longer than a year or so. I don't know where I got the year limit from; it was just there somehow, maybe since babies are weaned at around a year. After a year's grace, it should be time to have a baby again.

Did I realize, my therapist asked, that the current general handbook is much less dictatorial than I'd assumed? That while members are encouraged to multiply and replenish the earth, the timing is left to the parents' prayers and discretion? Had I prayed about this? Had God told me it was time?

I had prayed about it, but had assumed that God's default answer would be yes. Of course it would be yes. Of course I would need to have another child, and soon. That is what I would need to do to be good, to be righteous, to be a celestial mother. To be Eve.

Is it possible, my therapist asked, that God is more merciful than that? Is it possible that it's okay for you to take some more time before your next baby, to continue getting used to this one, to figure out who you are as a mother? You've lost the student-self you were used to, and you haven't found your mother-self yet. Don't you think God is generous enough to give you more time?

The headache didn't go away for a long time. I wish I could define the moment when it left me. Eventually I felt comfortable enough with my mothering that I believed God would let me have some extra time between kids, because I could not pop them out every other year like some women could. And I even believed that it was all right for me to take that time. I did not need to be just like Eve all at once. I began to think of our next child not as "another baby" but as Norah, even before she was conceived. Norah would be funny and passionate and strong-willed. She would be excited to play with Scott. Norah, my next child, was real.

The more I knew her spirit, the more I was able to think of welcoming her into our home. A few months after my headaches left, I became pregnant. I knew before the ultrasound that it would be Norah.

The night I went to have Norah, the nurse preparing me for my C-section was surprised to see me crying quietly. "Are you worried about the surgery?" she asked.

"It's not that," I said. "I'm just scared to have another baby. I don't know if I can do this again. The pain is terrible, you never sleep, and it's really, really hard."

Poor nurse. She did not seem to know what to say. I was not excited like most other moms-to-be; I knew what was coming and I was frightened. She rubbed my hands and said, "You can do this. We'll get you through it."

They did.

Norah was perfect, and beautiful. I spent a day with her in the hospital, holding her and nursing her and feeling motherly. I held her little body and felt God's approval. She came when I was ready, and that was all right. In my mothering weakness, I was given sufficient grace.

As I write now, I'm thirty-six-weeks pregnant with my third child. His name is Dale. I was scared to have him too, until I began to think of him as my athletic, happy son Dale. God has blessed me with the gift of knowing who my kids are ahead of time, of knowing their names, so that I can prepare my difficult heart to receive them.

I have forgotten most of the doing tasks that come with a newborn. I have forgotten how much he is supposed to eat with every feeding, and the best way to hold his wobbly head. Used to the heft of my two-year-old, I do not remember newly born lightness. I can feel him bumping inside me, exploring his narrow world. Other women, when they get to thirty-six weeks, want the baby out. I like him inside, where I can feel him kick without hearing him cry. My body nurtures him automatically. When he emerges in a few days, I will become his mother, and the nurturing must be deliberate.

I will never show up on Google for my heroic two A.M. feedings or epic laundry battles. Some day the student side of me may resurface there. I still miss her. But my nurturing does not belong on Google. Nurturing, I am learning, is inherently private. To proclaim my mothering accomplishments is either to turn myself into a martyr-mother, or to trap the sublime with stumbling, sentimental words. If my nurturing lost its privacy, it would lose its identity. By embracing the inheritance of Eve's mothering birthright, I received a sacred anonymity: a private, holy grace.



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