

# Long Live the Queen!

*by Jeannie Zandi*



Motherhood is a tree that sings.  
Motherhood is a willow.  
Motherhood is a tree falling over.

*— sung by Sophia, age 2 1/2*

Sophia Alexandra Zandi is my 7-year-old princess and I am her queen. When she was about 2 1/2, she started giving me orders. “Mama,” she’d demand, “Div me dat muffin.” Wanting her to have manners that reflected reality, I would say, “Please, Mama, Queen of the Universe.” “Pwease Mama, Queen of da Uniberse,” she would compliantly repeat.

When I was pregnant, I sensed a girl from the start. I labored in the dark in a warm tub with midwives attending, who took their cues from me and my body — no white hospital room, no lying on my back, no authority above my own, no inducing, no forceps, only beautiful, holy, mind-humbling, feminine power. We didn’t know if we had Sophia Alexandra or Oscar Kai for an hour and a half after her birth, simply relating to her as beingness. When her squirming white nakedness displayed her girlhood, I was ecstatic.

This might not have always been the case. When I was a girl, I was not happy about it. When I looked around, it seemed that the boys and men were doing all the interesting stuff and that the women around me were largely catering to and trying to please them. I did a lot of work and exploration to finally celebrate my womanhood, and when I had a daughter, I wanted to help her grow up to be a girl who liked being female. I wanted to do motherhood in a way that would give my girl power, strength and connection in being female, not confusion and isolation in it. As a side benefit, I have also found that the process of being a mother has increased my sense of wholeness in my own womanhood.

With her birth, I realized that my body was not solely a playground for the men I had loved — it was a life-giving, life-sustaining miracle! For the first time in my life, a female person had a relationship with my breasts and it revolutionized the way I saw my body. From birth until age

3, Sophia fed at my breasts with delight and fervor. When she was done breastfeeding, she still worshipped at the Altar of the Boobas regularly, singing to them and telling them how lovely they were. Here is a little song she sang them when she was 4:

### **Ode to Mama's Boobas**

You sweethearts!  
Look, you get flat and you hide.  
You are lumpy!  
You are like big hills, you can climb uuuuppppppp  
and down.

Climb up, climb up, climb up  
and slide down.  
Climb up, climb up, climb up  
and slide down.

Do you sometimes do that on hills?

To give Sophia a rooted sense of herself in her femaleness, I felt she must have a relationship with the bodies of the women around her — she must be able to see what a woman's body looks like and understand how her body will grow into what she sees in women. She must be allowed to see and adore women from reality, not from media images, so she can see and adore herself as she is. I had to move through some areas of discomfort and awkwardness in order to provide her with this! Once, in that quiet air-travel moment where passengers are standing in the aisle waiting to disembark, Sophia planted both her hands straight on my breasts and exclaimed with reverent passion, "Mama's boobas!"

I can't remember ever seeing my mother's naked body. We didn't talk about bodies, and my sister and I ignored our own. Once when I was about 8, my father and sister and I were canoeing and surprised a skinny-dipping band of people we knew, who at all other times had worn clothes. "Hey Walt," called Mrs. Cohen flirtatiously from the water, "Take your trunks off and come on in!" While my father verbally fended off the advance with awkward embarrassment, I was transfixed by the black triangle below the woman's navel, glowing with a primordial power that magnetically held me.

For Sophia, seeing a woman's body is part of everyday life, not an isolated mind-blowing experience. We've taken baths and dressed together since she was born; thus she can ask questions about my body, observe its processes and compare herself to me. Once when she was 2, we had this conversation in the bathtub:

S: "You have fur and I don't."

J: "When you're a big woman, you'll have fur too."

S (pointing to the moles on my body): "When I'm a bid woman, wiw I have spots too?"

This openness includes being witness to the process of my moon cycle — I talk openly about my cycle and its effects, and she sees me matter-of-factly inserting my menstrual sponge and squeezing the blood out of it. My mother's cycle didn't even exist for me as a girl. My sister and I played with the white cardboard "rockets" we found in the wastebasket of my mother's bathroom. She gave us a talk or two about not playing with them, but since we didn't understand why, we just kept doing it when she wasn't looking. This was my only exposure to her moon time until the "Birds and Bees Talk."

Already pissed off about being a girl (90 percent of the biographies I tore through in my town library were about men, all the kids in Little League were boys, and my mother had a tone of flirty reverence for males that I didn't understand), I refused to wear dresses and defiantly claimed I liked to play with trucks and would become president. I played basketball on a side court with a motley crew of recruited girls, while the boys ran up and down the main court. When I confronted them about girls being able to play too, I was unceremoniously decked and they continued their game around me. When I walked away from the Birds and Bees Talk my mother gave us when we were preteens with the perception that I would bleed continuously (like, every day!) from 13 to 50, I concluded I sure had lost the lottery, and big.

Because Sophia has witnessed my body up close as part of everyday life, she has asked a lot of questions! I answer her questions fully and honestly because I see sex as a matter-of-fact part of life, not any more or any less sacred than anything else. As a result, she is very relaxed about the whole thing. When she was 5, I bought her *Its So Amazing! A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and Families*, a great book that relates sexuality with families and babies — it continues to be one of her favorites. Sensing the charge about sexuality in most other places, she is consequently very interested in understanding why people are so weird about sex compared to other topics.

My sex education largely came from peers — it wasn't connected to my mother and women, and it wasn't matter-of-fact. One day in a circle of us waiting for the bus, Jimmy Chartrand told a dirty joke. When the punch line implied that whatever he was joking about was something I had, and something to be ridiculed, I burned a hot crimson and slunk away. I know now it was so he could feel some mastery in relation to an area of mystery and power, but then it felt like everyone knew something about my body but me, especially the boys.

I think about issues of teen pregnancy, AIDS and date rape as I teach Sophia what I know about being female. She already knows about how babies are made, that people can have sex and not have babies, why a girl would not want a baby as a teenager, and how to talk about her feelings and draw boundaries with others. These discussions all grew out of her questions and us reading our book. I figure that if these issues are made part of our everyday conversations, they

won't be as charged as they would be if dropped on her as a package just before becoming a teenager.

When the hormones started coursing for me, and the boys I knew started to think of girls as something other than where you get cooties, I was pretty confused, scared and ignorant. That didn't prevent me from being madly crushed out on Tiger, a boy my age with long blond hair that often hung in his eyes, a Stingray bike like mine and an obvious sense of adventure. I would go with my mother downtown to get the mail so I could perhaps glimpse him, his mother's car, his house, his dog. I would record my sightings in my diary. One day, after Tiger's hockey game, our first slow dance and kiss happened in Kevin LaFontaine's basement. I was petrified, completely unprepared for the advances that would follow in our time as girlfriend and boyfriend. He did things to me that I didn't understand, and mostly I nervously tolerated them in isolation and ignorance. I vowed to be a virgin until I was married largely because of fear of the unknown of sex and the specter of becoming a "slut," a term that seemed to be indiscriminately applied to any girl who knew her body and liked sex.

I do not expect Sophia will have the same confusion, and my sense is that she will come to me with her questions, knowing from our connection and sharing to this point that she can openly discuss such matters with me without fear. She will also have an easier time sorting out what's right for her from what she is fed from the culture and from the outside because she has been informed and thoughtful about the topic all along. From the moment I had a girl, I wanted her to have a foundation of love, knowing and celebration about her body that no 13-year-old-boy joke could touch — beholden to no one for her sense of her own womanhood. She would be the expert on her girl body, backed by her relationship with her mama and mama's body, firmly rooted in the glory of her womanness.

Princesses grow into queens and so do ordinary women sometimes. May all who read about our experiences find a way to celebrate every aspect of femaleness in yourselves and the women and girls around you. Long live the queen!

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