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In change room, discretion is better part of motherhood

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I've never breast-fed in public. One would need a baby for that. But I have — some might suggest with alarming frequency — exposed my breasts in a public place.

It's just an impulse, shared by quite a few female friends, to do something provocative, titillating, and usually associated with the consumption of too much alcohol.

The point — and it should be an obvious one — is that breasts are not merely anatomical globules intended exclusively for the nursing of infants. This might be the biological imperative. But the bosom is also a sexual appendage, an erogenous zone, constantly thrust into our faces to tease and arouse. Further, cleavage sells. Where would the advertising industry be without melons to sell vacation packages and maracas to sell shaving cream?

The breast-feeding movement — an altogether admirable crusade; mother's milk is better for babies than formula — may wish to seize total ownership of a woman's mammarys, de-sexing breasts and forcing them into a brassiere of family value containment rather than prurient mass culture entertainment.

When Rembrandt paints the Virgin Mary breast-feeding the baby Jesus, it's art, and nobody reels from the sight of a nipple. When Janet Jackson contrives a "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl half-time show, it's soft-porn and cause for national outrage. What struck me as a desperate and coarse stunt by a celebrity on the downhill slide of her career provoked in many others an outburst of moral indignation and endless self-examination in the media.

All for a peek at a boob.

Which brings us, circuitously, to a tempest in a C-cup, or whatever it is that lactating mothers wear to facilitate the nursing of their babies.

The arena for this debate is the ice rink at Dufferin Grove Park, more specifically the "all-purpose" change room therein where, last month, one Erika Ross was asked to more discreetly feed her newborn, perhaps by stepping into the women's washroom. That washroom has space for a chair, where mothers can more comfortably — and, yes, privately — breast-feed. The change room is not so private and there were, at the time, some boys and men lacing up for a game of shinny who may have inadvertently been subjected to a glimpse of Ross's breast, before her baby latched on to suckle.

Ross, hurt and taken aback, subsequently asked for an apology from the woman who confronted her, adding as well that she wanted park staff and volunteers better educated about a woman's right to breast-feed in public. She emailed her complaint to Friends of Dufferin Park, an activist neighbourhood group that has, over the past decade, rescued the park from more unpleasant urban elements. Indeed, Dufferin Park is a model for community involvement and family-oriented activities: a farmer's market in the summer, dance and theatre facilities, a Friday Night Supper program — which Ross and her family had been attending the evening of the

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incident. There's even a wood-burning stove, for communal bread-making, in this Rockwellian picture.

This is where it gets interesting. The putative shrew in the tale is not a right-wing prude or a pious fundamentalist offended by the sight of female flesh. Jutta Mason is, in fact, the park organizer, a leading force behind its renaissance as a public space during 13 years as a volunteer, a lynchpin with the Friends of Dufferin Grove Park, a former member of the La Leche League (which promotes breast-feeding) who home-schooled her own kids, and — sheesh — one-time recipient of the Jane Jacobs Prize. You can't get any more left-wing worthy than that.

Further, Mason happens to be editor of the Friends website. She posted Ross's email and defended — gently — her position, emphasizing her own pro-breast-feeding bona fides while arguing that compromises are sometimes necessary in a multiple use facility, to ensure everybody's comfort. That website has now become a point-counterpoint forum, even as the matter has migrated to other breast-feeding advocacy sites, with commentary from around the world. The parks department and the city have been drawn into the dispute, both adhering to the view — as stipulated in public space policy and supported by Ontario Human Rights guidelines — that a woman, essentially, has the right to breast-feed anytime, anywhere.

The parks department has apologized to Ross. Mason, thus far, has refused to do so.

Mason has argued that the issue was never about Ross breast-feeding in a public place. Rather, it was about how much of herself Ross was revealing in the process — two breasts rather than one, Mason maintaining that Ross was in the process of hiking up her entire shirt, which the latter denies. It was the "amount" of disrobing, in the midst of males, to which Mason objected when she made her approach.

"Many people, not only hockey players, are startled when a woman breast-feeds in such a way that a great deal of her beautiful figure is also exposed," Mason writes on the website. "There is a cultural sensitivity that can't just be condemned regardless of the context. The fact is, the context of a shared-use sports change room needs a bit of adaptation in breast-feeding styles."

It's rather amusing to see the corner into which Mason has been painted. This is an intra-league ideological dispute — the granola left eating itself.

Many of us were under the impression that the whole bared breast legal fray had been resolved, at least in Ontario, with the Gwen Jacob affair. She, as you will surely recall, was the young woman who, on a hot July day in 1991, walked bare-breasted through Guelph. Police, responding to a complaint, arrested Jacob and fined her \$75.

Jacob used the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to fight the charge. Six years after the incident, the Ontario Court of Appeal overturned the conviction — the charge was committing an indecent act — thereby allowing all females in the province to go topless where men are permitted to do so. Presumably, that would include a rink change room.

"The scope of her activity was limited and was entirely non-commercial," wrote Justice Coulter Osborne, about Jacob's eye-popping stroll. "No one who was offended was forced to continue looking at her."

Jacob wasn't doing anything lewd with her breasts. Neither was Ross. But that doesn't mean — legal ruling and public space protocol aside — that there is never any lewdness in the eye of the beholder. Or awkwardness, when little boys and grown men are confronted with an unknown woman whipping out her teat.

The breast — it has to be acknowledged — has a split personality: Nurturing and erotic. It's not always easy to disentangle the two.

Discretion may not be enshrined in law. But neither is courtesy and we could all do with a little more of that.

Rosie DiManno usually appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

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