



Circle of Birth

"I gasped for air. I was spiraling into a panic attack as they strapped me down in the freezing operating room." A circle of eighteen women were telling stories of giving birth. "My instincts went berserk like any mammal mother under a knife", the new mother explained describing an emergency cesarean section.

The women's circle was part of a doula training. We were learning about Preserving the Memory of Birth. The group had spent the morning reviewing new research that women retain a heightened memory of giving birth for the rest of their lives. The afternoon was set aside for each mother to share a birth story.

As story followed story I felt our focus of attention pull the circle into a moving wheel. The diverse group of women fell easily into intimacy as the sharing became uncensored and raw.

I entered a magic theater as I listened to the stories moving closer to my turn while I simultaneously opened the door to my own memories. My births were over 35 years ago. My experience was from the archaic past, I thought, assuming things must be better now. As the stories filled the room, I realized I was naive.

I felt a jolt of energy as images flooded into consciousness. I shifted my body in the chair. The force of the memory felt like a sharp edge protruding from the center of my chest cavity. I wouldn't need any further research papers on how this memory is seared into the psyche. I listened as two women began to interrupt each other recounting how the health of the child was handed to them like a prescription to ameliorate the traumatic passage they had endured.

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"Of course, I am thankful my baby was healthy", one of them said, "but it doesn't change my experience."

By the time my turn arrived I didn't care if my story was a long time ago. My voice rose. "My story was in 1971," I said. "I was the littlest Earth Mother, having jumped into the counter culture with both feet. I want to tell about the birth of my second child. The first had been born 22 months before when I was 18 years old. I can see how ill prepared I was although I didn't know it at the time.

"The father of the child was just a kid; he managed to stay for some of the labor but elected to retreat to a waiting room for the final hours when things got rough." I was surprised as my voice wobbled.

The doctor had arrived in the middle of the night to discover my contractions had stalled," I continued. "Failure to progress" the nurses told him--they still use that phrase today as if diagnosing a disease.

It was a Sunday morning, and I know now the doctor didn't want to spend it hanging around waiting for Mother Nature to set the pace." I was simultaneously seeing myself through the wisdom of decades of experience while I was lying in the hospital bed as they started the pitocin to stimulate contractions. "I'm unusually sensitive to medications", I said to the circle. "Suddenly I tasted escalating fear as the jagged medically induced contractions began to rock my body. My confidence ebbed away as I realized my long- practiced Lamaze breathing techniques would not be equal to the task."

The pain and disorientation escalated as each vaginal check revealed the centimeters of dilation mounting. Suddenly everything was happening at once as I was wheeled into the delivery room. Nurses on either side screamed in unison, "don't push!"

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I was engulfed by the memory as I lay on my back on the swiftly moving hospital gurney. I heard my voice create a bridge to the group, "it must have been transition because I wanted to die."

The nurse instructed me to pant and not-push while the OB and the anesthesiologist in some bizarre state of disengagement took ten minutes to administer an unnecessary saddle block.

The two doctors had an affable connection and the flow of their cheery conversation was punctuated with directives to turn over, expose my back, not push and hold my breath. My voice became raw with anger.

"I had forgotten, as the final contractions mounted to push my baby into the world my two male physicians talked sports. They ran through a play by play of the previous day's big football game. There was a nurse in the room but she was focused on the doctors. As soon as I was allowed into a birthing position, in one push my dusky blue baby emerged. Within seconds that first breath sounded like a thunder clap. I was completely alone when they announced the sex of the child, no one to share that remarkable moment."

I was barely 20 years old but my obstetrician called me, Mrs. Campbell, creating another layer of distance. Even though I didn't appreciate it at the time my psyche registered the dissonance---it's been in there all these years. I took a deep breath and steadied myself as a molten river of anger poured through me.

The medication did not take effect until 15 minutes after the birth. Still reeling from the trauma of my experience I was terrified to discover my legs were completely paralyzed. This continued for 36 hours. To accompany the paralysis was a headache from hell. "It must have been a long pass into the end zone when he shot the medication into my

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spine," I said. My story completed I passed my attention to the next woman in the circle.

As I listened I felt my anger rise and fall. One minute I was composing a letter to the hospital and the next I was combing through phone books to find the physicians so I could scream my indignation in their faces. My practical mind knew no redress was possible but I would be processing this anger for weeks. As we completed the circle of stories, we calculated the rate of emergency C-section in our group to be a shocking 45%. Another 40% had experiences that were traumatic in varying degrees.

We did have two among us who had the heroic births all women dream of. Their faces lit with pride as they recounted how they found levels of strength they had not known they possessed. We took time to savor their stories and the foundation of confidence it had sealed into their spirits.

I was disturbed by the intensity of my memories but paradoxically began to feel a new sense of integration. The feeling ripened over the subsequent weeks. By welcoming these shadows into conscious awareness and into a sympathetic circle, I felt the bracing solvent of honesty was creating a fresh wholeness in my spirit. I felt my passion deepen for creating a world that honors women and the sacred passage of birth. The mythic figure of the wounded healer came to mind.

As the circle was closing we spontaneously extended our hands to create the intimacy of touch. We had experienced the Memory of Birth and found its unending vitality. We had experienced the astonishing closeness that springs up spontaneously between women and we had renewed our commitment to create change for our sisters in the future.