

Womb to world

A contemplation on the spiritual in birth

The time of birth is a very precious time for the baby, the parents and family. An archetypal picture for the birth of every child can be found in the story of the Nativity. This article considers the more subtle side of this wonder filled transition around birth.

Birth as the Nativity

Birth reveals a strange juxtaposition of the earthly and the spiritual. On the one hand for a woman it is the most primal experience of earthly life, of blood, sweat and tears. At the same time it awakens in us profound wonder, joy and love. The new born, with a skull often distorted by the pressures of the birth canal, and a face still red and swollen with the hours of labour, cannot often be called physically beautiful, and yet our hearts respond so strongly to another more subtle spiritual aspect of birth that we stand in wonder before mother and child and indeed call the child beautiful. People, even those whom we hardly ever see, appear at our door, to come to greet our child at birth to be part of this child's nativity.

There is something truly sacred in birth that makes each child's birth a re-enactment of the archetypal nativity of the Christmas story.

I experienced this powerfully at a home birth I attended where the labour had been long and hard. This mother had two much older children who came to visit their new little sister immediately they heard she had been born. The atmosphere around the bed was reverent, the light dimmed, mother holding the child, father supporting her from behind, the two older sons kneeling on the bed, in deep awe of this new

baby. It was the beautiful scene of this child's nativity.

With my own last birth I also experienced the feeling of a certain blessing around us for some days. There was a reverence and awe to be felt around ourselves and our children. The children glowed. The image that came to me at the time was that we had all been touched by the angels' wings.

The nativity represents the coming to earth of each individual, the birth of a spirit and the non-material into physical matter. It is a sacred moment, this moment of incarnation of an individual spirit who is greater than this tiny new born baby, into which it comes. Sometimes at this powerful moment of the baby first being in the outside world, with the first breath, the first independent blood circulation, this individuality comes in and is present very strongly, just for a moment, before receding into babyhood again. Mothers sometimes describe how, in this meeting when a new born opens their eyes and gaze intensely at them, that they see who the child will later become. Some describe the incredible power of the individuality, or 'an old soul' shining out of the child. Such moments are experiences out of the ordinary. One might even call them spiritual

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experiences because they are felt in a part of ourselves which is not really material.

So this is a significant, sacred time. When we meet this powerful individual coming into a baby's body, we meet as spiritual equals. But then this individual has to learn to live in this physical world which can be a painful imprisonment compared to the freedom of the spirit. The child now depends on us completely to defend and protect them until they can completely take hold of their body to be fully

Building the relationship

This meeting with the individuality of our child of course may begin long before birth. Some people, mainly women, speak of how they felt the child around them, waiting, longing, even before conception, sometimes for years. A few women report knowing exactly when the child was conceived. When we consciously make a special time to welcome children into our lives as we prepare for them, it creates a place to begin a connection with an individual who may come to us. However, whether we have these more subtle experiences or not, we know that we can build a relationship with our babies in utero even as their physical senses develop. As we talk to them, stroke them, sing to them, surround them with our love, already the relationship is growing. This is not imaginary. Studies show that the sound of a father's voice, where the father has spoken lovingly to the baby in utero, can be recognised by a new born baby and be a comfort to them.

With adoption, IVF, with donors of sperm and eggs and even wombs, by others in the conception and growing of a child, this relationship with the baby becomes more physically complicated. But the spiritual relationship and deep love between biological

themselves. We know that this takes at least 21 years, perhaps even the whole Saturn cycle of 28 years, and conscious parents feel this responsibility even as they have to step back gradually and let their growing children take over responsibility for their lives.

Birth then reveals two profound realities—the need for a deep respect for the individuality of the child and the immense responsibility of the parents as the new authority and protector of the child.

parent or adopted parent can still be there as a powerful force.

The following story illustrates this. Harpo Marx of the 'mute character' of the Marx Brothers' stories tells in his autobiography *Harpo Speaks* (p. 410-1) of their experience of their adopting their child Billy:

Still we had to sweat through six heart breaking months, before we could bring our baby home. We had found him right away. He was pale and tiny, small for his eight months. The nurses were a little discouraged over him. He seemed listless. He never smiled. He refused to take solid food. But the moment Susan and I looked into his huge sombre dark eyes, we fell in love with him.

Susan leant over his crib. The baby studied her face for a moment, then broke into a smile. To the nurse this was a minor miracle. She asked Susan if she wouldn't try feeding him. Susan offered him a spoonful of cereal. He gobbled it. We knew he was ours and he knew it too.

On a lovely morning in March 1938, we bought our son home. William Woollcott Marx entered our lives and changed our world.

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Those who give part or all of themselves to providing a small body for an individual to come into are also part of the story. Often the relationships built with the baby's spirit in this gift to other parents has profound ongoing aspects, as we know from the stories about women who have given up their babies for adoption and experience deep grieving and yearning and from the need sometimes felt in the children to go looking for their biological parents.

All these stories illustrate the power of love, but also tell of the recognition of our spiritual connectedness. Pregnancy and birth is an

Maximising nature's help

This recognition of the love between us and our baby and the bonding between us does not necessarily happen quickly and needs time and loving. We are normally supported in this by nature with the hormone oxytocin which helps us to bond more closely with the child we nurture, especially in the first hours after a birth. Studies have found that when the maternal levels of oxytocin are low, women often have more difficulty bonding. It has also been suggested that this may be so with fathers too. Perhaps there is a broader social survival mechanism in this too which drives our 'tribe' to meet a new baby immediately after birth.

The significant role of oxytocin underlines the importance of trying to optimize the mother's

Finding our child's nativity story

The nativity story is an archetypal picture of this love we feel for our child at birth. It is a picture not only of the love of each family for a child, but a celebration of the specialness of this child, by the heavenly community and the earthly community — the love of their parents, angels to sing a joyous welcome, humble shepherds with

opportunity for parents to try to tune into this. The openness of women particularly in this time can give some women deeper insight into this. For myself, the strongest personal indication of the reality of an existence beyond this material life was the experience I had with my fourth child when he was two weeks old and lying on my chest, the way tiny babies love to do. I suddenly had an unexplainable and immensely powerful experience of he and I coming into what I can only call a spiritual embrace, where I felt overwhelmed by joy in feeling "It is so good to see you again!"

and father's reproductive health before conception and to reduce stressors in pregnancy and around the birth. Vaginal birth, breastfeeding, (especially in the first hour after birth), and frequent and prolonged touch all stimulate higher levels of oxytocin. If levels are low, we need to maximise the human and environmental factors to compensate for this; we will need to spend more quiet, peaceful, loving, touching time with the baby to develop the relationship, and, in spiritual terms, to find and rebuild the connection, all with more consciousness. The traditional protected mother and baby time after birth becomes even more necessary.

their sheep, great kings with precious gifts who come to come to greet them, a great star shining protectively over it all. Children love to hear the story of the Christmas nativity and not only at Christmas, because it has therapeutic power. It brings confirmation that each child is loved, wanted, and sacred, even in difficult moments.

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It helps even more for parents to write down the child's own birth story—how you felt, who was there, what happened. Who came afterwards, what they said or brought. How was this child welcomed (who were the child's shepherds and kings?). It is beautiful to tell the young child their story on their birthday each year or at times when they need reassurance. There are times and ages (like nine years) when children are more vulnerable in their sense of their belonging and may think they are adopted. Their birth story reaffirms who they are.

The importance of a name

If one has this picture of a coming to earth of a special individual in our child, one can also be more open to the possibility that this individuality perhaps needs a name which suits them. Names form us, as those who have changed their name may tell you. We need our name to fit with who we are. Sometimes we feel we need to change our name because we have changed ourselves in our lives. So we need to consider this in choosing a name for our child.

As our human consciousness has changed and developed we have become more and more individualized. In the past children were often called by the place they came in the family (as we still see with the Balinese names Wayan, Made, Nyoman and Ketut). Sometimes children were named for ancestors, or more recently for relations or special friends. Now more and more children have more and more individual, names, more and more unique names.

Where do we find a name for our baby then? Well, we can open ourselves to finding it intuitively, hearing it, seeing it, becoming aware of it. People may be 'struck' by a name when reading a book, or have a name in a book of names seem to jump out at them. They may dream a name. A name may come up and then

For children who are adopted or were IVF babies there is a time and a way when these facts of their birth can be woven into their story. What it reaffirms is that, however they came to us, they are loved and belong and that there were others who gave part of themselves so they, our children, could be here with us. What is important in this story, is the loving connections within the family as it is now and our gratitude to all who made this possible.

be confirmed by other 'coincidences' and happenings. Some parents found that their child coincidentally was christened on the Name Day of the saint of that name in Catholic tradition. Another parent found that the grandfather said the name "if you were to call her..." Our own experience taught us to listen for the name with our hearts, rather than impose the name from our heads. And importantly— Don't tell anyone the name you are thinking about until you have met your baby to see if it fits. Many mothers have told me they have had to change the name because it did not seem to suit the child when they came face to face. One example was of a child who was to be named Bruce, but when he was born appeared to be a particularly sensitive baby who seemed to need a different name--a decision confirmed when one saw the fine boned, refined, artistic adult he grew up to be. Bruce has a more robust quality to it as a name.

So finding the right name is all about meeting the needs of the individuality who is in your child' tiny body. This is a very different approach from assuming that we mould the child into who they become. The environment of course has a big influence on a child, but what the child brings with them as an individual is equally important.

Birth as a natural process

We could perhaps find one more imaginative metaphor in the nativity story, in that the Christ child comes as a gift from God. The birth process too is a gift which is natural and healthy. The more we learn about it, the more we recognise the wisdom in the birth process. Birth is not an illness and should not be treated as such. It is true that birth is usually very hard work, and may involve its own sort of excruciating inescapable effort which really constitutes an initiation for women. You have to go through it. You cannot escape it. For many it may be the hardest physical work you will do in your life. As one mother said "I feel like I have been driven over by a bus!" Some people may like to persuade you that you can avoid this initiation with an elective caesarean, but then you must go through it after the birth, with the pain and discomfort of surgery instead.

Each woman approaching pregnancy and birth needs to decide whether she is going to trust herself, her body and the birthing process first and find people who support that if she does. Then it helps to carry the image of natural birth in your heart.

I remember my own birth doctor had deep trust in what I felt and what my body was telling me. That was very strengthening for me as a new mother. He used medical procedures if he needed them, but he came to birth with a deep respect for the natural process of birth, for the wisdom within a woman's body, if it is listened to.

Good midwives, and especially home birth midwives, also come from this place. They train themselves to work sensitively with the birthing

process as it unfolds naturally. They learn to read the signs of trouble, of the process being blocked and how to unblock it and keep it flowing. They are not totally dependent on instruments to know how things are going. They know modern medicine needs to be there for emergencies, but not for the replacement of intimate, knowledgeable, human care. Good midwives and good doctors protect your natural birth process and give it the best chance it has in working well. Nothing is guaranteed in birth but this is a good start.

Nevertheless, things do go wrong sometimes, even with our best efforts to have a natural birth. Then we need to be able to accept the blessings of modern medicine at its best and adapt our birth story appropriately. If the house is burning and you can't get out of the door, the fireman gets you out of the window. So with birth, sometimes it is necessary for the doctor to take the baby out of a "window" which he or she must make to keep you and your baby safe.

But all this is only the physical side. On the emotional and spiritual side birth is also the greatest joy, the deepest satisfaction, the greatest wonder, that you have given birth to a new life.

When fears arise in you (as they may), come back to the image of your own child's star shining over his or her birth and to the images of the nativity to find healing. Rudolf Steiner suggested that Raphael's Madonna paintings are particularly helpful for contemplation by pregnant women — particularly the image of the head of the Madonna and Child surrounded by angelic beings in the "The Sistine Madonna" now in Dresden.

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From all this, I am suggesting that birth can be a time for learning about the sacred, a unique opportunity for learning to differentiate the physical from the spiritual, for learning to listen to the wisdom of our bodies and beyond them. For this it needs respect, time and space. It needs protected times for nesting before birth, for 'lying in' after the birth, with time for quiet bonding and establishment of breast feeding, for gently bringing siblings into a relationship with the new child and adjusting to a new place in the family, and for you to find new rhythms for the whole family. This all needs consciousness, care and commitment.

Further reading

For more on the spiritual in birth see www.consciousparentingguide.com by Julie Le Gal Brodeur for a practical quick reference guide to pregnancy, birth and early childhood based on Steiner Waldorf principles.

For more on the support nature provides for attachment see the article by Linda F. Palmer author of The Baby Bond [www.http://babyreference.com/bonding-matters-the-chemistry-of-attachment/http://babyreference.com/bonding-matters-the-chemistry-of-attachment/](http://www.babyreference.com/bonding-matters-the-chemistry-of-attachment/)

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