

## Birth as a Spiritual Journey by Adela Stockton

(some thoughts in response to Nessa McHugh's article reprinted in B&B Issue 24, April 2005 'Midwives of the Soul; The Spirituality of Birth' 2003)

The idea of birth as a spiritual journey is one that I have been considering for some time; it would seem that the process of becoming pregnant, giving birth and entering new motherhood *inherently* carries the potential for raising consciousness (Kitzinger 1987, Taylor 2002) and enhancing spiritual awareness (Baker 2000, Style 2004), and that the role of the birth attendant is to support women's needs in bringing this to fruition (Buckley 2004a&b).

Baker (2000) suggests that "*giving birth is women's spiritual practice*", Style (2004) describes the midwife as one who may empower the mother "*with spiritual strength.*" The moment that the baby emerges from the womb and the woman becomes a mother is still considered a sacred rite of passage within many world cultures where it is honoured in ways that the West has largely forsaken; rituals, ceremonies and songs are used by both labouring women and their attendants in countries around the globe to call for spiritual protection and an easy birth (Goldsmith 1990, Priya 1992). While the act of giving birth intrinsically involves the mother-to-be facing and surviving her deepest fears, including the fear of death, it has been likened to meditation and other practices used along the path to spiritual growth (Taylor 2002). Regardless of denomination, perhaps the Western birthing woman's strongest ally is her faith, her spiritual belief in the emotional and physical powers of her body and in the universe to assist her in delivering her baby safely.

Those of us who have been fortunate enough to witness, or to go through, an unhindered joyful labour and calm gentle birth will agree that something ‘other worldly’ was occurring. The sense of spiritual strength emanating from a birthing woman in these circumstances is truly awesome; drawing not only on the power of her physical body but also the fortitude of her whole soul, she works together with the conscious being that is the child within her, to bring about a safe and non-interventional finale to her labour. “*It is like watching an angel giving birth*”. (Kennedy 2004) How far a woman is able, or wishes, to engage with this inner journey however, lies with the individual, although much depends also on the kind of support that is available to her during this time.

Further to the existing ‘midwifery’ and ‘medical’ models of maternity care, I would like to suggest the possible emergence of a third support system: the ‘spiritual model’, where the positive emotional state of the labouring woman and appropriateness of her environment is understood as fundamental to keeping the birth process normal. The facilitating of a warm, quiet, dimly lit space where a woman is private and free to concentrate on discovering inner fortitudes that she never before knew she possessed, where she may focus on her intuition and freely follow her instincts, and where she may express herself in such a way as to allow her physical body to birth safely. Buckley (2004a&b) refers to this as ‘*undisturbed birth*’: one where the birth attendant’s work is ‘*to be*’ rather than ‘*to do*’, while protecting the birthing woman from anything that might stimulate her neocortical brain and thereby disturb her primal instincts from the work at hand, such as noise, conversation and strangers (Odent 2002). It is not easy to create such an environment within a hospital setting, yet, with a birth plan founded on evidence

based information and clear intention as well the certain support of committed birth attendants, it is not impossible. The birth centre or home settings are nonetheless more conducive to supporting a spiritual birth experience, fundamentally in that they offer a more private birth space.

After much heartfelt deliberation I recently gave up my midwifery practice: I felt disheartened and frustrated by the lack of opportunity to provide the holistic care that women want and need to enhance their chances of having a normal physiological birth, or at least a positive and empowering birth experience, and I was growing increasingly intolerant to the psychophysical toxicity of the environment in which I was working. Having chosen instead to focus on my work as a childbirth homeopath and a doula, I now relish the time and the freedom to access a range of non-clinical skills and resources in order to facilitate the increasing desire of mothers-to-be to find ways of birthing consciously, or more consciously than the last time, in an individualised way. McHugh's (2003) concluding point: "... *midwives need the space to practise meaningful midwifery in environments that support them in supporting women.*" certainly struck a personal chord for me. I also know that, despite the odds, there are many midwives who *are* providing truly holistic care to women during the time around childbirth.

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