

Birth Stories: The Instinct of Birth

by Candace Whitridge

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When a woman is in labor, a little fight goes on in the woman's brain. One part of her brain, the intellect, will tell her that she should do certain things. Perhaps those are things that we learned in childbirth classes; perhaps those are things that other people have told her that she should do to cope with birth.

But from the other part of the brain will come an urge so deep within her that it will compel her to move her body and to use her voice in a completely different way.

Those are her deep instincts about childbirth, but we have buried these for so long that most of us have forgotten that knowledge. Occasionally, though, I see women who remember...

Very early in my practice, a young 16- or 17-year-old girl came to see me when she was very, very pregnant. She thought that she was getting close to give birth, so I gave her a very lengthy exam and we talked for almost two hours. She was in good health, so I made an appointment to see her the following week.

But the next day, she returned with her husband. She smiled and said, "Well, here I am. I'm going to have my baby today." I looked at her face and body for some evidence that she was in labor, but say nothing. "Well, let's take you back to the room and we'll give you an examination," I said.

"Are you having contractions?" I asked her. "Oh, you bet I am," she said. I expected to find a very closed cervix—but she was 8 centimeters!

She wanted to deliver in our clinic's birthroom. So we went into the room and she jumped up on top of the bed. She began to order everyone around. She said to her husband, "Now I would like you to sit in that chair." And she said to me, "I would like you to sit on this bed with me." I still saw no evidence that she was in labor.

I got our sterile bowl of instruments and put it down next to me on the bed. And this woman sat there and continued to smile, looking like an angel. She closed her eyes and pulled up her skirt. "Well, as I said, the baby is coming," she said. I sat there with my silly little bowl.

She opened her legs and the bag of waters appeared at the opening of her vagina. The water broke like a little river and the head appeared. She took the baby's head in her hand, and when the shoulders turned she took her baby out and put it on her tummy. Then she said, "I would like my husband to cut the cord, please." I showed him what to do, he cut the cord, and the family enclosed themselves. And I still sat there, and had done nothing so far. Then she said, "Oh, excuse me, but here is my placenta now." She pushed it out into the bed so I gathered it up, and my little bowl, and everyone was fine so I just left the room.

I talked with her later about why birth seemed so easy for her. After all, she was only 16. She told me that her mother, who had many children, told her that when she was in labor, she would feel God's power coming through her and she should do anything possible to welcome it. So that was the attitude that this woman had about birth. There was no doubt in her mind that she would know what to do. Her knowledge and courage impressed me immensely.

Two days later, I had another young woman in labor. She, too, had never taken childbirth classes but she was very different from the first young girl.

She was very noisy and moved all over the room. She strutted like a big rooster and threw herself on the bed and on the floor. She roared around and moaned loudly. She and her young husband did "high fives" because they were both very proud of what they were doing. Rock music played in the background.

She had a very fast labor, and she told me later that she just did what she felt like doing. She did not think about it. There was nothing to think about—she was just going to do the work and birth her baby.

Women, when they are in an environment that supports them and are with people who trust them, will birth exactly as they need to in order to birth their babies. We have forgotten that we remember. I have also learned that women have a very strong desire to be among people who are happy and who have a lot of trust in them. I live and work in a place where women say that birth is so important they should not waste the opportunity. And they say that birth is something that one should "get into," and is not something that one simply must "get through." Imagine a place where women talk about their stories over and over, because they had such a great time, instead of a place where women fear birth.

A woman came to me to have her second baby. She had her first baby elsewhere, using the breathing techniques the childbirth classes had taught. She said, "I felt like I had to huff and puff and blow my baby out." All through labor, she said she felt an urge deep within her that was very wild, almost like an animal. But people kept telling her to be quiet and to stay in control. Well, she said she absolutely did not want anyone at this birth to tell her to shut up and stay in control. She said the feeling in her was so wild—she didn't know what it was—but she wanted to do as she pleased at this birth. And she wanted me just to be her guardian, to watch over the safety of her and her baby as the baby was being born. So, I agreed to her wishes.

When she went into labor, I was called to the hospital. The lights were very low in the room, and my friend, a nurse, was sitting on the floor in the corner, very quietly watching. The woman and her husband were dancing cheek to cheek, with their eyes closed, all around the room. The music was her moaning ...aah, aah, aah. I sat quietly in the room and watched them. When my friend had to listen to the baby's heart rate, she crawled over quietly with her little machine and listened, then crawled very quietly back. Finally, the husband opened his eyes and looked at me for the first time. He smiled and said, "Oh, this is just like the dance at our wedding."

The woman really didn't even notice I was there. During contractions, she pulled away from him, threw herself on the bed, grabbed the pillow in her mouth and rolled around. Then she came back together with him and he held her, and they continued to dance together, everywhere, all over the room.

Finally, she bent over and squatted by the bed. She had a startled look on her face and she said to me, "Oh, no!" "What's the problem?" I asked. "Well, I'm pushing already and I was having such a good time!" She did not want to be finished. I thought, "Every woman and her husband should have the opportunity to birth in this way. Unlike most women, who can hardly wait for labor to be finished, this woman was just beginning to get into it."

If we can understand that the best things in life do not come to us without our effort, and if we can discover a different understanding of childbirth pain, then we will find that we do not need to pull away and run for it, as if we are frightened.

Only then, can we emerge from the other side of birth much bigger than we were before we started.

Candace Whitridge is a nurse-midwife and farmer in Northern California. These stories are from a talk she gave in Poland.

