

BIRTHING AND THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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I WRITE BOTH AS A MIDWIFE AND AS A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, and as one who has become aware of the parallels between these two roles. Both involve being present with people as they bring something to birth. In both cases that presence is not a matter of intervention and ‘doing for’, but rather something more contemplative, a matter of ‘being with’. Such presence involves knowledge, insight, skilled intuition and experience, as well as trust in the overwhelming process of birthing. In our spiritual lives, we are continually being birthed into union with God. In Romans, Paul takes women’s experience of birth as an image for how the Kingdom emerges out of the whole creation:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ... But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:22-25)

We can draw insight into our position as individuals within creation from the wisdom of the birthing process. The meaning that women find in physical birthing can point us towards the ways in which the transcendent is unfolding itself within the whole of our lives. This article follows Paul’s analogy through by comparing the phases of pregnancy and labour with various stages of the spiritual journey. There are long stretches of waiting and enduring that can be likened to pregnancy; and there are moments of growth and transformation that can be compared to labour, at once painful and exhilarating.

Pregnancy

What Women Experience

Women’s responses to the discovery that they are pregnant may vary considerably. They may experience a mixture of feelings ranging from



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great joy and excitement to disappointment and uncertainty. Their feelings will depend on how they think they will be able to cope with pregnancy, both personally and in their relationship with others. In early pregnancy, some women may feel sick and vulnerable, constantly fatigued. They may only have enough energy to do the necessary things in life, spending much time resting and sleeping. For other women, this may be a time of heightened energy. But for

all, it is an opportunity to focus on themselves as they prepare for the life-changing event of motherhood, and on the shifts in their relation to the self and to others that this will bring.

Some women may be ambivalent about pregnancy, and may need time to reflect on the meaning that this event has for their life, now and in their future. For those women who have experienced miscarriage, abortion or a death in their lives, pregnancy may trigger emotions that bring grief to the surface.¹ Fear of the loss occurring again leads them to experience each day as a gift, one day closer to the reality of a child in their lives. Some women begin to dream about the child they carry, and some may discover that they are anxious about the health of the foetus. Will everything be all right? What if there is something wrong with the baby? Will I cope with being a mother? What sort of changes will this bring in my life? This is a time when women need supportive friends around them to share the experience.

¹ 'In the *acute grief reaction* that usually follows pregnancy loss, there are a number of typical symptoms: shock, disbelief, emptiness, depression, sense of failure, frustration, anger, guilt; there may be accompanying psychosomatic dysfunctions such as insomnia or anorexia. There may be the emergence of long forgotten loss reactions experienced in childhood.' (Norman A. Beischer and Eric V. Mackay, *Obstetrics and the Newborn* [Sydney: W. A. Saunders Company, 1986], 255.)

As time goes on, there will be very subtle movements that indicate something is growing within.² These movements can be felt and seen by others as the woman's uterus grows with the foetus. Partners talk about feeling the baby move, and are able to relate more to their new child. Towards the end of pregnancy, women become more tired and are usually ready and eager to deliver the baby when they are due. The mother just wants to have and hold her new baby, to see the child for the first time.

The Spiritual Journey

During pregnancy, women become more sensitive to themselves and to what is happening in their bodies; they notice changes, and become more reflective and observant. This 'annunciation' can also occur in the spiritual life. Some other person may awaken us to the work of God within ourselves and in our lives. It may happen through a moment of grace, through an insight that begins a gradual unfolding of meaning eventually integrated into our lives. In this anticipation of new life there may be a desire to share our experience with others and to marvel at God's presence and work. This may also be a time of quiet reflection on the possible meanings of the new life, and some hesitation as to what it may require of us.

A growing awareness that God is present and manifest to us in our lives is part of our initial recognition that we are being called to reflect deeply on the movement of the Spirit. This uncovering of the new life of faith within places us on the brink of a precipice. We may experience a variety of feelings: great joy, excitement and heightened energy, but also uncertainty, doubt, panic, sickness, vulnerability and tiredness. We sense that what is being heralded is going to cost us the life we know, not through a literal death, but through our having to let go of a known way of being. This may bring a fear of loss, because we know that we are going to be changed forever.

The work of God is slow and unpredictable; we are unable to know or control outcomes in the spiritual life. But, if we choose to begin the journey, we are invited into a rhythm of waiting, and listening, and sharing this time of gradual growth in faith with others. Over some time,

² 'Quickening, the date of the first foetal movement felt by the mother, provides an indicator of pregnancy' (*Myles Textbook for Midwives*, edited by V. Ruth Bennett and Linda K. Brown [Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1989], 98).

we are invited to reflect on what this growth may mean to us, and we are given the opportunity to think about the annunciation, to let it—as the common phrase has it—sink in. Luke’s Gospel has Mary sharing her news of pregnancy with Elizabeth; likewise pregnant women today will seek out a wiser and more experienced sister whom they can trust so that they can share their story, and so that their fears and joy may be heard. Wise women are also intuitive, and Elizabeth showed this in her response to Mary: ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’ (Luke 1:42).

Elizabeth affirmed for Mary what Mary knew in her heart. In sharing her news openly, Mary was able truly to celebrate what she had been pondering and what had initially disturbed her. Elizabeth listened to Mary deeply, and Mary was then able to proclaim her joy. Mary’s *Magnificat* was not a declaration of doubt and uncertainty, but a true description of the kingdom to come and of the knowledge of God working in and through and with her. It was also an affirmation of how much she was loved by God, and of how this pregnancy was an expression of God’s particular love. Her own loving response was to accept the gift, to say ‘yes’ to God. Mary’s *Magnificat* expresses the Kingdom of God. As Anne Elvey writes in her study, ‘The Fertility of God’, the Annunciation heralds the ‘in-breaking of God’ as the ‘in-breaking of the Kingdom’, an in-breaking in which the divine becomes human.³

In prayer, we nurture our relationship with God, the new life of faith within, knowing that this ‘ordinary time’ is vital in our spiritual growth. Each of us has a truly intimate, individual bond with God. As we let this relationship grow, in a spirit of openness and contemplation, we let ourselves notice and attend to the Spirit’s subtle movements in our lives, and our awareness is heightened. Others may begin to notice changes in us too—a quality of peacefulness or reflectiveness, reminiscent of the ‘inner glow’ women often have during pregnancy.

The experience of waiting, however, also brings up uncertainties and doubts about whether we are ready or able to cope with spiritual growth. Painful memories of loss, and the fear of possible failure, may bring past grief to the surface, even at a time of hope and expected joy. When we undertake the inner work of our spiritual journey, we

³ Anne Elvey, ‘The Fertility of God’, unpublished masters thesis, Melbourne College of Divinity, 1994, 64.

uncover areas of our lives that still bear pain and carry wounds. We desire relief from this pain, but we know that the only way out is the way through; we must explore the core of our cries and feel the depth of our emotions. As we wait and make space for spiritual development we allow these emotions to surface and be acknowledged, and we sit with our pain, woundedness and grief. If we are truly waiting, we are able to attend



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to these aspects of our lives in order to bring about freedom—not freedom from struggle or pain, but rather the freedom that comes from knowing ourselves more deeply, from knowing the place of God in our pain. Just as another pregnancy does not replace a child lost through a previous miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death, so our waiting to bring to birth a new life needs to include a proper and fitting grief for past losses.

The Latent Phase of Labour

What Women Experience

When a woman begins to go into labour, she may experience a time of uncertainty and self doubt, when what feel like contractions and ‘the real thing’ may, in fact, be spurious.⁴ Anticipation and excitement are mixed with anxiety, and perhaps with some fear about what to expect. As she begins labour, a woman may find that activity is helpful as a way of encouraging the process to continue, though the activity must be interspersed with periods of quiet rest and relaxation that will prepare her for the intensity of what is to come.

⁴ ‘And in the period denoted as the latent phase of labour the cervix becomes effaced and continuous with the lower segment; this occupies approximately half of the duration of labour’ (Beischer and Mackay, *Obstetrics and the Newborn*, 336).

This is a waiting time and a restless time. Sleep is uncomfortable and difficult owing to the woman's pregnant body—something which helps to prepare her for the sleepless nights after her baby is born. The latent phase is a time for patience and vigilance, and for checking out with others, particularly midwives, whether this is the 'real thing'. It is difficult to remain aware and patient, and there can be a temptation to want to speed up the process.

The Spiritual Journey

In order to discern whether in our ongoing spiritual life we are bringing something to birth and, if so, what it may be, we need to be attentive to ourselves and to the movements of the Spirit. This requires patience amid the excitement; it may mean that we experience restlessness and discomfort in our lives as we wait vigilantly to see what will eventuate.

We still experience questions and doubts in our spiritual lives even when we have been nurturing a relationship with God. The growth within is real, but we need to be patient and let it reveal itself slowly. When the time comes, when we realise that something is starting to happen, when we sense that we are going to enter into an experience that will be painful, despite the fruitfulness for which we may hope, then we may feel doubt and anxiety about how we will cope, about what the outcome will be. We may touch on particularly dark areas of our lives that need exploring, or we may need to make a decision about the direction of our lives, either personally or in our ministry. We cannot remain pregnant without eventually bringing a child to birth; likewise the inner movements of our relationship with God cannot remain static. Rather they too must lead us to give birth, to bring forth something new in our life.

The Established Phase of Labour

What Women Experience

Eventually a time comes when a woman in labour must work hard and become focused. The contractions become very strong, and open the cervix for the baby to be born.⁵ Each contraction stops the woman in

⁵ 'When the cervix starts to dilate actively, the process is quite rapid; this acceleration phase is similar in the nulliparous (first baby) and parous patient (subsequent baby)' (Beischer and Mackay, *Obstetrics and the Newborn*, 336).

whatever she is doing and demands her attention. She needs much support and encouragement. She may also want relief from the pain and struggle. She is no longer able to maintain full awareness of what is going on around her, or of the people who are with her, but she seems nevertheless to sense and appreciate their presence. Some women will turn inward at this time, and cope with each contraction quietly, within themselves. Others will groan and thrash around, requiring space in which to express themselves.



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This phase of labour is a painful and seemingly unending process. Women move from one position to another—rocking, breathing hard, and curling their toes with each contraction. There is no relief from the pains which come with increasing frequency and intensity. There is still some semblance of control—women are encouraged to regulate their breathing, and can use pain-relieving drugs—but it gradually ebbs as they become more dependent on others and lose touch with their outside environment. Some women begin to behave in ways that are not normal for them—they may swear or cry out or get angry and panicky, and they may even find themselves begging for relief from the agony. This is no longer a time for being ‘good’ or ‘nice’. The pain is excruciating, and it brings out something primal in women. Their voices change, and they make sounds that come from the very depths of their being. Their cries express a strong and overwhelming force that is taking over their body. All they can do is either wrestle against this force, or relinquish control to it.

The Spiritual Journey

In the spiritual life, too, we reach a stage when something of ourselves is being broken down and stripped away; we are left with little choice but to go with the process and trust to its outcome. There is a passion, and something like death, in this experience. We can only trust that

the experience is a call to a different and deeper union with God, a call to allow ourselves to be gradually converted or transformed. We can only stay in this place in our spiritual lives if we believe in the joy of the resurrection. The pain and struggle call us to trust that something will come to birth, and that God has not completely abandoned us. In this place we are asked to take part in the passion of Christ. We are invited to enter more deeply into relationship with God, firm in the belief that ‘by excluding God from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting God into our life we enlarge and enrich it’.⁶ The call to be a Christian is not a call to suffer as such, but rather to enter into our suffering in the knowledge that it leads to conversion and transformation, and that it provides a place of birth, of new life and hope, of deeper union with God.

Transition

What Women Experience

Before the birth, there comes the most difficult part of labour, when the woman does not want to continue with the process; indeed, some women feel as if they are going to die. This is the time of complete



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surrender, a surrender which leads to the eventual birth of the child. Women may lose control and become irrational, saying that they ‘want to go home and don’t want to have a baby any more’. They may chastise their partners and assert that this is certainly the *only* child they will ever have. Midwives know that this is a short period, usually lasting an hour. However, it seems endless to the woman, and she needs constant reassurance that the birth is definitely imminent.

⁶ William A. Barry, *Now Choose Life: Conversion as the Way to Life* (New York: Paulist, 1990), 102.

This time of transition usually occurs just before a woman's cervix is fully dilated and she is at the end of the hard and painful established labour. She may begin to make some involuntary grunting or pushing noises; however the full strength of the expulsive contractions is not yet felt. Birth is imminent, but it is not yet clear if the woman will push the baby out and what type of delivery it will be. Everything hangs in the balance. The final effort is yet to be made, and the woman seems to have little strength left to cope with the next contraction.

The Spiritual Journey

There are times of surrender, too, in our spiritual lives, such as when a close relationship ends or someone important to us dies. We no longer have any control, and we may feel that a part of us is dying or has died. We may feel that we want to give up, or that we do not know what to do with ourselves any more. We may have little strength left, and we may succumb to involuntary forces that seem to take over our lives and ourselves. God may seem distant.

In his last agony on the cross, Christ, according to Mark and Matthew, cried out in complete surrender, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46). Yet the experience of pain, even when it is still felt with its full force, can be sacred, because of the conversion and transformation it may engender. This is not to deny the original wound, with all its difficulty and confusion. Indeed, the moment of surrender is in the 'not knowing', in the fear that pain may end in death, and that the self whom I am and know may be lost forever.

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of pain
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Birth

What Women Experience

Pushing the baby out is hard work. The pain is different now; the contractions are expulsive and there is a direction to the woman's effort. She is able to work with her body to give birth to her child. Much encouragement is needed. The woman's sounds change from painful cries to deeper grunting and straining efforts. Her body has completely surrendered to this experience, and all she can do is go along with it. Some women report feeling as though they are going to split apart, something which may cause them to shrink from entering

fully into the pushing. There is a tension between what the woman's body is naturally doing, and her experience of pain, accompanied by the fear that her body will be significantly harmed.

After the birth of the baby, whether there has been long and strenuous pushing or a rapid delivery, there is a period of silence. It is a moment when anticipation hangs in the air, when everyone waits for the baby's cry.

The Spiritual Journey

In our spiritual processes, too, the pain and struggle of transition eventually give way as the new life of faith comes to birth. Pain is still there, but it has changed; there is now direction to the effort. New life is in sight, and excitement, as what has seemed like endless pain and confusion has brought hope and change.

There may be a tension between bringing the new life of faith to birth and fearing what may happen when this occurs. Some may be stunned by the experience and feel overwhelmed, uncertain whether they can birth the new life they are being called to bring forth, just as women may experience a physical tearing of their body as they push through the pain. At the moment of his death, Jesus gave birth to the Kingdom of God,

... the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27: 51-53)

At the moment of Jesus' death, the Most Holy Place of the Temple was revealed to the world.



Postnatally

What Women Experience

Although the birth is over, there is a lot of new learning for the mother as she begins to establish breast-feeding, and learns how to care for her baby. If a woman has needed to have stitches in her perineum because of a tear or an episiotomy (cut), she may experience considerable pain and discomfort for some time after the delivery. Some women also experience 'after-birth pains' when they are breast-feeding, as their uterus contracts back to a smaller size. It is also common, about three to five days after birth, for women to feel tearful and emotionally down, as a result of the hormonal changes that are occurring, though this does not last for more than a day or so. It is important for women to know that there are many things to learn after their baby is born.

The Spiritual Journey

There is also a phase of learning after any deep experience of conversion or transformation, as we seek to integrate our deepened sense of self, of others and of God into ordinary, everyday living. We may find it difficult to readjust to the world, as we care for the new life within.

Just as women need to learn how to breast-feed their babies, so those who have had a new life brought to birth within them in the Spirit must learn how to nurture it. This requires patience, and time to sit with the gift, allowing it to grow and develop in its own gradual way. Nurturing may take the form of silent, contemplative prayer; of sitting or walking in natural surroundings; of rest and care for ourselves; of spiritual direction; of spending time with friends who are able to listen and share with us; or of taking time for the enjoyment of life. As Christians we may also draw on the Eucharist, on other liturgical practices, on the Bible, and on the community of other believers with whom we can share the new life received.



To conclude, therefore. We can think of pregnancy as a symbol of a waiting and watching time, during which our secret hopes and dreams develop. Then the latent phase of labour is a time of discernment, of listening to the stirrings within, of waiting for something to be

revealed. In the established phase of labour, we require encouragement and support through the struggles of the spiritual journey, and in 'transition' we must trust that our desperation, anger and weariness will herald the birth of a new life in the Spirit. The 'birth' is a time of joy and celebration, along with relief and awe at the gift of God's grace and love in our lives. And finally, there is the 'postnatal' period, when we integrate this new life of faith, and move forward.

Anne Dooley has a background in nursing and midwifery. She has worked in Aboriginal communities in Australia and has a special interest in women's health and wellbeing. She has been a co-ordinator and facilitator at a centre for women's spirituality and has a master's degree in Spiritual Direction from the Melbourne College of Divinity. Currently, Anne is Coordinator of Lay Partnership for the Marist Brothers' Melbourne Province and works with people involved in Marist ministries and with those who have an affinity for the Marist charism and spirituality.