# Trusting Birth in a Technological Era

**by Robin Sale**

Out of a jar of many crayons, Jenny reached for the gray and red to express her feelings of the birth of her first child. She drew herself without a face. Above her head was a bubble containing a question mark. An intravenous line and some wires connected her to numerous machines. Surrounded by doctors, nurses and her husband, she looked utterly alone and confused. One doctor held a knife in his hand while his eyes focused on his watch. "No one seemed to pay any attention to me. I was invisible." Something in her weak voice made me think she still felt invisible. She patted her belly, full and round with her second baby. "I just want this birth to be different."

When I met Jenny after her second birth I hardly recognized her. She was glowing. "All my life I thought I was so weak, but now I think I could do anything! When I think about this birth a rush of pleasure runs through my body." As she said this, I too believed she could do anything. Jenny's two birth experiences were dramatically different. What interests and pleases me is Jenny's shift in her perception of herself from disempowered to strong and able.

Our technological advances in medicine have saved and improved the quality of many lives, yet in the arena of birth there may also be a cost. In a well intentioned attempt to control and perfect the outcome of labor and delivery, we have unwittingly undermined women's confidence in the natural process of birth. The resulting fear and distrust that accompanies so many women into the labor room often creates the complications that necessitate technological intervention. Subsequent to a highly medicated and technological delivery many women are often left feeling inadequate, depressed or angry. There may be little support for her to express and move beyond these feelings. Those around her will often encourage her to cheer up, after all, she has a perfectly healthy baby and that's what really matters. Unfortunately, this only adds more shame and isolation to her feelings.

This is hardly an optimal way to begin motherhood. If a woman is unable to bring her child into the world without the help of so much technology and professional expertise, how then can she confidently master nursing and caring for her newborn? Gayle Peterson, Ph.D., author of Birthing Normally and An Easier Childbirth, sites research showing that childbirth experience has a direct effect on a woman's self-esteem and can impact her emotional availability to her baby immediately afterwards. Penny Simkin, PT., an innovator in the field of childbirth education conducted a study to assess the long term impact of a woman's first birth experience. Fifteen and twenty years later the women she interviewed marked the event as having a significant influence on her feelings about herself. The feelings of empowerment, self respect and confidence gained through giving birth unaided by unnecessary technology accompany a woman throughout her life. They assist her in meeting the challenges of mothering and maintaining a long time relationship with her partner.

Besides the emotional cost to women, their families and to society at large, the economic cost of our high tech birthing practices is disconcerting. Despite spending far more than any other country per capita on maternity and newborn care, the United States still ranks only 23rd in industrialized nations in preventing infant mortality. We also have among the highest incidence of premature and low birth weight babies in the technologically developed world.

While no one would deny the blessings of the technology that saves lives, I wonder how, as a childbirth educator, I can encourage women to rely on their own inner expertise. I'm referring to the innate wisdom in the female body that's evolved over thousands of years of genetic ancestry. This "body of knowledge" predates childbirth education by thousands of years.

A vital link of instruction regarding childbirth, passed down from mother to daughter, has been severed in recent generations. Women no longer regularly attend the births of their sisters, daughters, aunts, and cousins. In many cases, and especially during the 1940's, 50's, and 60's, women were rarely even present at the birth of their own children - - consciously that is. Add to this the comical and frightening images of labor portrayed on network television and in other media and it's little wonder that the very idea of birth causes fear and anxiety. Many women,

reacting to what could be called the "negative hypnosis" about birth in our culture, have relinquished all responsibility to medical experts to manage their pregnancy, labor and delivery. Although this maternal link has been lost or weakened at best, I believe that each woman possesses within her own body the instructional wisdom of birth. Here, in this 'body of knowledge' she can access what she needs to know about her natural ability to bring life into the world. Reestablishing trust in this cellular intelligence, a woman may reconnect with her ancestral heritage as a mother and ease the way for her daughters and granddaughters to trust in the birthing process.

My work in childbirth preparation, as I see it now, is to help women and their partners cultivate this trust in the innate wisdom of a woman's body to birth. Trust is a vital and powerful ally when walking into the unknown territory of birth. This inner trust can only be contacted through intentionally slowing down, paying close attention to the body and through moments of stillness and silence. Prenatal yoga, meditation and deep relaxation are excellent ways to help inner trust bloom and minimize fears. Remembering our place in the natural world; spending time observing the rhythms and cycles of nature can also help us to feel and honor our own nature.

It's not an easy task to go against the strong current of fear that so completely pervades our modern perception of birth. However, I have seen many courageous women bring patience, perseverance and commitment to preparing themselves to meet the challenge and intensity of birth. No matter what the outcome of their delivery, they feel empowered and satisfied. The skills they have cultivated for labor will serve them for a lifetime, through all of life's challenges. In our modern birth practices we have exchanged the clinical for the sacred, the desire to know and control for awe and mystery. The following remembrance is not an uncommon one amongst women who are able to fully participate in the birthing process;

"It's difficult to describe, but at some point I felt connected to the farthest reaches of the universe and simultaneously to the deepest place inside myself. I was intricately woven into the fabric of life. A tiny yet vital thread in a vast tapestry."

It would be easy to try to assign fault for the current state of birth in our culture. To fault the medical profession, the hospitals, this litigious society. To fault women for not taking more control over their births. The media, whose images frighten women. But to assign blame is not helpful. Looking at her own first birth experience clearly and courageously, Jenny learned to move beyond blame, beyond bracing herself angrily against the medical model. She learned to trust again in her body and open to it's innate wisdom.

Reading and educating ourselves about birth is one element of preparing for birth, but we must also cultivate a deeper understanding. In moments of stillness and silence, taking the time to make contact with our bodies we may learn volumes about the every day miracle of life as it births itself again and again.

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