

BIRTH

by Linda Chrisman

Each one of us owes our life and breath to a woman. To create life on this earth some woman has opened and has cried. Whether by squatting, by standing, by dancing, on all fours or on her back. Whether by scalpel, by breath, by prayer, by song, by grace or by will. Whether at home, in the fields, beside a road, in a hospital or in the water. Whether by cracking, by slicing, by oozing, by tearing or by pushing. Some woman has opened; some woman has cried. This I know from my body. This I know from giving birth to my son.

I have always come to Buddhist teachings through my body. This is the only way I know and the only way which makes sense for me. It is through the searing pain of surrender in giving birth that I know of suffering and compassion. It is through the molten anguish of rage while birthing that I know of interdependence. It is through the sweet pause between my contractions that I know of emptiness. It is through abiding with the minutia of sensation that I have touched the limitless nature of our existence.

My labor began slowly. Each phase marked a surrender of control and a dissolving of form. I don't even know where to mark the beginning. The first contractions were weeks before my son was born. One night, as I got up to

pee for the third time, my belly spontaneously began to contract. There was no pain, just intense waves of sensation. I felt like a boa constrictor, tightening and releasing to push the rat she had swallowed into her belly. When the contractions were over I was awestruck and relieved. It didn't matter that I had no experience and no idea about how to make a baby come out of me. I was a woman, so my body knew. As in my meditation practice, all I needed to do was to relax and remain alert.

Days before my son's birth I listened to requiems, over and over, for hours and hours. I listened and wept to Brahms and Berlioz and Fauré. I don't really know why but I craved those requiems the way I had craved corn in the early months of my pregnancy. I was aware of death from the moment I knew that I was pregnant. As my baby grew in life inside of me, death grew as a presence beside me. Sometimes I was afraid my baby would die or afraid I would die. Sometimes I was not fearful. The certainty of death, however, grew as my belly grew. I had understood the cycle of life into death and death into life but now I felt this cycle. I could feel that in birthing this baby into life I was also birthing him into death.

In the beginning of my labor I tried everything I could think of not to feel the pain that was spreading through my abdomen. I danced. I undulated. I moaned. I changed my breathing. I even imagined I was a surfer riding on top of the waves of contractions. All of these activities helped a little, but my contractions seemed to have a life of their own. I felt a strange dissolving

sensation along with each contraction and for a moment I wondered if this is what it feels like to die. It was not the pain which brought dying to mind, but my inability to change the inevitability of a physical process. I understood then that birthing and dying were essentially the same process and I felt a shiver of fear so deep that it startled me.

After several hours I called my midwife because my contractions were still irregular. I was afraid that I would have to go to the hospital and that I would have to have a caesarian. My midwife assured me that she was not alarmed and suggested I lie down and gently ask myself what I was afraid of. As soon as I asked, I knew the answer. I was afraid of pain. In the next moment, a contraction, a huge searing wave of pain, crashed over me. I lay very still and felt it pass through my uterus, my abdomen and my diaphragm. I felt it begin to break me open and I knew then that there was no escape. There was nothing I could do except surrender. With each new wave of pain I kept repeating, "break me, crack me open." These words sound harsh now as I write but then they were filled with softness and love. Break me. Crack me open. Break me. I spent all afternoon lying on the sofa barely breathing, barely moving, feeling wave upon wave break over me, break through me.

Later, my midwife told me to eat a light supper and soak in a hot tub. The hot water would either speed up my labor or slow it down. If the contractions slowed down I was to drink a half glass of wine and go to bed. I would then probably wake up in three to four hours in active labor. I prayed

for my labor to slow down. I wanted that half glass of wine badly. I longed for bed and sleep and a respite from the contractions.

Instead, my labor sped up. There were no images to help me now. I just hurt, and I could feel something happening “down there.” I wanted it to be over. I had had enough. I had done everything I knew, including surrender, and I still kept on hurting. I hurt and I wanted God or Buddha or whoever was out there to know I was finished. I couldn’t take it anymore. This was my limit. But the contractions kept coming.

It was then, after I threw up my supper, while my husband dashed between making the bed, phoning our friends, pressing on my back and timing the contractions, it was then that I began to vibrate with rage.

Every monk, every guru, every ascetic, every world leader, every corporate executive, every child, every man and every woman is alive because a woman gave birth. A woman opened to suffering. And still this truth is not recognized. This truth is not respected. This truth is not honored. Women are not recognized. Women are not respected. Women are not honored. Instead of being recognized for birthing, women are beaten. Instead of being respected for birthing, women are raped. Instead of being honored for birthing, women are murdered. Women are killed.

No one was exempt from this rage. Not even our friend, a monk, who had called earlier and rejoiced in my labor. He had reminded my husband of the preciousness of human birth and the need to honor mothers. How sweet, I thought at the time. But in this birthing rage not even he was exempt. Even I was not exempt. I too had never recognized my mother for birthing my life or respected my mother for her suffering on my behalf. I too had never honored my mother for the gift of my breath.

My rage broke. My water broke. And I entered into the final stage of pushing. I don't know how people endure ceaseless pain. I don't know how someone endures not knowing if pain will end. I knew this pain would end. This thought kept me willing to feel and to be present. To be honest, it was not the desire for my baby that sustained me. It was the desire to be free from pain. I was burning in hell and I wanted out. I was burning and my midwife kept telling me to push through the ring of fire. It was not enough to feel and be present, instead I needed to use every fiber of muscle and will to push into the pain. With each push my skin screamed that it was tearing. I was sure I was ripping open and I expected to see my bowels and guts oozing onto the floor between my legs. I didn't trust my midwife's assurances that I wouldn't split in two. I thought she would do anything to birth this baby, including lie to me. But I also knew that my friend Ruth wouldn't lie and Ruth was sitting in my living room, holding my hand and telling me that she too had pushed into this fire and survived. So I pushed.

The pain of my contractions stripped me of everything that I thought I knew. I was left with raw sensation. There was no “I” in the usual way. As I pushed into the pain I remember hearing every word spoken by my midwife and friends. I remember a quality of precise awareness. And yet, when my husband asked, between contractions, if I was thirsty I didn’t know how to answer. I couldn’t find the “I” that could detect thirst. I could hear. I could feel. But I couldn’t discern something as particular or as personal as thirst. I couldn’t formulate an answer. As my baby was slowly being birthed into air and earth, I was becoming more formless.

After what felt like an eternity of pushing, but was actually an hour and a half, my son’s head appeared, wet and round and large. My joy was short-lived when I realized I still had to push out his shoulders. No one had told me about the shoulders! I thought when the head was birthed the rest of his body would slither out on its own. After another eternity of pushing, which probably lasted only a minute or two, I heard my midwife, say that my baby was here. In one movement I sat up and without thinking reached down between my legs and pulled my half born son out of my vagina and onto my chest as I lay back down to rest in my husband’s arms. My baby was born and suddenly there was no pain.

The next day, as I nursed my baby and visited with my midwife, I realized that I felt I had failed. Even though my son was born at home with

no complications and glowing with life, I had failed because I had experienced so much pain. Of course, I knew that childbirth was painful for most women but I secretly believed that I was different. I had read stories of tribal women squatting in the fields birthing effortlessly and other accounts of women in ecstasy while giving birth. I knew that childbirth did not have to be painful. I knew from being Rolfed that the experience of pain is subjective and before my son was born I privately believed that only repressed women who couldn't undulate their pelvis or moan or growl felt pain. I was certain that because of my years of body awareness practices childbirth would be relatively easy.

The feeling of having failed persisted for months and I felt that my practices had failed me as well. I had spent fifteen years immersed in the study and practice of massage, Trager bodywork, Rosen Method bodywork, Continuum movement, mindfulness meditation and Vajrayana Buddhism. I understood and experienced my body to be an open, fluid, innovative organism and I spent time daily attending to sensation through sound, breath, movement and stillness. My basic meditation practice was to develop intimate awareness and compassion. But it was only after giving birth and feeling like a failure that I realized I had expected these practices to protect me from pain.

I was shocked by the depth of my feeling of failure. I kept asking myself: How can someone fail in birthing? Who fails? But no matter how I framed my questions, or what my midwife or teachers or friends said to me, the feeling persisted. Because I had felt so much pain and because the desire to stop the pain was stronger than the desire to hold my baby, I had failed.

Now as I write, I can feel another birth occurring. As I accept these feelings of failure, I sense a spacious strength, a flowering of compassion and a deepening knowing within myself. These are the gifts of my labor. I am aware of the strength that comes from feeling whatever occurs, moment to moment, whether fear or rage or surrender or pain.

I was humbled by the pain I felt. I know now that my practices could not have protected me. On the contrary, they were designed to make me feel. It was because of these practices that I was able to feel and be conscious of all the sensations of birthing, including pain. Pain is a part of life. I am not a failure for feeling pain. I am not a failure for being no different from any other woman who suffers in childbirth or any other person who cries out in agony. I am not a failure for wanting the pain to stop. It is through my body that I am challenged to feel the vastness of human suffering and to feel the truth that I am the same as every other being. I am challenged to feel whatever occurs with equanimity and openness. I am challenged to be intimate with life, with birth, and therefore with pain.