

Birthing isn't just for babies!!

Susan Morrisson, intern minister, May 9, 2010

Call to worship. Today is Mother's day. Whether you are a mother or not, I bet you had a mother!! I invite you to think about her, knowing she did the best she could, given her circumstances. She gave you life!!

And if you haven't given birth to something or someone recently, I encourage you to think about what might be waiting in you, to be born, a little touch of newness...perhaps you can come to church following a new path, or begin a new habit of noticing kindnesses, or simply learn some new adverbs.... I share these thoughts with you from my book of Life Prayers¹

Here am I, myself, but also vessel of creation.

Rhythms of the ages stir the Womb of Woman, my own womb --

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Ancient pulse in my own heartbeat,
nourishment in my own breast.

This life through me was fathered deep in fire-consecrated flesh,
And here, behold!

A miracle, that what was **not** before **is now!!**

Sermon: Birthing isn't just for babies!!

There was a recent birth on Mercer Island, my hometown: Harry Bolson, a Mercer Island student, completed his High School senior project. From conception to completion may have taken one year. His project is the first solar energy product at the school. What caught my attention was the front-page photo of the young man, with huge posters plastered around the edge of the High school assembly hall. Names of collaborators and supporters were drawn boldly under a big Thank You. Students, faculty, city representatives and community members gathered to celebrate the new 1.61kw solar panel system. The creator, Harry, hopes to keep working on this and raise enough money to double the school's solar energy system.²

What was not there before, is now!!

I don't know about you, but in the four times I have given birth to babies, no such gathering has ever occurred. I did get what I wanted, a new baby. And there were collaborators, starting with my husband. There was a baby shower in anticipation of the arrival, and a few family embraces following the delivery. I would say that describes the custom around most births I am familiar with.

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This morning I want to explore how birthing may be connected to happiness. That Mercer Island newspaper arrived at my house with the announcement of new energy.

¹ Roberts, Elizabeth and Elias Amidon, *Life Prayers from around the world*. P. 191

² Mercer Island Reporter, Wednesday, April 14, 2010

And Around the same time, another headline came in my mail: the Birth of a New opera!!

Birthing often begins with desire, then collaboration. Is that true for opera? Daron Aric Hagen, the composer of the new opera, begins by scrawling colorful patches on a wall. It helps him to have a visual layout showing how all the parts of the story fit together. This opera is particularly relevant today because the theme is related to birth. "In the opera, the title character Amelia gives birth to a baby, after the usual gestational period of nine months." The gestation of the opera took much longer -- more than seven years.

Collaboration began when Speight Jenkins, Seattle Opera's General director invited Hagen to share his new ideas. Speight liked Amelia's Themes of flight, and themes of the life cycle that included moving from loss to rebirth. They decided to invite an author to develop the story. A woman, Gardner McFall, was chosen to write the libretto. Her book, **the Pilot's daughter**, fit into the theme of the opera. The two worked together several summers putting together words and music and creating a lot of fill for the waste basket!! This sounds like real labor: Creating was a struggle ---difficult and long. Desire, collaboration, formation were all components of this birthing.

After more than two years, the piece was ready to share with the musicians in Seattle. More revisions and consultations were needed. The creating included their own real life experiences. McFall brought the memory of giving birth to her daughter. The composer, Hagen used his experience of being present at the birth of his son, Atticus. His wife's labor lasted 22 hours. When the opera was completed, he had this to say about his success. "I have to admit I wanted everything to happen quicker." Even with his personal success, "he also has learned the joy of what he calls 'the subdued flush of communal satisfaction that only comes with collaboration.'"

Hagen, MacFall and many others experienced the happiness of birthing the new opera.³

Just as W. Beran Wolfe once wrote:⁴

"If you observe a really happy person, you will find him building a boat, writing a symphony, educating her son, growing double dahlias in her garden....He will not be searching for happiness as if it were a collar stud that has rolled under the dressing table."

I noticed how subtly the composer mentioned the filled wastebasket of discarded thoughts, music, and themes. He must have been frustrated or discouraged during the seven years it took to create this opera. Why didn't the negative feelings paralyze him? What kept him and the others going?

This question reminds me of an article I read by, Barbara Frederickson, *On cultivating positive emotions*.⁵

As a psychologist and researcher, she has been investigating The Science of Happiness. She has found that Negative emotions are necessary for us to flourish and we can't avoid them; positive emotions are by nature subtle and fleeting; the secret is to increase their quantity. We can increase our positive feelings by noticing when they

³ Seattle Opera Magazine, 2009/10 Spring Issue, pp 13-16.

⁴ The Sun magazine. May 2009. Issue 401, p. 48 Sunbeams.

⁵ Ibid, p. 4, interview by Angela Winter

occur. Really, more positive feelings occur in our day to day life, therefore we benefit when we notice. How does one define “positive emotions?” If we look at a whole range of positive emotions – from amusement, to awe, to interest, to gratitude, to inspiration – what they all have in common is that they are reactions to our current circumstances. They aren’t a permanent state; they’re feelings that come and go. That’s true of all emotions, but positive emotions tend to be more fleeting.

Pleasure is a little different. It tells us what our body needs, like a drink of water when we are thirsty. Or a good warm coat when it’s cold. Positive emotions tell us what we need mentally and emotionally and what our future selves might need. I wonder which positive emotions were the strongest for the composer while he struggled for seven years to complete what he had been inspired to begin? Some times birthing seems quicker, the young senior taking one year for his solar panels. Then there is birthing of the opera, which took seven years.

What Frederickson has done in her research is to uncover how positive emotions actually cause us to be happier by helping us build our resources for managing day-to-day life. When we have better resources, we emerge from adverse situations feeling more satisfied with the outcome.

Data shows that only 20 percent of Americans are flourishing. What does “flourishing” mean? Flourishing encompasses both feeling satisfied with your life and also functioning well in it. The way psychologists measure that second part is to assess whether people feel as if they are learning, growing, and making contributions to society. In the wake of traumas and difficulties, the people who are most resilient have a complex emotional reaction in which they’re able to hold the negative and the positive side by side.

People who flourish become “beautifully unpredictable.” What is the value of unpredictability? Acting in unexpected ways is necessary for growth. In natural selection random genetic variation leads to new traits, even new species. Children are not exact replicas of their parents. There’s always some random genetic combination that can lead to new skills and attributes. This may be where birthing, and creating something new connects with happiness.

As we have seen, Birthing isn’t just for babies!! And then again, many times it is!!

I have four adult children. I actually had five pregnancies. One ended early in its development. Today, I want to tell you about giving birth to my second daughter. My husband was in the air force at the time. There were pluses and minuses to that situation. The plus was that all the medical care was paid for. When he was reassigned he had to go into a training situation, and that was the minus of being a military family. I was 8 months pregnant and we already had a two year old. We had just come back home from 3 years in the Philippines. We decided the most important factor around the new birth was to provide a stable, caring place for our two-year-old daughter. My husband went off to his training, got a really cheap room to rent in Texas, while I stayed with my parents anticipating delivery.

Both his parents and mine were excited and wanted to support and help in any way possible. I quickly found a Doctor. The baby would be delivered at the UCLA Hospital, near my mother’s home. All my births were Cesarean, so we made our plans...for me and the two year old. Mother took me to the Hospital at the appointed

date and time. Several hours later the Dr. came to my bed and pronounced: “The baby is not due now; it’s much too small. You have made a mistake on your date of conception.” I was sent home. I didn’t believe I had made a mistake. But I didn’t feel I could argue with authority!! I made an office appointment, but no conversation happened to clear up the “what ifs” We all returned home to continue the waiting.

Four days later, I felt the pangs of labor. But I wasn’t sure it was labor –never having had labor. What to do? What were my resources? It was now getting late in the evening...should I go to sleep? I didn’t think I should allow labor to progress, because we had a plan for the C section. I paced the floor, trying to pay attention to my body. Finally, I woke my mother. What should we do? We don’t really have a plan. I called the hospital to ask them...”How can I confirm that what I am experiencing is labor? “ Their answer: you better come in. I kept thinking about the baby. I had heard of bad things that happen if birthing begins and then doesn’t proceed normally. Mother called our neighbor to come and stay with the sleeping two year old. She drove me to the Hospital. They put me in a room...”no My Dr. was not available.”

All of a sudden I felt totally overwhelmed – alone in the hospital bed, with no one I knew to talk to. I started crying, inconsolably. Soon a young man, an intern, came to my bedside. He started talking to me; I started talking to him. I don’t know if he had any instructions about crying pregnant women, but what he did was just right. He stayed with me for about an hour until I calmed down. Then the nurse came in and gave me something for sleep. I didn’t really want that; I wanted the Dr. who was supposed to be taking care of the expected baby and me.

What was difficult was not labor pains, although they continued, but the uncertainty – the abandonment. I knew my other daughter was being taken care of, but what about this new one? I wished for a valiant advocate that would come to me and assertively demand answers for my predicament. But, my mother wasn’t good at that. She was doing what she felt was helpful. Taking care of the two year old. And it was. Finally, after waiting all day, it is now 24 hours after I was admitted, my Dr. showed up. Emergency!!, emergency!! We have to get this woman ready for Cesarean. In my mind, “where were you all day?” I was angry, and worried. At 10:10 PM our new baby was born --- 7 pounds, 5 ounces, 20 inches long. She was healthy; I felt relieved. My Mother sent a western Union telegram to First Lieutenant Thomas Armitage in Wichita Falls, Texas. He telephoned the hospital room the next morning. Celebration could begin. The family was in touch.

My story had a happy ending. I remember the kindness of the young intern. I felt grateful for the total care my family was taking of my two year old. They didn’t have much experience because we had just returned from the Philippines a few months before; they hadn’t been around babies for a long time, and yet they totally jumped in anticipating a growing family.

Not all stories of birthing come out the way you want them to. Things can happen that are way beyond what you expect.

I remember a time during my chaplaincy training. There were regular departments we were assigned to during the week. We also had to take weekend and evening calls. These calls were to departments we were not familiar with. On this particular weekend, I was called to the maternity ward where a baby had died. The mother had requested to speak to a chaplain. I felt scared. What can I do? Gratefully the

Mom knew what she wanted. She was very young and the father looked even younger. The nurses stopped me as I came to the floor. The baby just wasn't formed well enough to live. Maybe they felt I would judge them, or that they didn't try hard enough. I had no thought of that. Oh, I said.

When I entered the room the two parents sat quietly together, on the hospital bed. Then, she asked me to get a box from the closet near the bed. She had a white, decorative box ready for the memories of the birth and the baby. I handed it to her. She opened it and showed me the pictures of her holding the baby, swaddled in newborn blankets. Then the booties ready to be worn by the newborn. She had prepared lovingly for this birth. What was my job? I was there to listen. Let her talk. I listened with all my heart. At one point, I almost cried. My own feelings for her loss welled up. But I didn't cry. Her feelings were to be hers. My feelings were less important. As her chaplain, I was there to listen to whatever she had to say and feel. I will never forget the integrity of this young mother. She figured out what she wanted, in spite of her pain. She asked for it, and then she readied to leave the hospital and move back into her life.

I don't know what happened next. Did she have her family surrounding her with comforting arms? did she remain silent because there was no baby to bring home? What about her friends? We often don't know what to do when the outcome doesn't match our expectation. I hope she remembered any kindness shown her at the hospital. Even with negative outcomes, there is an opportunity to notice the positive feelings we experience.

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There was the birth of the newborn, the birth accompanied with grief. There was the young man and the composer. Birthing happens later in life too. How can that be? Sometimes an idea starts to germinate, but life interferes and so creation doesn't flourish. But the idea remains. I am thinking about the birth of the Woman's Bible. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton began her project, she didn't know if she would live long enough to see it completed. And yet, she began.

“I had long heard so many conflicting opinions about the Bible—some saying it taught woman's emancipation and some her subjection—that, during a visit of my children, the thought came to me that it would be well to collect every biblical reference to women in one small compact volume, and see on which side the balance of influence really was. To this end I proposed to organize a committee of competent women, with some Latin, Greek, and Hebrew scholars for a thorough revision of the Old and New Testaments, and to ascertain what the status of woman really was under the Jewish and Christian religion.”

At this time in Euro-American history, (and maybe even now), many laws and moral values were dictated by what was in the Bible. Since Stanton had dedicated most of her adult life to the liberating idea that women should have the right to vote, it is not surprising that she wanted to know where ideas of justice came from.⁶

⁶ website: Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

“We immediately set to work. I wrote to every woman who I thought might join such a committee, and Miss Lord ran through the Bible in a few days, marking each chapter that in any way referred to women. We found that the work would not be so great as we imagined, as all the facts and teachings in regard to women occupied less than one-tenth of the whole Scriptures. We purchased some cheap Bibles, cut out the texts, pasted them at the head of the page, and, underneath, wrote our commentaries as clearly and concisely as possible. We did not intend to have sermons or essays, but brief comments, to keep "The Woman's Bible" as small as possible.

The project was thwarted when some of the women withdrew, fearing the work would be too radical. Stanton didn't give up. "I began to read the usual commentators on the Bible and was surprised to see how little they had to say about the greatest factors in civilization, **the mother of the race**. For several months I devoted all my time to Biblical criticism and ecclesiastical history, and found no explanation for the degraded status of women under all religions, and in all the so-called "Holy Books."

The Woman's Bible is not an attempt to re-translate the bible to make it more acceptable to women. The commentary presents a direct challenge to one of the most important theological doctrines of the church: the authority and infallibility of the biblical word. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Revising committee insisted that the Bible was not divinely inspired, but rather was an historical document, a product of its own period and culture.⁷

The Woman's Bible is the first organized and in depth effort by women to engage in the hermeneutical task, to re-interpret those portions of the bible which had most deeply affected them as women. They assumed that women's perception would differ from that of men, and they were correct! The book was intended to encourage women to express their own spiritual natures without being hampered by male theology and institutional bigotry.

When "The Woman's Bible" was finally published in November, 1895, it created a great sensation. Some of the New York City papers gave a whole page to its review, with pictures of the commentators, of its critics, and even of the book itself. The clergy denounced it as the work of *Satan*, though it really was the work of Ellen Battelle Dietrick, Lillie Devereux Blake, Rev. Phebe A. Hanaford, Clara Bewick Colby, Ursula N. Gestefeld, Louisa Southworth, Frances Ellen Burr, and myself. (3 of the women were ordained Universalist ministers) Extracts from it, and criticisms of the commentators, were printed in the newspapers throughout America, Great Britain, and Europe. A third edition was found necessary. The Revising Committee was enlarged, until it consisted of over thirty of the leading women of America and Europe. This publicity given to the women's bible sounds a bit like where we started....Banners, newspaper headlines and community gatherings...

⁷ Study guide, written in 1975, published by Island Industries, Vashon Island, Editors: Marie fortune and Joann Haugerud.

Birth and its partner, creativity flourishes in the face of difficulty and criticism. Outcomes are frequently beautifully unpredictable!! Happiness develops along with hard work and commitment. Notice the positives; keep them in balance with the negatives. Both are part of the celebration of life!!

Benediction: #692, UU Hymnal

If, here, you have found freedom, take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort, go and share it with others.

If you have dreams, help one another, that they may come true!

If you have known love, give some back to a bruised and hurting world.

Go in Peace.

Lauralyn Bellamy.