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Birth Art

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By Mary Nolan

My birth art relates to my second pregnancy in 1986. In many ways, 1986 seems a very long time ago, but I recall one particular moment in my labour with such vividness that it is as if I can see, hear, feel and experience the moment just as it was then. The famous American childbirth educator, Penny Simkin, wrote two wonderful papers based on her research into what women recall of their labours and discovered – which will surprise none of us – that even women well into their later years remember in minute detail what happened to them during labour, the midwives and doctors they met, the things people said, and what was done to them. I also remember my second labour in this kind of detail, but the one moment I have tried to capture in my birth art was so surreal that I think of it regularly whereas I revisit the rest of my labour only occasionally now – 36 years on!

I used tissue paper, felt tips and confetti stars for my birth art. Not being a very creative person, I didn't expect that doing the artwork would lead me into a deeper understanding of my labour. I was therefore surprised to find that every aspect of making the picture, from choosing to use tissue paper, which worked well to capture the fragility and transience of the moment I wanted to describe, to deciding how prominent to make the tree, to choosing whether or not to depict the bath as opposed to just the water in

the bath, to deciding where to place myself and the baby, did, in fact, draw me into my experience in a way that renewed it for me.

My first labour ended in a BBA – Born Before Arrival – as I gave birth to my daughter on the bed in which she was conceived with no-one in attendance. She and I were both fine and I felt a great smugness that I had 'done the deed' without any help whatsoever. The labour had lasted about eight hours, so fairly quick for a first baby, and I imagined that the second would be similarly speedy.

But it wasn't. It unfolded at a much slower pace and I found myself in the afternoon of the second day of labour lying in a warm bath, having regular, fairly strong contractions, looking out of the window at a tree which was just starting to show its Autumn colours, but remained predominantly green.

I felt an immense calm. Totally untroubled by the contractions. Warm and comforted by the water around me, and supported by it. The tree's branches seemed to be both outside the window and inside it, hanging down over the bath and enfolding me in their leaves. A wonderful golden light shimmered in the branches and around me. The baby inside me was peaceful and she and I seemed absorbed into the light and movement of the tree.

Just as the tree was in a liminal moment between its summer foliage and its autumn, so the baby and I were on a threshold, hers between her life in the womb and her new life outside, and mine between living the last moments of my final pregnancy and life with my new and completed family.

It was a moment of the most total wellbeing I have ever experienced. I felt completely at one with the tree and the light, with my own body, with my womanhood and motherhood. The words of Julian of Norwich were the mantra that I used to ride the contractions: 'all shall be well…and all shall be well…and all manner of thing shall be well'.

My birth art tries to capture this moment out of time. The tree with its glancing light is central. The water is also a key part – unconfined by the bath I was lying in but a part of the flow of nature. I and my big belly are small but at the heart of the picture. The stars depict the magic of that sense of being both deeply inside myself and an integral part of a universe beyond.

Over the forty years that I have worked in childbirth education, so many women and men have told me their birth stories. It saddens me that many were stories of distress, of an experience that was far from the joyous one that should herald the arrival of a new baby. My experience in this particular moment in this second pregnancy was, for a second or two, one of profound connection with an everlasting renewal; it was a moment of the most profound and spiritual fulfilment that I would like more women to experience and more women who have enjoyed it, to talk about.

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