AIMS For a better birth...

Wounded Mothers

AIMS Journal 2007, Vol 19 No 1

Benig Mauger discusses healing loss of soul in childbirth

'The contractions suddenly came non-stop and I had no chance to catch up and adjust to the excruciating waves of pain. I panicked and just could not stop screaming, and then when the baby got stuck I heard them say "Get the forceps, cut her!" It felt like an attack. Afterwards there was blood everywhere as if a murder had taken place.'

Having a baby can be experienced as a deep trauma as the words of this mother testify. She felt violated, demeaned and disempowered. It wasn't that giving birth was the problem; it was rather that she felt traumatised by how she was treated during her birthing experience. My book Songs from the Womb tells many women's birth stories; they make harrowing reading. Following such a birth, Emma had flashbacks and nightmares. When no one listened, she gradually withdrew into a world of her own. She gained a child, but she suffered a devastating soul wound.

A difficult birth often results in emotional wounding in both mother and baby. Such 'soul' wounds are often overlooked because we have been taught that having a baby is a potentially hazardous physical experience to be managed by medical professionals. If we emerge from the experience, relatively physically intact, with a healthy baby, then we have no cause to complain. But many of us do.

Soul wounds can take years to heal In our modern birthing practice, preoccupation with the physical aspects of childbirth can mean overlooking the emotional, particularly the negative psychological effects of highly medicalised births. The inevitable focus is on making sure that a healthy baby is delivered of a healthy mother. The medicalised management of childbirth and our technological advances are designed to make our lives easier, but is there a cost?

I believe there is. Technology, last time I looked, has no soul. Neither does the medical institution, which is based on the division of mind and body and has turned birth from a natural event into a technological feat. And since, as human beings, we are made up of body and soul, mind and matter and so much more, how can technology or medicine ever even come near to understanding the mystery of human life?

Soul wounds are part of life and can propel us into healing painful experiences necessary to our spiritual growth. Indeed this is often what happens when a birth wound is activated. The experience of childbirth in this way can be a catalyst for healing. However, in an age where the same technological advances have shown us that the unborn baby is a conscious, feeling being, an understanding of this does not lessen each person's responsibility in ensuring the incoming soul a warm, loving welcome. The psychological impact

of not only birth but also prenatal life is well documented by now. From research and studies in ante and perinatal psychology we know that not only what happens in the womb and at birth but also at conception is grafted into the psyche of the child creating patterns that are carried into later life1.

And if the mother feels wounded so does her child No doubt being catapulted into life at 32 weeks in a traumatic way had some part to play in leading me to study psychology and write my first book Songs From the Womb. This experience informed me so that as a mother, antenatal teacher and later as therapist, I was acutely aware of women's disillusionment with the medical management of childbirth. Knowing the unborn and newborn baby's exquisite sensitivity meant questioning some of the practices that have become the norm in hospitals.

People ask me 'Why is it so vital that women experience a good birth?' The answer is simple. Birth is a child's initiation into life and giving birth is every woman's birthright. The desire to have a good birth experience is so basic as to be archetypal, which means it is in our nature. So that when this doesn't happen, it can have devastating consequences, with both the mother and her baby bearing long lasting psychological scars.

At the same time that I was involved in childbirth, I discovered the work of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. He talked about 'loss of soul', and described it as a spiritual malaise afflicting modern man. He believed that in many ways we have become alienated from our archetypal natures. Archetypal patterns possess a numinous energy that exercises a strong influence on our lives. Denial of the archetypal dimension puts us off kilter. Giving birth and being born are archetypal experiences of great spiritual and emotional significance. However, modern medicine strips nature of its spiritual dimension, dismissing soul and wounding mothers and babies. When a birth is experienced in this way, it can propel women into trying again in an effort to 'get it right this time'.

Birth is a soul experience that for many of us is potentially profoundly healing and transformative. Most women want to experience the birth of their child as a fulfilling, joyous and creative act. Again this is archetypal and universal. All too often this is denied them, since the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the birth process are largely unacknowledged. In my therapy room I see bruised, depressed and traumatised women, battling to come to terms with an experience that falls far short of what birthing their babies should have been. These women are wounded mothers. Often the hurt they experience during the birth of their child touches on other hurts from the past, which formerly lay hidden in their unconscious, or in the darkest corners of their hearts. They are wounded because instead of experiencing joy in the birth of new life, they feel pain. Depressed, they may find it hard to feel love for their child or others close to them. Or they may feel love, but it will be tinged with pain.

Healing birth wounds is essential to recover a sense of inner wholeness and most particularly to create fulfilling and empowering birth experiences in the future. How can we heal birth wounds? We should remember that there is a collective as well as a personal dimension to human experience so that in healing the personal we also heal the collective. We should also remember that each person's experience is unique to them and that each healing process is different. In the personal section, I have outlined my

therapeutic approach, which most women have found effective in helping them heal from such birth wounds.

On the collective level: We must empower pregnant women and return birth to parents where it belongs. Pregnant women, taught that birth is a technological feat to be managed by professionals, are often disempowered and alienated from their innate, instinctive ability to give birth.

We must restore full choices in childbirth so that women can give birth according to the dictates of their bodies. We need to free the instinctive feminine.

Healing the collective mother wound means reclaiming the feminine in our culture so that childbirth is perceived and managed differently. It means reinstating the neglected and wounded mother archetype.

On a personal level:

Healing means listening to the lost voice of your soul. Be prepared to listen to your soul needs. Working therapeutically means giving voice and form to the unconscious by writing, recording of dreams, painting, movement, telling your story to another and having it heard (therapy).

Take responsibility for your healing process. Take your health and well being into your own hands. Although anger towards those who you consider to be the perpetrators is appropriate, remaining a victim to it will imprison you.

Remember that what you don't feel you can't heal. Your willingness to suffer and endure the wound will bring you, in time, to healing. Try and clear a previous birth wounding before giving birth again. If pregnant, dialogue with your baby; remember and hold to your heart the amazing resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Keep your heart open and trust that your soul knows the way.

When you come to give birth again, trust your inner wisdom and choose your place of birth carefully.

When we understand our birthing challenges as spiritual tasks of empowerment, it both heals and frees us. Healing will happen when there is awareness of the emotional and spiritual significance of the birth experience. When birth attendants realise and honour both the exquisite sensitivity of the unborn and the sacred dimension of giving birth, and combine technology with soul, we will have a new model of birth, empowered yet vulnerable.

References

1. Raphael-Leff, Psychological Processes of Childbearing IN Mauger, B., Healing the Wounded Mother p.70 Benig Mauger is a Jungian Psychotherapist, writer, lecturer and pioneer in ante and perinatal psychology. She has a private practice, teaches and runs workshops internationally. Benig is also author of Songs from the Womb - Healing the Wounded Mother and Reclaiming Father - The Search for Wholeness in Men,Women and Children. For more information please

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