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Birth of Mutual Understanding and Respect

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Tamara Parnay looks at cultivating an empathic environment for the sharing of our birth stories

Birthing is a hugely important subject for parents and parents-to-be. We have a great deal to learn from and share with others, but we may struggle in our attempts to tap into our collective wealth of knowledge and experience. This article intends to show that the availability of a wide range of first hand birth stories encourages and enables expectant parents to inform and prepare themselves perhaps more effectively than any other form of childbirth education. For anything so close to our hearts and personal, we need to start by providing a non-threatening environment conducive to open, heart-to-heart participation.

The topic of birthing is so highly charged. The contention seems to arise mainly between those who have had natural births or home births and those who, for whatever reason, haven't. One side may come across as patronising, smug, and self-serving. The other side may seem insecure, defensive, envious, and even ill-informed.

Expectant parents who have researched and considered all the birthing options available to them are making an informed decision. They may plan on any combination of options, such as a home birth, a natural hospital birth, a hospital birth with minimal pain relief, a hospital birth with maximum pain relief, and even a planned caesarean. Of course, there may be unforeseen events that could change Plan A to Plan B, and these changes may be completely out of anyone's control. So, for instance, those planning on a natural home bir th would need to consider the possibility, remote as it may be, of ending up in hospital having an emergency caesarean.

Maternity care providers in all steps of the process, from pre-pregnancy through to postnatal care, need to move more in the direction of assisting people in having personalised birth plans and helping them safely to realise these plans. In other words, they must consider the family to be an integral part of the decision-making process.

With informed planning, financial considerations need to be taken into account: some families may not be able to afford private care; risk factors must also be considered; it may not be advisable to plan a home bir th for a high-risk pregnancy; some women might desire pain relief; they may simply not want to experience the pain of birthing. For other women, pain relief may be crucial. Pain sensitivity may vary greatly from one person to the next, which would mean that some women may simply not be able to cope with pain as well as others. If pain relief wasn't available to some women during labour, their birth experience could be overshadowed, even complicated, by their overwhelming inability to cope with the

pain. Couples need to be realistic about their circumstances and thus deserve to be free to make informed and unfettered decisions about what best suits them for a birth plan. Once they have become informed, the best combination of options for any family is that which they feel best suits them at the time.

For some mothers who have experienced a natural birth, they may find it difficult to understand why others have not, cannot, or do not desire to do so. Some natural birthers have described to me how they were successful at getting themselves into the right 'zone', pointed out that they had made the right choices, and emphasised that they hadn't given up when the going got tough; some described how they felt in complete control during their birth experience.

For some who chose or needed medical intervention, doubts and 'what ifs' may creep into their thoughts when they hear natural birthers' stories, even if they have processed their birth experience and have come to terms with any disappointment they may have felt, that is, assuming they were disappointed at all. I have heard comments, such as, 'I must not have been able to get myself into the right frame of mind.' 'I think I made some bad choices.' 'Maybe I didn't try hard enough.' Their insecurities and defensiveness may actually end up reinforcing and perpetuating the attitude that all women can control every aspect of their birthing experience and its outcome if they really want to.

For some who choose a home birth, they may feel misunderstood, even humiliated, by hospital birth advocates who consider home birthers to be reckless with their baby's and/or their own well-being. Comments such as, 'It's risky business to birth at home' or 'something could go wrong, and then your baby's and even your own life could be in jeopardy' may undermine the confidence of those who are considering a home birth.

What might cause these misunderstandings and ill feelings to develop?

Perhaps the answer lies in our culturally-driven need to compete. Competition is not only prevalent in mainstream settings; it also exists in alternative communities and social circles. Society instills in us the need to compare the many things in our lives in order to determine what's better, or what's best. Then we generalise that 'what's best for me must be best for you too.' By setting up a better than/worse than dichotomy, competition stifles our ability to empathise with each other. Unspoken irrational comparisons might take place, such as: 'I had the shortest and least complicated natural birth.' 'Oh! My natural birth took longer than hers.' 'Oh no! How can I share my birth story? I didn't even have a natural birth!' For many reasons, everyone loses in competitive situations like this. One unfortunate consequence is that non-natural birthers may feel uneasy about sharing their birthing stories. We may all lose out on their valuable input, because we don't end up having the chance to view the bigger picture.

A competitive atmosphere that develops surrounding the sharing of birth experiences is a clear sign that on an individual level, everyone needs to reflect more on their own birthing experience. If individuals find themselves proving others wrong in order to make themselves feel right, then they need to have a look at possible reasons why. They need to give themselves - and then each other - credit where credit is due, as

well as acknowledge their good fortune.

A practical idea for encouraging a less competitive environment is to discover what we do have in common. So, it would make sense to emphasise the ways we have promoted bonding with our newborns from the time they entered into our lives. It is helpful to 'fast forward' to the present time and talk about what we are doing now - and tomorrow - to remain attached to our children.

When we can get beyond our feelings of competitiveness, we are able to foster a healthy dialogue because we are more receptive to what others have to say. Through empathic listening, we are less likely to make assumptions about others' views, motives, and feelings, and more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt. We are able to: reflect on others' birthing experiences in order to 'try on' their situation (their 'truth') by imagining ourselves in their place; then give validation and empathy (but not in the form of an unsolicited therapy session) and increase our own knowledge of and sensitivity to birthing issues. We can then help each other move on to our current parenting situations by sharing ideas for remaining as attached as possible to our children today, tomorrow, and in the years to come. Giving birth is not only about having babies; it's also about motherhood.

In a fully accepting and flexible atmosphere, people are safe to make themselves vulnerable by sharing their feelings, needs, disappointments, triumphs, and dreams. Natural bir thers are able to view non-natural birthers' experiences and concerns with sincere, unbiased interest and empathy; and they will softly share their own birthing experience. Mothers who did not experience the birth they had hoped for will feel understood because their own birthing stories are validated; and they will be able to share in the joy of other parents who had the birth experience they had hoped for. The good feelings we derive from feeling superior are fleeting; the good feelings we receive by helping other people feel good are longlasting.

Even those most informed can run into unplanned, and sometimes serious, complications during the birth process. By no means is it right for anyone to be made to feel negatively about whatever birthing options they choose, or for whatever birthing experience they have had. We all deserve to feel as good as possible about our birthing choices and experiences. Through our positive and non-judgmental contributions to this normally contentious topic, we create a collective harmony that enables ever yone to leave the discussion feeling good. We bring these good feelings home to our families. And thus the empathy we have given to each other 'touches' the greatest gift we all receive in our birthing experience: Our own children!

To take this idea one step further : Some women might agree with me that the most beautiful birth experience imaginable would be to have all the most important women in our life surrounding us - grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts, sisters, cousins, nieces, close friends - and, of course, our husband or partner, and possibly other important males, but mostly women. If birth experiences were attended by many women, men, and children from all generations, everyone involved would be educated about the birth process. Birthing wisdom would remain in our hands, heads, and hearts, instead of being shifted to 'outsiders,' such as medical specialists.

Just imagine this: If, by the time we were mothers-to-be, we had already witnessed, or participated in several births, or had even simply listened to many different birth stories, how much this would help to normalise the birth process.

Mothers need ample opportunities to share their birth stories, to hone them, and to let them season and become family wisdom that is passed down to their daughters. Those listening to the stories, especially firsttime birthers, become informed about a wide range birth experiences and options. Birth stories are powerful and empowering, and they tend to leave an enduring impression on us all. Let's start shifting the current paradigm by cultivating a harmonious atmosphere in which to share our birth stories.