AIMS For a better birth...

Unassisted Childbirth

By Laura Kaplan Shanley

AIMS Journal, 2000, Vol 12 No 1

Many people have heard the terms unassisted childbirth. But what is this movement, which is particularly gaining ground in the US, all about. Is it safe? Is it sane? Laura Kaplan Shanley pleads the case for mums who want DIY births.

The self can be trusted. This is a bold statement to make in a society that idolizes its "experts". And certainly a bold statement when it comes to the act of birth. Everyone knows, or so they think, that birth is inherently dangerous and therefore needs to be managed and controlled by highly trained specialists.

Yet around the world many women are finding they can indeed trust themselves to give birth safely without outside "assistance," and it is this belief that has lead to the phenomenal growth of the movement that is becoming known as "unassisted childbirth."

Many couples who choose unassisted childbirth have been heavily influenced by the work of the late Grantly Dick-Read. Dick-Read was an English obstetrician who wrote and practiced in the first half of this century. He is widely credited with being the father of natural childbirth. Although he never specifically mentioned unassisted childbirth, at the time of his death he had embraced the concept and was regularly corresponding with women who were choosing this option.

It was Dick-Read's belief that women's bodies were designed to give birth easily and painlessly - provided they weren't afraid. Fear, he stated, is a very powerful emotion. It tells the body there is a danger out there that must be fought or run away from. Blood and oxygen are instantly sent into the extremities enabling the frightened woman to fight the danger or run from it. In order to do this, however, all non-essential functions must be shut down. The body stops producing saliva, which is why our mouths may get dry when we have to give a speech. It stops digesting food, which is why chronic stress (fear) leads to digestive problems. And it stops sending blood and oxygen to our sexual organs, which is why it is hard to get sexually excited when we're feeling stressed. In an attempt to save our lives, the "fight/flight" response, as it is called, actually overrides all other bodily functions. This can indeed be a handy tool to have at our disposal, provided we are truly in a dangerous situation.

The problem is the body cannot "reason." It cannot differentiate between a truly dangerous situation - a wild animal that is about to attack, and an imagined one - a woman's perceived fear of a perfectly natural bodily function. And so, just as the body shuts down digestion when the fight/flight response is activated, it shuts down birth. Because the uterus is deprived of fuel (blood and oxygen), it cannot function

correctly, nor can waste products be properly carried away. Hence we have pain and problems. The solution? Eliminate the fear, allow the body to work the way it was designed to, and birth can indeed become the safe and fulfilling experience it was meant to be.

Personal Experiences

In 1978, I got the opportunity to put Dick-Read's theories into practice. My husband, David, and I had come across his work two years earlier, and had been instantly convinced of its validity. Around that same time we had also been introduced to the concept that we create our own reality according to our desires, beliefs, and intentions. From Jane Roberts, author of numerous books including THE NATURE OF PERSONAL REALITY, we learned that thoughts are not simply nebulous words floating about in our heads. They are instead electromagnetic realities that have an intense desire to manifest themselves in our lives. To put it simply, what we think becomes real, and the stronger the thought, the more quickly it materializes. Or as author Richard Bach states, "We magnetize into our lives whatever we hold in our thought." This is not simply new-age gibberish. It has been proven by noted physicists such as Norman Friedman, David Bohm, Neils Bohr, and Fritjof Capra.

Soon after conceiving our first child, we decided we would deliver the baby ourselves. We had already seen evidence of the power of the mind in other aspects of our lives, and saw no reason to believe we couldn't apply this same philosophy to our births. This is not to say that we were totally free from fear. Fears did surface, but we dealt with them by saying beliefs suggestions ("I believe I'm not afraid, I believe I trust myself,") and working with our dreams. We believe that dreams are a place where we can face and change limiting beliefs. Dreams also enable us to practice major events in our lives before we actually live them. In the beginning of my pregnancy I dreamt I was giving birth in a hospital surrounded by my father (a physician) and other doctors. I was afraid and in pain. By the end of my pregnancy, however, I was dreaming of giving birth at home, simply and easily without outside assistance.

On the afternoon of August 20, 1978, I began feeling what I thought might be labor. By about midnight I knew this was the real thing. David called three friends of ours (all men) who wanted to be at the birth along with a film maker who was making a film about us.

I spent the next hour on the toilet as I found that was where I felt the most comfortable. All the men hung out in the bathroom with me and we laughed thinking about how strange it must have looked - a woman in labor sitting on a toilet surrounded by five men. David had me say some belief suggestions that I wasn't afraid and that I trusted I had inner help.

About 1:30 my water bag broke neatly into the toilet and seconds later I reached down and felt the baby's face pressing against my perineum. I wasn't pushing - he was coming out on his own. At that point I decided I'd better get over to the bed. I remember feeling like a wild animal. I knew that my body knew what it was doing and I didn't want anyone to interfere.

When I got to the bed, I was on my hands and knees about to turn over when I heard a voice inside my

head say very firmly, "Don't turn over." I hadn't read anything during my pregnancy about the undesirability of giving birth lying down so I had just planned on having him flat on my back. There was no mistaking the intent of that voice, however, so I stayed in the all fours position. Seconds later I gave one semi-voluntary, semi-involuntary push and the baby literally came flying out of me. David caught him in mid-air. I could feel the joy in his voice when he said, "It's a boy!"

I turned over and David laid him on my stomach. It all seemed unreal. One second he was in me and the next he was out. After letting John, as we decided to name him, get used to his new environment, David tied a string around his cord and our friend, Rick cut it with his pocket knife. Then all the men took him into the other room and gave him his first bath. An hour or so later I stood up and delivered the placenta into the toilet. Success!! We were thrilled with the whole experience.

A year and a half later, I realized I was pregnant with Willie. I had a very healthy pregnancy, as I had with John. I never vomited or had any of the other so called symptoms of pregnancy (which I believe are generally fear induced). I had planned on giving birth on my hands and knees because that had worked so well with John, but in a dream I was shown otherwise.

In the dream I was watching a woman giving birth standing up. She was straddling a little baby bathtub and catching the baby herself. I heard a woman's voice very gently say to me, "Tell her to remember not to do too much." I understood what the woman was saying - birth needs to be allowed to happen, not made to happen - and the peaceful feeling of the dream stayed with me for the remainder of my pregnancy.

On the morning of August 17th, I began to feel contractions. David and I made love and I remember feeling an orgasm followed immediately by a contraction. The rhythmic contracting of my uterus during the orgasm felt almost identical to that of the contraction. They seemed to have the same pattern.

A few minutes later I was walking across the room when my water bag broke. I took out my little bathtub and stood over it as I had been shown in the dream. At that point I couldn't feel any contractions, but I knew I was having them because when I put my hand inside myself, I could feel my muscles rhythmically contracting around it. A few minutes later a foot appeared between my legs. I wasn't expecting a breech birth, although a friend of mine had dreamt during my pregnancy that he saw the baby inside of me standing right side up.

David and I said some belief suggestions that everything would be all right, and we patiently waited for Willie to come out. Little by little his foot got lower and when I felt the time was right, I gave one push, his other foot popped out and I pulled him out in one smooth movement. David yelled excitedly, "You did it!" and Willie immediately began to nurse. (Incidentally, twelve years later I learned that Michel Odent, the well-known French obstetrician, believes that breech babies can be born vaginally provided the woman remains in a "standing squat" or upright position, and the attendant does absolutely nothing to interfere if at all possible. This had been the message of the dream.)

In the summer of 1982, I discovered I was pregnant again. I went into labor on the morning of November

16th. This time, I decided I wanted to give birth alone. If David was there I wasn't going to kick him out, but ideally I wanted to be by myself. I had come to view birth as a personal challenge and I was confident I was up to the task.

David had just left for the library when I felt the first contractions. I told the boys the baby would be here soon, but nothing happened. I seemed to go in and out of labor all day. When someone called or came over I would feel contractions, but as soon as I was by myself they would stop. I realized I was afraid to give birth alone so I said my belief suggestions.

The next morning, David left for the library again and my contractions started picking up. I took a shower and took out my little plastic bathtub. This time I got down on one foot and one knee, the position that seemed to feel the best. Joy (as we later named her) came out as easily as the others. The water bag broke over her face. She looked right up at me and gave a little cry. The feeling I had was beyond description. It was as if we were the only two people in the world. The thought went through my mind that she was the most beautiful gift I had ever received!

I wrapped her in a towel and offered her my breast. She nursed contentedly for a while, and then I put her in a baby seat so I could tie and cut the cord. A few minutes later I delivered the placenta into the tub.

I hadn't slept well the night before so I decided to lie down for a while. The boys were still sleeping and Joy was peacefully looking around as I began to hear beautiful inner sounds. Soft bells and the sound of ocean waves filled my head. I was in ecstasy.

Soon the boys woke up and made me the best glass of chocolate milk I had ever tasted. I had forgotten that I hadn't eaten in a while. I took a quick shower and then the boys, Joy and I all walked over to meet David at the cafeteria on campus. The temperature was in the 70's and I felt positively blissful. This, I thought, must be what Grantly Dick-Read meant when he said that childbirth should give a woman a feeling of exaltation.

Four years later I became pregnant with Michelle. Once again I had a very easy pregnancy. On the morning of her birth I awoke at 7 A.M. and realized I was in labor. David was out on the couch reading the paper, but I didn't tell him I was in labor. I felt perfectly capable of handling it myself. As I lay there I said belief suggestions that I was totally cooperating with my body. "I'm not fighting this in any way," I told myself. I felt myself slip into a state of complete relaxation. There was not a tense muscle in my entire body.

At 8:15 I got up and walked across the hall to the bathroom. "You taking a bath?" David asked. "Yes," I answered, still not informing him of my condition. I turned on the bath water, sat down on the toilet and noticed the water bag between my legs. It popped and seconds later a head appeared. I gave a little push and Michelle slid out into my hands. The cord was wrapped loosely around her neck and I unwound it. She gave a little cry and immediately began nursing. "David," I called out. "Will you come here a minute?" David had heard the cry but thought there was a cat in the bathroom. His eyes widened as he saw Michelle sitting on my lap.

A few minutes later he washed a pair of scissors and cut the cord. That afternoon the girls and I went to a baby shower some friends of mine had unknowingly scheduled for April 5th (I had thought she was going to be born around the middle of the month). Needless to say, they were surprised to see her on the outside of my body!

Taking The Leap

Unassisted childbirth isn't for everyone. I say this not because I believe some women's bodies are poorly designed, but rather because some women simply are not going to be able to overcome their fears. This is perfectly understandable. Women have been told their whole lives that birth is inherently painful and dangerous, and it may take several generations to turn this around.

I do believe, however, that it is time for all women to at least take a small leap in faith and begin to believe in their own abilities. Women should be encouraged to be as autonomous as possible when giving birth. They should be instructed to look within themselves for support and direction, rather than be told how to give birth. Midwives, doctors, and most importantly, birthing women need to recognize that there is an intelligence within us that needs to be listened to and respected. This intelligence knows how to grow a seed into a human being, and it knows how to get that human being out. Nature or God is efficient, and it will complete the process - if we let it.

The bottom line is, we don't have to invent a better mouse trap. We simply have to be humble enough to accept the fact that the perfect way to give birth has already been invented, and all creatures - cats, dogs, birds, butterflies, and women - already know how to do it. The key is to eliminate the fear, and dare to listen to the still, small voice that is always guiding us. When we do, birth, and indeed life, can become truly miraculous.

Laura Kaplan Shanley is the author of numerous articles about birth and spirituality. Her book, UNASSISTED CHILDBIRTH, was published in 1994 by Bergin & Garvey. Laura, David and their children live in Boulder, Colorado.
To purchase UNASSISTED CHILDBIRTH or learn more about the subject please visit her website - www.unassistedchildbirth.com.