BIRTHING

MAUREEN URSENBACH BEECHER

"TOMORROW WE'LL DO IT, THEN," said the obstetrician, peeling off his sterile gloves. "Call me at 7:30 to be sure the hospital can handle us." With a pat to my thigh intended to convey confidence and reassurance, he left the examining room. I would not see him again until the end had begun.

We had been together, he and I, more than just the nine months of this adventure. A hesitant, no longer young bride, I had weaseled my way into his already full practice with protestations that "if we're going to do it at all, we have to do it right away." He specialized in infertility, and somehow that made him worth the effort. At the pre-marital examination he had pronounced all in readiness, and then shocked sudden tears to my eyes with the announcement that "medically I should advise you not to have children." He recited statistics about Down's syndrome and older mothers, backing study with study, overwhelming me in those few moments with mathematics and the moral dilemmas concurrent with amniocentesis and IUDs, with abstinence and abortion. "Whatever you and your husband decide," he added, "I'll go with you."

Returning six months later, lab report in hand, the pregnancy "pos" box checked, I read in his face a practical mix of congratulation and dismay—how nice, but he really didn't need one more pregnant woman this month. The dismay faded with subsequent visits. We talked of his progenitors, Pratts and Romneys they were, from the Mexican colonies, and of my work in the Church's history division, writing accounts of just such stalwarts as his ancestors. Of the pregnancy there was little mention; things were "progressing nicely," and I was given to understand that the complaints that went with my condition were simply to be endured. Was I not, after all, a daughter of

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Eve in sorrow bringing forth my children, I thought angrily after one more visit diminished, again, my hopes for relief from the interminable nausea. "Doesn't the Bendectin work?" sympathized the nurse.

Now at last the pregnancy would be over. Back at my office I had cleared my desk before leaving for the appointment; colleagues there would be pleased not to see me tomorrow.

By eight the next morning we were at the admissions desk. "Yes?" asked a white starched nurse. "I'm here to have a baby," I explained. She led me off for the routines which hospitals impose on people who come there. I had never had an enema before.

By the time Dale had filed the admission forms with the computer-head of the hospital, I was gowned and bedded in a narrow room surrounded by a bank of monitors. Competent people began attaching me by various cords to the hospital machinery: the intravenous first, to my arm, then the plastic tube to my spine. I welcomed that one, having been reassured by my doctor that, since we were too busy for breathing lessons, and since he fully expected me to demand some anesthetic when it would be too late to inject it, why not plan on the epidural block. It will be nice, I thought, to be awake, but numb.

"Will you sign here, please," smiled the young resident as he pushed a clip board toward my I.V.'d arm. "Your doctor has agreed to let you be part of our study." I was getting used to being a guinea pig, but Dale had questions. "Oh, there's nothing experimental in the pill itself," the resident explained. "We just need to know how much dosage at what stage is best for inducing labor." Dale signed, I swallowed, and the process was made immediately irreversible, despite nervous jokes of "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

From some intern's sleeve appeared a white plastic device resembling an outsized crochet hook. "Just to break the sac," he explained, as though invading private space were nothing at all. Two more cords wired me to the machinery of the system. The fetal monitor beeped encouragingly, and, hardly minutes after my ingestion of the pill, the swinging arm of the second monitor began to indicate contractions. "Here comes one," Dale would say. "Shut up," I thought. The pain surged through my abdomen, swelling to an intensity I had never experienced, then relenting. "Just tell me when it starts to peak out, will you?" I hoped that he wouldn't feel rejected that I didn't want his warnings. Bonding between husband and wife during labor was important, the book had said.

In the spaces between, I tried to think of other things, but birthing will not be upstaged. The scene from a B-rated movie played across my thoughts, an Indian woman, crouching and grunting in a copse of aspen and then emerging impossibly soon after, her child bundled in her skirts, to present her son to his father. Too neat, I thought. Then I remembered another Indian birthing story that seemed, in comparison, genuine. In a lecture series on women's issues, a Navajo nurse-social worker had been an invited panelist. I recalled nothing of her assessment of the medical problems of Indian women, but remembered having been deeply moved by her account, told and retold in familiar ways, of the birth of her father.

It was so different then, there, to that mother, Hasbah, birthing her fourth child in a hogan. None of the impersonal white sterility of this hospital, none of the tubes and wires which even now linked me to systems I might never need. Only the red cord sash which the medicine man had tied to the sacred west beam of the hogan for Hasbah to cling to when the pains came hard.

None of the white-suited mob of unknown faces as here; instead her oldest daughter, watching over the coffee can boiling on the oil drum stove, assuring the cleanliness of the pocket knife with which the cord would be cut, the string with which it would be tied; her husband, in and out of the hogan as he dug the oval hole in the dirt floor in front of the sheepskins which were the delivery mat; her mother, rubbing between her hands the cedar bark—soft, very soft, for the baby's diaper—and placing it on the sheepskin blanket; Old Man Manygoats, his blessingway chants, slow, monotonous, rhythmic, singing the baby out. And finally, her uncle, his strong arms around her waist giving gentle downward pressure. Everyone loved and loving, each involved intimately in the event now taking place on the birthing mat. Another contraction, a hard one; Hasbah grabbed the sash belt. Her mother coached her on. She grunted as she pushed again. She let her baby come gently, her mother helping, expert and smooth with her hands. A son. The vigorous cry filled the hogan. The grandmother laid the baby in the fluffy sheepskin. She wiped his face and back. Old Man Manygoats sang the chant of the corn pollen boy. Grandmother cut the cord and tied it. She wrapped the baby and gave him to his mother's breast.[1] My eyes teared in anticipation of my own coming moment.

"She's crowning!" bellowed the nurse, having once more invaded that space no longer private. "Where's the doctor?" "Didn't *you* call?" "Oh, damn." "Well, let's take her into delivery."

By the time Dale returned, gowned and scrubbed, I was lost in my own body, in a world I had never known so well. The epidural block had not worked—it had seemed odd that deadened pain should be so fierce—but I was above caring. I felt the muscles move to my command. I pressed, relaxed, and pressed again, moving all the world in my own belly. I felt the baby press, I panted "not yet," I held him for the moment, confined in the birth canal, while some functionary did his thing with the scalpel. He signalled his completion of the episiotomy. Now! I opened, pressed, and eased my child from the moist darkness of my body into the dry brightness of this unfriendly world. We would meet later, I promised, and I would make it up to him.

They whisked him away, out of range of my astigmatic vision. Across the room I could make out wild thrashing arms and legs in the isolette. "Go at it, baby. You've waited a long time for that."

I was glad the delivery room crew had other things to do, that Dale had other places to look. The grin on my face, I knew, must be grotesque. I wrapped my arms around myself and closed my eyes. Dale left to share his happy news at the office.

The recovery room nurse was a soul from the past, ministering supreme in this roomful of women. A nineteenth-century midwife, I mused to myself, as she calmly went from mother to newer mother with her homely comforts,

her warm messages. The lace of her Mormon garment through the white uniform seemed somehow anachronistic—Patty Sessions would have had plainer. But her ministrations were as caring as those of the midwife.

She could have delivered my baby, I thought, remembering other midwives I had read about. It would have been comforting to have spent a confinement among such women, to have been blessed by them. A sacred washing and anointing of women before their delivery had been common even up to the time of my own birth. I wondered if warm Relief Society hands had pressed their blessings on my mother's modest body, if the fetus that was to become me had felt the surge of spirit from those sacred words.

I had earlier found the text of such a blessing, carefully penned into a Relief Society minutes book nearly a century ago. There at my desk in the church archives, cars humming by outside my window, I had read the blessing. Parts of it reverberated now:

> . . . we wash you preparatory to your safe delivery and speedy recovery, for life, health, salvation, for yourself and your offspring, asking God the Eternal Father that His holy spirit may attend this ordinance.

There were blessings for each member of the body, for each function, all articulated in a blend of the practical and the sublime utterance:

> . . . that every cord and muscle may be strong and healthy, that the marrow of your bones [be] warmed up by the spirit of God. . . . That your heart might be comforted and that no cold might settle upon [your] bosom and that your milk may be pure and filled with nourishment.

Anticipating what had been a most serious threat to my sisters in the past, the blessing prayed against premature delivery.

> that [your womb] might be strengthened and the ligaments thereof that it may retain what is there-in deposited to its full time and bring forth in perfection.

How easily such concepts had slipped from the lips of nineteenth-century Saints: perfection was for the gods, I had often reminded myself.

> We ask that your child might be perfect in every limb and joint and muscle . . .

And so would he be, my child?

> That it might be beautiful to look upon, that its nerves may be strong, that it may be happy in its spirit, . . . that it may be free from spot or blemish, that it may be filled with faith from its mother's womb.[2]

The holy blending of the magnificent and the mundane that is a woman's blessing had poured over me, and I felt the strength of sharing, the continuity

of sisterhood. The office secretary, poking her head into my alcove, had wondered at the water on my cheeks. Someday I would tell her of the washings of love which span decades.

Now, ecstatic beyond sleep, I was moved readily back to my room, watching, as I passed, my name being erased from the blackboard now filled with names of others in a long listing of delivery room comings and goings. In the bed adjacent lay my roommate. Two beds opposite were empty. After not much preliminary talk with my neighbor I sensed some deep grief beyond her telling. When the nurse arrived with the woman's baby, I knew. "She doesn't look funny, does she?" the mother pleaded. The lower ears, the slanted eyes. "No, of course not," I answered. I did not lie. She had a newborn loveliness that Down's syndrome could not alter. The baby's father came in, in his bishop's voice playing out complacencies about this "special angel," this seventh child whose difference neither parent had in the slightest anticipated. He left his wife uncomforted.

Into the evening we talked, she and I. I had read some things she needed to know, and she had some fear, some anger, but mostly a bottomless sorrow which she could barely speak. To be a mother so many times, secure in her skills, and then to find herself dependent on a nurse to be taught how to feed a child who cannot synchronize the sucking with the swallowing. She was where I was, having to learn firsthand the mother things.

Underneath it all, the talking and listening, lay in me an urgency which finally burst out. "Oh, I wish they'd bring my baby!" I cried. "Why didn't you say?" my new friend replied. "I'll call the nursery for you."

George came in with the wheeled crib. Our friend, as well as pediatrician, he was a welcome sharer in this first holding of my first born. "He's beautiful," George announced, "and normal." Then, in very doctory tones, he instructed, explained, assured. Touching the baby's hand in parting, he hesitated. "Maureen, look," he said. "This line on his palm is continuous. Downs babies often have that." Tears sprang. Through many months afterward I would caress that line, reminded of the healthy mind with which our Daniel had been blessed, of how easily it could have been otherwise.

George left, my roommate turned to sleep, and the nursery attendant, after a brisk warning not to risk falling asleep with the baby in my arms, left us. Now at last, was the moment of my peace. The nameless child fit himself into the crook of my arm as he had so many months nested in the warmth of my womb. Only now there was no squirming, no jabbing of leg or arm, no eagerness for separation. Oh, this is better, we seemed to say to each other. And I resented the others, the everpresent others, who had until now kept us from this moment.

Why the coldness of it all, why the white sterility, the metallic intrusions into our process? The machines, the strangers, the unfamiliar walls. Reason intervened: what if things had not gone so well? What if you needed instruments? or oxygen? How many babies had been saved because of the warnings of a fetal monitor? Or delivered Caesarean when things went wrong? Infant mortality among nineteenth-century Mormon women was about ten percent; the facts injected themselves into my reverie.

The midwives, for all their comforting presence, had been helpless in so many cases. Juanita Brooks had written of Grandma Leavitt, midwife in the remote Mormon community on the Arizona strip. The birthing was not going well, once, and there was no earthly help beyond the midwife's own experience. Theresa Leavitt provided the details:

> Grandma was called to Littlefield to take care of Alice Strausser Knight, wife of Edward Knight, with her first baby. She could see that she must have help, so she sent Theresa for some Elders, and she brought back the two Frehner brothers, Albert and Henry.
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> They administered to her, but still things were not working right, so she sent Theresa to get Harmon Wittwer and Parley Hunt who were camped by the school house on their way north with a load of salt. It was in the middle of the night, but Theresa woke them and told them they were needed badly over at Knight's.
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> Now there were four men all holding the Melchizedek Priesthood kneeling around her bed and asking for the Lord's help. Grandma said she wanted every one to take part in prayer, one after another, and not to stop praying until this child is born.
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> Only one or two had prayed when she stopped us. "Something is wrong here," she said. "Someone in this group has hard feelings against each other, and I want them to make it right so that we can be united and the Spirit of the Lord made manifest and this child can be born."
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> No one said a word for a few seconds, and then brothers Albert and Henry Frehner got to their feet and said they had a bitter quarrel that day, and were not speaking to each other. They stood there and with tears in their eyes asked each other's forgiveness.
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> Then they all kneeled again, and the praying went on, but not for long. These two brothers had hardly finished before the baby was born.[3]

That was the backup support, I realized. Priesthood. And I had known that, too. Early in the pregnancy, when the nausea was preventing me from the level of productivity my work required, Dale had blessed me through his priesthood privilege. I had already learned to listen carefully to his words—they were short, simple and, experience had demonstrated, either inspired or confirmed from above. This blessing, going beyond what I thought was my need—to be able to do my work—pronounced almost as an afterthought that "the baby is healthy." That was all, but it was enough. Fears of Down's syndrome left me, and I was free for the rest of my term to anticipate in peace the birth of my normal baby boy. Amniocentesis could have told as much, I realize, but this was better for me. My own intuition—I had not even bothered listing girls' names among the boys'—and Dale's pronouncement had replaced mystery with knowledge, fear with comfort.

So this was birthing, this crazy-quilt of contrasts, of senses and feelings in chaos, coming occasionally to rest, as now, with a sleeping son in the crook of my arm. Had I won the grand prize? or was there a bigger and better one behind another curtain? Hasbah, Alice Knight, the women washed and anointed, the ones with surgical deliveries, my roommate, did they have it

better? or even different? So much we had shared: the sisterhood of women at birthing times; the practical rituals, pleasant or unpleasant, necessary or unnecessary; the religious rites and their invoking of the divine; our private moments of self-knowledge, when, by whatever process, our bodies have borne their burden; and the public acknowledgement of the oneness of the human family.

And I had known it all. Had experienced the sisterhood, had participated in a ritual as old as seeding wheat, had sensed the link, to powers beyond my own, had found my own soul, had felt God.

NOTES

[1]Ursula Wilson, "Tom Knocki, Son of Hasbah," from a panel presentation 20 November 1975 in "Utah Women: Roots and Realities" series. Notes in the author's files.

[2]Oakley Second Ward Relief Society Minutes, 1901–1910, Church Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

[3]Theresa Leavitt, as quoted in Juanita Brooks, "Mariah Huntsman Leavitt. Midwife of the Desert Frontier," in *Forms upon the Frontier: Folklife and Folk Arts in the United States*, edited by Austin Fife, *et al.* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1969), pp. 125–26.