

A SUPERIOR ALTERNATIVE

Julie J. Nichols

I'm an Aries with my sun in the sixth house, which means, according to astrology, that since the moment I was born, health has been my top priority.

I had a hard time believing that when I first heard it. Since I was little, *writing* has been my top priority. Well, okay, after church and family. While I was growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area in the sixties, my goodly LDS parents taught us well in the words of God. Still, following a strong K-12 education as a writer ("we all know what Julie likes: to talk, to read, to write; someday we're sure to see her name in print or neon lights!" as my fifth-grade teacher once wrote), I barreled off to BYU, declared an English major, and sailed on through to grad school in the same department. When Professor Don Norton caught me in the department workroom one afternoon in mid-1978 and asked me if I'd be interested in writing a book with a lay midwife from American Fork, I jumped at the chance. I hadn't had my birth chart done in those days, so I had no idea about the health thing, but I'd always intended to be a writer, and this sounded like a great opportunity. Married just recently enough to have produced a baby, I was a California transplant who ate whole foods and rode her bike to school, and Don prefaced his proposal by saying, "You're pretty eccentric, aren't you? You might like this job."

"Sure," I said, "I'll help a lay midwife write a book! I don't even know what a lay midwife is! Introduce us!"

Polly Block must have been in her late fifties then. She'd been teaching midwifery classes out of her home for years and had reams of lecture notes to organize into a persuasive tome she titled *A Superior*

*Alternative: Childbirth at Home.*¹ We liked each other immediately and spent the next few months immersed in a conversation that was half about writing (“This is what I want, Julie, fix it so it works”) and half about natural healing.

Natural healing? What did that mean?

With chapter titles like “Assume the Responsibility—It’s Your Health,” “From Home to Hospital and Back,” and “Midwives: Our Heritage and Our Hope,” the book (long out of print) was more than generous with information about specific techniques and instructions for preparing and experiencing successful home birth, on the well-supported assumption that hospital maternity wards were set up for convenience and efficiency, not for the best interests of the mother or the child. I’d had one baby safely in the hospital, but I hadn’t liked the presumptive epidural and intuited that there were better ways to bring my kids into the world. I’ll confess: Polly had me at “hello.” No drugs? Herbal support throughout pregnancy? Fully aware preparation via “zonal and massage therapy, natural supplements, hydrotherapy, and so forth—in short, no screaming, no drugs, no panic” (xvii)? It all sounded awfully attractive.

By the time the book was finished and on local shelves, I was pregnant with my second son, and I planned a drugless, non-interventionist hospital experience, a compromise between Polly’s full-on home birth and the conventional experience I’d undergone with my first baby eighteen months earlier. When, in the new birthing room at Utah Valley

1. Polly Block, *A Superior Alternative* (American Fork, Utah: self-published, 1979). Cover by Sharon Lusko, sketches throughout by the author. Even when I was working on this book, I was pro-choice and headed for an academic career, so the chapters on abortion and family dynamics (men working, women in the home) didn’t resonate. But I respected Polly, and I believed in so much else in the book that I kind of ignored those ultra-right-wing sections for the sake of finishing the project to her liking. Anyway, there was no chance to write a disclaimer—I’m acknowledged nowhere in the book, and she probably wouldn’t have included a single word of mine even if I’d asked for it.

Regional Medical Center, I refused the fetal heart monitor and labored without painkilling or labor-inducing meds, at least one of the nurses made it clear she thought I was totally irresponsible. Nevertheless, I felt sure of my decision, proud of my own strength.

By the time we conceived our third child three years later, I had helped Polly edit and prepare a second book, *Polly's Birth Book: Obstetrics for the Home*, a more technical manual for midwives detailing actions, interventions, and contingencies for every stage of pregnancy, labor, and birth.² I was ready to try home birth for myself. The new book convinced me, if the first one hadn't, that she and her associates could handle nearly any emergency and that they knew when and how to enlist the aid of doctors and hospital equipment if necessary. I also knew that if I followed her regimen of nutritional, herbal, social, and exercise support, chances were good that that aid would be unnecessary.

And so it was. No hospital at all. After the successful delivery in our bedroom, my husband cut baby Jessie's cord, and the team of midwives cleaned up and disappeared just like the Cat in the Hat. It was a great experience. Four years after that, women who had been Polly's students helped me again to deliver my fourth child in my home.

But this story isn't just about home birth.

Polly's books laid out spiritual and practical reasons why allopathic medicine, certainly in the case of childbirth but elsewhere as well, doesn't always best serve the patient. *A Superior Alternative* was mostly personal anecdote, stories of women who respected birth as a natural process, completely manageable with appropriate support in the nurturing environment of their homes. Through these narratives, she appealed to the Mormon instinct for listening to the Spirit, for personal responsibility, and above all for embracing foundational earthly gifts like bodily intuition, an inborn capacity for health, and the intentional allyship of plants. I was hooked.

2. Polly Block, *Polly's Birth Book: Obstetrics for the Home* (n.p.: Sunrise Publishing, 1996).

Fast forward a dozen years.

Even a healthy lifestyle can't always stave off hard times. The stories in my head about perfect marriage and grown-up happiness interfered with reality, and when some dear friends from California saw that I was slipping down a vortex of despair with four young kids and a sense of thwarted ambition, they reminded me about taking responsibility for my (including mental) health. "You already have your answers," they said. "You just have to find them." So I started actively looking.

The Polly story was behind me. I was done giving birth to babies. I needed to give birth to my sun, my essential self. A few years before, an institute teacher at the University of Utah had told a group of us grad students that everything Jesus did, except the Atonement, we could do ourselves—every miracle, every healing, every outreach to greater truth. So at this juncture I asked, "How? How did Jesus do what he did?" I also prayed, fervently.

When I tell friends about this now, the more scripture-studious among them point to text after scriptural text about Christ's (and the ancient prophets') use of body structure, natural substances, star data, and visions to enact all types of healing. At the time, though, I was on my own, and when books about all those things fell from their shelves into my hands, I felt heard by Heavenly Father and Mother, felt taught in a Christlike way. Energy and consciousness, patterns of times and seasons, plants and the proper words—invoking the vibes—these were how Jesus did what he did. I had my birth chart done during those years. When the astrologer told me my sun was in the sixth house, I said, "Really? But I want to be a writer!" She just smiled, and I kept looking.

Because my California friends had said, "You have to find your answers," I let myself see answers everywhere. I found and worked with psychic intuitives, bodyworkers, purveyors of feminist spirituality, energy healers. When I entered a doctoral program in 1987, I wrote stories from my eccentric experience, taught writing as a healing modality

at a woman-owned massage school in Salt Lake City, and through a guest instructor there I met a healer from Northern California who offered workshops on a long-term basis right there in my old home. (Finding true home, living within its vibe, can be an important facet of healing.) I became his apprentice, practicing hands-on energy work to fascinating effect, and then a teacher of his work.

During that period, I was fired from my position as adjunct faculty at BYU for the heretical fiction I published in journals like *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*. I knew that writing is an expression of energy and consciousness to be used for good or ill—for healing or not—and I proposed to my teacher that I write a book for him. In 1999 and 2002, we coproduced two books he used to promote his teaching.³ In the first—just as in *A Superior Alternative*—the procedures and protocols of the modality are described through personal experience (my own, as it happens). The second includes philosophy and technical instructions. Collaborating with healers as they articulated their practices corroborated for me what I was coming to know for myself: that everyone has power to embrace the structures and energy of this planet; for most health issues, “there’s an herb for that” or “there’s an oil for that.”

I *have* used allopathic medicine. When nutrition, herbs and oils, energy work and movement aren’t enough for either prevention or relief, I’ve had surgeries and procedures (appendectomy, neuroma, ACL repair, lithotripsy, colonoscopy), with immense appreciation for the technology and human expertise that make my healing possible. My children were vaccinated, stitched, and otherwise cared for properly as their normal risk-filled kid lives unfolded. I would never advocate turning away from such options. They are miraculous in their own way.

3. Julie J. Nichols and Lansing Barrett Gresham, *Ask Anything and Your Body Will Answer: A Personal Journey Through Integrated Awareness* (n.p.: NoneTooSoon Publications, 1999); and Lansing Barrett Gresham and Julie J. Nichols, *The Body’s Map of Consciousness, Vol. 1: Movement* (n.p.: NoneTooSoon Publications, 2002).

But our roots, our indigenous and Mormon roots, are in folk magic and folk healing. Plant medicine is ancient and effective. Healing by means of energy flow and consciousness, slow consistent striving for balance on many levels, with or without supportive herbs, adaptogens, yoga and other movement therapies, light and electromagnetic therapy, essential oils, flowers and shrubby helpers, as well as the speaking and hearing of multiple stories—all have profound roles in the deep history of healing. Jesus knew this. Joseph Smith knew it too. It is common knowledge cultivated and transmitted by women and men in every culture at every phase of our evolving world.

Toward the end of my novel *Pigs When They Straddle the Air*, a troublemaker lies in a hospital bed in a coma, surrounded by six people whose lives have intersected with his (and each other's) throughout the book: an herbalist, a lawyer, a businessman, a trained charismatic energy healer, and two members of the family of the unconscious man.⁴ Some of these people are men, some are women, some are Mormons, some are not. In this scene, the Mormon men perform a blessing while the women call the sick man's name and hold the space. The energy healer directs the energy, and the man's autistic child guides the entire event. Although he does not leap recovered from his bed in this scene, or even by the book's conclusion, everyone present at his bedside is purified and changed by the collaborative work of multiple healing modalities.

I loved imagining this gathering of people of differing faiths, all working together for good. When I helped Polly write her first book, I thought, perhaps naively, that Mormons would know instinctively that what she said made gospel sense. When I helped my California teacher write his, where he declares that everything is energy and consciousness, and when, under his direction, I laid my trained hands on bodies whose energy I indubitably felt, I wondered why anyone should doubt the

4. Julie Nichols, *Pigs When They Straddle the Air* (Zarahemla Books, 2016), 130–33.

truth. I acknowledge that we're immersed in a world of human-centric materialism, but I thought, when I helped compose those books, that we Mormons should be above all that. If it often seems that the institutional Church isn't into self-empowerment or reverence for inherent powers of body and mind in cooperation with nature, nevertheless I believe God is. The sun in my sixth house tells me so. Imagining, speaking, and enacting practices that favor faith in those inbuilt earthly powers—*these* are the superior alternative.

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