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Spiritual Birth: A Personal Reflection on the Birth of a Spiritual Mentor and an Exploration of Spiritual Birth

Betsy Leighton

My Spiritual Birth

I became interested in spiritual formation after having what I call a "spiritual birth" in 2001. I was thirty-two years old and pregnant for the second time, after having birthed my first child at home in an uncomplicated water-birth with a midwife in attendance. Both my midwife and my family-practice physician supported my decision to forgo routine ultrasound, and because my pregnancy showed no "red flags," I was not consciously aware that I was carrying twins. I say "consciously" because around seven month's gestation I dreamed about being the mother of identical twin girls. I did not realize until later that the dream was the work of my intuition.

On the morning of July 29, my water broke around 6 a.m. My husband, David, called the midwife to tell her it was time to come over. I labored quickly while he filled the rented birth tub. Within minutes of getting into the warm water, I began spontaneously to push, despite the fact that the midwife had not yet arrived. I retreated to an inner world governed by the instinctive limbic brain, and my body gracefully delivered a baby girl. David and I briefly cradled her in the warm water, and then I announced to David's unbelieving ears, "I feel another head."

Again the wisdom of my body took over, and I delivered a second baby girl in a whoosh of adrenaline. Minutes later when the midwife and my mother ascended the stairs to our bedroom, their eyes nearly popped out of their heads when they saw me with a baby in each arm and David beside me looking bewildered.

Though I was convinced that some part of this experience had been the work of the Divine, the ensuing months were a challenging whirlwind of diaper changes,

breastfeeding, staggered meals, and interrupted sleep. The reality of having unexpected twins gradually fit into our life plans: double the clothes, twice the crying, two college funds, and so on. Around the second year, when we all began to sleep more regularly and as the haze of mothering hormones that clouded my brain began to thin, I started to write about the experience. The following chronicles my journey from spiritual birth to spiritual mentor as I explored the connection between spirit and birth.

Spiritual birth, as I define it, is the concurrence of spiritual awakening with childbirth. *Spiritual awakening* is the experience of union with Spirit that transforms all of one's prior notions about life, connection, and purpose. Based on my experience, I believe that under the right conditions, women giving birth can spontaneously awaken to the Divine.

I came across Ina May Gaskin's book *Spiritual Midwifery* during my second pregnancy and was immediately drawn to the book. I read it, feeling instinctively that it had something to say to me about giving birth,

though I wasn't sure what. While reading Gaskin's book, I was awed by the moving stories of what she calls *ecstatic childbirth*. Gaskin, a certified professional midwife and internationally known lecturer, has assisted thousands of births in her home at an intentional community known as The Farm in Tennessee, USA. The hundreds of birth stories she tells in her book paint a picture of trusting totally in the female body to give birth and of uniting with sacred birth energy through breathing techniques and the human connection to aid childbirth.

Gaskin's birth stories underlie her premise that birth is a natural process that can be aided by relaxation and awareness of the Sacred. At the time I read the book, I didn't envision myself being particularly connected with

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the Divine during childbirth; I approached birth with a no-nonsense attitude and the belief that my body was fully capable of the physical act of giving birth in a safe manner.

I think that because I had the unexpected opportunity to experience unattended birth (birth without a caregiver in attendance) of twins, I was more attuned to the role of the Sacred during the birthing process. And though I did indeed embody what Gaskin describes as ecstatic childbirth—Spirit assisted in the experience of birth—my birth experience was remarkable in that the converse was also true—birth assisted in the experience of spiritual awakening.

It has taken me six years to discern the gifts of my spiritual birth. In 2003, I began to explore with a spiritual mentor the concept of birth as a metaphor for the Sacred. Some of the realizations that came to me were an awareness of my inner Divinity and the integration of my physical and spiritual selves. I also felt great healing taking place as I put more reliance on my inner wisdom. In 2005, I published the story of my twins' births at www.mothering.com as another way of processing my feelings about the birth experience. The work with my spiritual mentor culminated in an "emergence" ritual and was the impetus for me to begin formal spiritual direction training in 2006. In my training, I was deeply affected by the notion of the sacred feminine in the books of Sue Monk Kidd, Jan Phillips, and Patricia Lynn Reilly. I chose to focus my spiritual mentoring practice on women, especially women in the childbearing cycle.

Spiritual Mentoring

I had tumbled headlong into spiritual awakening during an empowering childbirth experience; the raw intensity of this life-changing event had heightened my intuition. When I began the internship portion of my spiritual direction training, I happened to meet with two women who had been transformed by birth. The language they used to describe their birth experiences bore many similarities to the vocabulary I used to describe awakening to Spirit: opening, letting go, surrendering to a power greater than myself, connection to others. They used phrases such as *birth force* and *embodied spiritual experience*.

At the same time, I developed a tool for both individual and group spiritual reflection for women called "MyWomb." Similar to prayerful art, the technique uses the creative medium of collage to explore deep feelings and experiences of the body, mind, and spirit. Over the course of creating almost one hundred womb collages myself, I began to see birth as a transformative event, much like menarche and menopause, and to process it in a holistic way.

The Survey

My hunger for spiritual birth stories led me to independently compose a survey, which was published in the July 2007 *Membership Moments for Spiritual Directors International*. Over the course of several months, I received more than 150 responses to the survey from women of all faith traditions and walks of life, many



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of whom were affiliated with Spiritual Directors International. Women seeking spiritual direction have unique needs, and I hoped my survey would emphasize the specific needs of women in the childbearing cycle.

I used the survey format to gather data on spiritual birth and its relationship to other factors, hoping to address questions such as these: Do women experience spiritual birth? Does prayer relate to spiritual birth? Does taking part in spiritual direction relate to spiritual birth? Ultimately, I hoped to write a book on my findings.

From July to September 2007, I collected 156 responses to the survey. Of that number, 7 percent of the respondents learned of the survey directly through *Membership Moments*; many more learned of the survey from friends, clients, or colleagues of Spiritual Directors International members. Ninety-seven percent had given birth to at least one biological child, and 90 percent answered “yes” to the question, “Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?”

Do Women Experience Spiritual Birth?

This was the foremost question I hoped my survey would address. In evaluating the prevalence of spiritual birth, I looked primarily at whether respondents said that birthing was a spiritual awakening for them. Those who responded positively to the question of whether birth was a spiritual awakening for them I defined as *spiritual birthers*. More than half of all respondents (53 percent) said that birthing was a spiritual awakening for them. Among spiritual birthers, almost half (40 percent) also

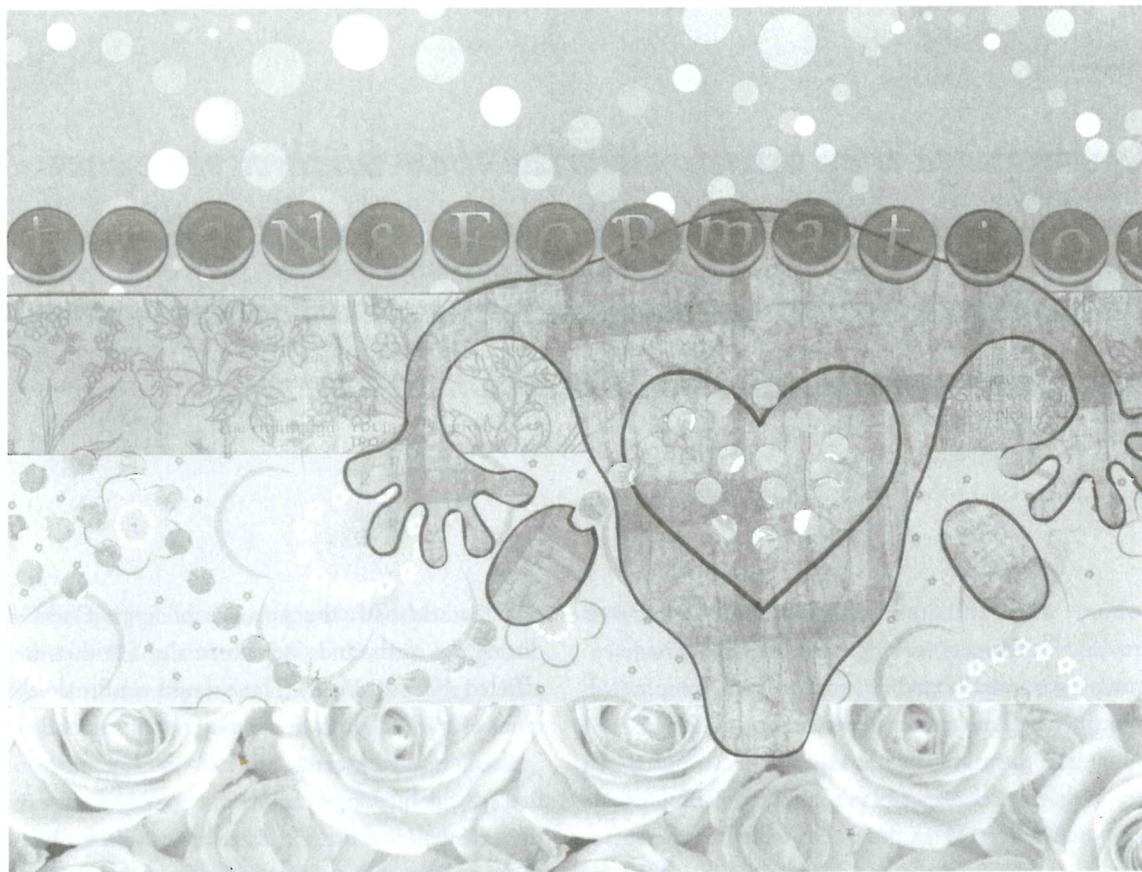
said that they felt the presence of Spirit-God-Goddess during the birth, and 68 percent also felt that the birth affected them spiritually. These results confirmed the existence of spiritual birth in the majority of respondents.

Another way I looked at the relationship between spirituality and birthing was whether respondents said that the experience of birth affected them spiritually. Almost three-quarters (74 percent) of all respondents said that the experience of birth affected them spiritually (defined here as *affected spiritually*.) Though not all of those classified as “affected spiritually” also experienced spiritual birth, I made this distinction to form a data subset for comparison in the remainder of the results.

Two other ways of looking at the relationship between spirituality and birthing were whether women “felt a spiritual presence while giving birth” and “felt the presence of Spirit-God-Goddess during birth.” I’ve combined these two subgroups and defined them as those who *felt Spirit*. Those who felt Spirit did not all experience spiritual birth per se but provided interesting comparisons.

Within the group of those who felt Spirit, there was an interesting split. While 60 percent of all respondents said that they “felt a spiritual presence while giving birth,” only 45 percent of all respondents agreed with the statement “I felt the presence of Spirit-God-Goddess during birth.” I wondered what accounted for the difference between those who “felt a spiritual presence” and those who “felt the presence of Spirit-God-Goddess.”

From reading so many of the explanations that accompanied the survey responses, I believe one reason for this



“Transformation” — Betsy Leighton

difference is that spiritual birth brings one in contact with what I call *inner Divinity*. I define *inner Divinity* using one of the ways Jan Phillips looks at embodied spirituality in her book *Divining the Body*: “feeling the Divine Presence within yourself.”

The narrative responses I received richly confirmed my theory about inner Divinity. One woman described having “a sense of the powerful spirit inside me” during birth. Another wrote about feeling “privileged to have experienced my own power during childbirth.” A third woman wrote that birth “humbled me in knowing my magnificence.”

Another aspect that differentiates “feeling a spiritual presence” and “feeling the presence of Spirit-God-Goddess” is the connection with all women that we tap into during spiritual birth. As one woman wrote, “I found and still can touch a place of the intrinsic beauty and power of woman, of earth, of our sweet and precious design that has us whole, complete and connected to each other as women, and the earth.” Another wrote, “I feel

more connected to a universal plan—less individual—more unified and interwoven into an ancestral tract.” And another wrote, “I felt like I was part of a womanly tribe of ancestors that had given birth—like I had been initiated into a secret society of ‘knowing’ the birth experience.”

Does Prayer Relate to Spiritual Birth?

Another aspect that I studied was the impact of prayer on birthing. Overall, 62 percent of all respondents said that they prayed while giving birth, and 40 percent said that they believe prayer had an impact on how their birth went.

Among spiritual birthers (again, those who “considered birthing a spiritual awakening”), about a third (32 percent) prayed during birth, and about a third (34 percent) felt prayer had an impact on how the birth went. These percentages, though modest, show that at least a third of spiritual birthers consistently utilized prayer during childbirth.



Among those who were defined as “affected spiritually by birth,” 52 percent prayed during birth; 49 percent felt prayer had an impact on how the birth went. This demonstrates that about half of those who were defined as “affected spiritually by birth” utilized prayer during childbirth.

Does Taking Part in Spiritual Direction Relate to Spiritual Birth?

Another facet that the survey addressed was the relationship between spiritual direction and spiritual birth. More than half, or 58 percent of all respondents to the survey, said that they had taken part in spiritual direction at some point in their lives. Of those who had taken part in spiritual direction, 40 percent were spiritual birthers (compared to 53 percent of all respondents), and 65 percent were affected spiritually (compared to 74 percent of all respondents). Of those who had taken part in spiritual direction, 35 percent said that it influenced their birthing experience. Those who had taken part in spiritual direction actually had a lower incidence of both spiritual birth and being affected spiritually by birth than the group of all survey respondents.

In relation to prayer, 45 percent of those who had taken part in spiritual direction said they felt that prayer had an impact on how their birth went (compared to 40 percent of all respondents, 34 percent of spiritual birthers, and 49 percent of those affected spiritually). Thus, feeling that prayer impacted birth seemed to be a universal trait among those who took part in spiritual direction.

Follow-up

In follow-up questions, I asked spiritual birthers more specifically how their experience related to Jan Phillips’s notion of embodied spirituality, to which I received many varied responses. One woman wrote poignantly, “For me, the birthing experience was down and dirty, gritty. It was getting so connected to your physicality that you finally understand why you’ve come into this body. It was going through the physical to touch the spirit and witness the miracle of life. That awe is what I experienced as the Divine.” Others wrote about how birth had been a spiritually fragmenting experience, believing they had lost soul parts during the process. Whether an integrating experience or a fragmenting

experience, giving birth seems to touch a core connection with the Divine.

Conclusions

Overall, the results of the survey confirmed that many women experience spiritual birth and that prayer relates to spiritual birth. I was surprised that respondents who had taken part in spiritual direction did not evidence a greater incidence of spiritual birth or of being affected spiritually.

One of the main things the survey validated was my choice to serve as a spiritual mentor to women in the childbearing cycle. While the statistics are interesting, I find the birth stories much more alive. I am eager to continue my one-on-one spiritual mentoring practice while I continue to collect stories of spiritual birth.

In sharing my research and stories, my intent is to acknowledge that birthing can be a profound spiritual gateway for women. My own spiritual formation has unfolded within the context of motherhood since my spiritual birth. Many other life events are also potential spiritual gateways for women: birth, coming-of-age, pregnancy, fertility, mothering, and perimenopause. Further questions arose as the survey results came in: What are the spiritual aspects of adoption? Does conscious childbirth accompany a greater likelihood of spiritual birth? What is the spirituality of nursing? What is the incidence of spiritual fragmentation associated with childbirth? I believe these questions, and more, merit further consideration in the realm of spiritual direction. ■

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