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## Guest Editorial—Part 2

# Uncovering Your Own Birth History

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### Abstract

In the second of a two-part article, the author encourages women to learn about their mothers' and grandmothers' birth experiences as a way to celebrate and record their family's legacy of childbirth.

*Journal of Perinatal Education, 12(4), vi-x; childbirth, birth history.*

All human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman's body (Rich, 1985, p. 11).

Childbirth is universal, but class, culture, ethnicity, and the scientific and political state of medicine all influence how women have experienced it. Biological factors, individual personalities, and other personal circumstances intrinsic to each family contribute to the uniqueness of each birth. But how many women know their family birth stories? How many of us have actually taken the time to ask our mothers and grandmothers to tell us what it was like to be pregnant and give birth? "Where were you when your water broke, Grandma?" is hardly typical conversation around the dinner table. We may know that we were born by cesarean birth or that our mother was breech, but we tend to know few of the details and little of her feelings. Our mothers' and grandmothers' birth stories, though—not to mention the births of mothers before them—form the birthing history of our families. It is a legacy that we, in turn, can pass on to our children.

In the previous issue of this journal (Behrmann, 2003), I wrote about my own family's birth history—from my

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laboring grandmother who was admonished for “bothering the other hospital patients” while drugged with “twilight sleep”; to my mother who was unconscious for almost all of her entire labor, which culminated in a cesarean birth; to my own two births, also in a hospital, but with stellar midwives and the power to make informed and empowering choices. The three of us birthed a total of four, healthy daughters. But our passageways to motherhood took place in three distinct eras and reveal profound changes in how our culture manages and understands births.

### Benefits and Rewards

Much can be gained from hearing our mothers' stories. Throughout history, mother/daughter relationships—indeed, all relationships among women—were trivialized and ignored. As Naomi Ruth Lowinsky writes in *Stories from the Motherline*, “Women lament the lack of narratives of women’s lives, yet women’s stories are all around us. We don’t hear them because our perception is shaped by a culture that trivializes ‘women’s talk’ and devalues the passing down of female lore and wisdom” (1992, p. 2). These silences have deprived us of our foremothers’ wisdom, insight, and inspiration. Even though rapid social and technological changes have altered the construction of childbirth, knowledge of our past helps us to understand who we are and where we come from. It helps us to define ourselves as women and mothers, and it reminds us that our mothers and grandmothers were, first and foremost, women like us, with similar hopes and fears, hurdles and triumphs.

Lowinsky (1992) writes about the importance of uncovering one’s “Motherline,” the embodied experiences that form “cords of connection” across generations. “These cords of meaning weave through our birth-giving experiences like umbilical cords, connecting us through those who bear to those who bore us and to those who bore our mothers and fathers . . .” (p. 4). Among the most powerful and mysterious stories from the Motherline, Lowinsky adds, are those involving birth.

Knowing our family birth stories can give us confidence and empowerment in birthing our own children. A friend with a 15-month-old child explained, “Knowing that my mom didn’t have any problems gave me confidence when I went to the hospital to give birth to *my* baby.” For me, knowledge of my mother’s and grandmother’s experiences helped strengthen my resolve to do things differently. My family is not known for physical strength and endurance. During some of labor’s most anguishing moments, I found myself thinking, “I can’t give up! I *will* get through this! I want to show my mother and grandmother that our family *is* capable of participating in childbirth!”

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Despite generational and personal differences, knowledge of how our family members experienced pregnancy and childbirth helps strengthen the intergenerational bonds among family members. It reminds us of our common ground as the givers and sustainers of life.

### All Families Are Different

Obviously, not all women will be able to learn their birthing history. Your mother or grandmothers may have passed away or their memories could be too poor to recall details of experiences so far away in their past. Your relationship with your mother and grandmothers may not permit such intimate conversation. Even if this is not the case, family members may still have difficulty discussing their pasts because the circumstances surrounding pregnancy and childbirth are not always joyful. Your mother may have suppressed her memories, making her unable or unwilling to recall situations that caused her pain or sadness, even shame or humiliation. Each situation is unique. Additionally, each of us has to decide to what extent we can probe into a *heritage* that is ours, but an *experience* that is not.

Some women, particularly if they have regrets, may feel threatened talking to you. They may feel defensive, fearful that you will judge their experience and their

mothering. Others may just feel uncomfortable, especially if they are not used to discussing such intimate matters. A woman with two boys told me of her experience talking with her mother and grandmother:

The biggest thing I noticed is our generation's total willingness to go into details, but reluctance with my mom's generation and much more still with my grandmother's. My grandmother just wanted to gloss over everything and give me a very brief summary. She had four children and she didn't differentiate between each pregnancy and delivery. If I had four kids, I could talk for an hour about each one! I had to pull the details out of my grandmother.

Despite these caveats, many of us risk nothing in broaching the subject, except maybe an awkward moment or a little reservation. My own grandmother, for example, was willing to share with me what she remembered, but she could not, for the life of her, understand why I cared. She dismissed the details of life's most profound experience as trivial. But with an explanation and some reassurance that her experiences mattered to me, she told me what I wanted to know. And who knows? Maybe your request will be met with enthusiasm and candor.

### **Interviewing Your Mother and Grandmothers**

If you want to learn more about your family birth stories, but are not sure how to get started or what questions to ask, the following paragraphs offer some suggestions to help you talk with your family.

#### ***Broach the Topic***

Think about how you will bring up the subject. This is unlikely to be an issue if your family is close-knit and unreserved. On the other hand, if you are entering uncharted waters, you might want to choose your words carefully so that your motives are not questioned. Make sure to convey respect and to assure your relatives that you value their experiences and feelings.

#### ***Choose the Setting***

Decide the best way to obtain information. You can talk face to face or over the telephone, or you can ask your relatives to write down their experiences and memories. Obviously, if you live in Seattle and your grandmother lives in Miami, it will be difficult to sit down together in the same room. Choose whatever approach works

best for you and your relatives. Neither my mother nor my grandmother, for example, was willing to *write* a single word, but they were willing to *tell* me whatever I wanted to know.

#### ***Talk Together***

If your relatives tend to be uncommunicative or reticent by nature, you will probably be better off speaking in person or over the phone. That gives you the opportunity to try to elicit further information. If you are face to face, you also have the advantage of being able to observe body language. You might want to consider using a tape recorder to record the conversation—with permission, of course. That way, you can devote your full attention to the immediate conversation without having to ask the person to slow down or repeat things.

#### ***Solicit Other People's Perspectives***

Consider talking with other people who played a role or who could offer their own perspective: your father, for example, or an aunt or older sibling.

#### ***Create a Comfortable Climate***

Assuming that your mother or grandmother has agreed to share her story with you, create a climate that is respectful and nonjudgmental. Even if you are appalled by something you hear, remember that you are not there to judge, but to listen. Bear in mind that medical discourse and cultural norms influence not only the experience of childbirth but also one's interpretation and reflection of that experience. As sociologist Marjorie L. DeVault (1990) points out, most people learn to interpret their experiences in terms that are not necessarily their own.

#### ***Plan Ahead***

Prepare your questions ahead of time. You may want to follow a chronological approach where you begin by asking questions about pregnancy and end with questions about life with a newborn. If your mother seems uncomfortable, consider beginning with more general questions and saving some of the more intimate questions for later in the interview, when she might feel more relaxed. See the Box for a list of suggested questions that may help you prepare your own list.

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## Box Suggested Birth-History Interview Questions

Here is a list of questions you might want to consult in preparing your own list. Not all of them will be appropriate in every situation. Use them as a guideline, adapting them to match your own needs and circumstances and rewriting them to reflect your own way of speaking. Keep what works for you and disregard the rest. (You will unlikely have to ask this full list of questions because much of the information may emerge in a more natural way.) You may also want to add additional questions. For example, if the birth took place in another country, you may want to ask questions about cultural differences surrounding pregnancy and childbirth.

### Learning about Pregnancy

- How did you feel when you learned that you were pregnant?
- Who did you tell first?
- What did you say?
- What were the reactions of the key people you told?

### Pregnancy

- How much information did you have about pregnancy, childbirth, and babies prior to being pregnant?
- What do you remember about being pregnant?
- How did you feel about being pregnant?
- Was pregnancy something that you talked about frequently, or was it considered a taboo subject?
- During your pregnancy, did you feel supported or did you feel alone?
- What kind of support system did you have?
- Who was your primary caregiver: a doctor, a midwife, or someone else?
- Did you use a doctor or a midwife?
- Why did you choose him or her, and how did you feel about that person?
- What did you do to prepare for the birth?

### Labor and Delivery

- Where did you give birth?
- Who was there with you?

- If your partner was not with you, where was he (or she)?
- What do you remember about being in labor?
- How did you feel?
- What kinds of interventions were used, if any (e.g., shaves, IVs, enemas, drugs, surgery, etc.)?
- Were you awake to experience the birth? If so, what did you do, if anything, to help get through it?
- How did your experience of giving birth compare to how you ideally wanted it to be?

### Life with a Newborn

- How did you feel physically and emotionally after the baby was born?
  - About yourself?
  - About the baby?
- Were you with the baby after the birth, or were you separated?
- Did you fall instantly in love or did it take a while to develop maternal feelings?
- To what extent was the baby's father involved?
- How did he feel after the birth?
- How did you feed your baby?
- Why did you decide to breastfeed or use formula?
- Did you feel supported in your decision?
- If you breastfed, did you have any difficulties?
- How did you decide the baby's name?
- What were those first few weeks like for you?
- Did you know what to do?
- Did you have any help?
- Did you do anything after the birth to honor the baby, such as a christening, a bris, or a naming ceremony?

### General or Summary Questions

- How did the material circumstances of your life shape your experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and early motherhood?
- If you could do it all over again, would you do anything differently? What and why?

### *Ask Manageable Questions*

Ask open-ended questions and, for the most part, avoid questions that elicit a yes or no response. Ask questions that are not so broad that your mother or grandmother will have no idea of where or how to start. Break them down into manageable components.

### *Use Probes*

Follow general questions with more specific questions, called *probes*, to get beneath the surface or to gather more information. Do not force information out of someone if she appears to be uncomfortable or embarrassed. Use tact and judgment.

### *Engage in Active Listening*

Be an active listener; that is, listen for the total meaning. Listen to their words as well as to their silences. Their feelings and attitudes about their experiences are as valuable as the technical facts surrounding labor and delivery.

### *Model Reflective Listening*

Use reflective listening techniques. To make sure you understand her properly, reflect back on something your mother has said. For example, by saying, "It sounds like you were pretty scared," gives her the chance to respond, "Yes, I was," or, "No, I wasn't scared at all. I was angry!" Your own views are likely to color your reactions. Make sure that you do not obliterate her experience with your own interpretation. Rephrasing some of her thoughts serves as a reality check throughout the interview.

## **Conclusion**

"Mother is the first world we know, the source of our lives and our stories," writes Lowinsky (1992, p. xi), and listening to our mothers' and grandmothers' stories helps us understand our own. I hope these suggestions will help you reach across time and break the silences that too often separate us from those who have given our lives so much meaning. Remember to record your own birth stories—stories to pass on to your children and to those whose lives you can only imagine.

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