

Case Study

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A Case Study on Birth Experience



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Abstract

Background: Normal consciousness may be profoundly changed during labour. Access to heightened states of personal and existential awareness may be part of the uninhibited ritual of natural childbirth.

Aim: Validate the possibility of heightened awareness and transcendence that can occur beyond the province of normal human experience. Peek experiences may bring life changing realizations of deep universal connection and personal insight.

Findings: Breakthrough experiences may occur in any state of intense physical focus, including the mindfulness of supported birth practices.

Discussion: The perspective reiterates the importance of rational, individualized, woman-centred care in birth.

Conclusion: The environment of birth, the safety and support of known and trusted care givers can allow birth events to unfold with the least possible intrusion. A hitherto under-recognized sequelae for such freedom may be the possibility of connecting to a state of expanded awareness that can bring profound unveiling of inner being and self-acceptance.

Keywords: Normal consciousness; Natural childbirth; Woman's emotional experience; Bleeding; Fearfulness; Birth experience; Acute medical resuscitation, Neurosurgeon

Statement of Significance

Problem

Constrictive models of care during birth.

What is already known

Current institutionalized models are driven by risk and litigation. Success in mitigating such harms has been tempered by spiralling costs of intervention and more insidiously, a diminution of the birth experience.

What this paper adds

The rationalization of appropriate care. The importance of choice and the understanding that birth can yield of itself, a glimpse into the extraordinary, an experience of wonder and life changing self-awareness that can be truly transformative for the mother and for all those with whom she shares her journey.

Pushed to the Limit - Reclaiming the Ecstasy of Birth

"I remember when my world changed forever. I experienced something miraculous when I gave birth, I gave birth to myself as a mother. During labour, I noticed the world around me change.

The lights seemed dimmer and there was a silence in the room. I was conscious but it felt different. There was an incredible sense of calm. I could sense everything, the bed, the room, my breath, and heartbeat, my thoughts and feelings. Time stood still. I was no longer connected to the room. I was distant in a place I had never been before. I was totally removed from everything. There was a sense of floating without boundaries. It was so calm, peaceful. I remember looking down as I hovered over my body, watching myself from above, as if I were two separate beings. I felt so loved. Fearless. I have never felt like this before, the beauty, the purity and bliss. A realisation of my existence came. It was as if I had gained clarity and the answer to life's many questions. Everything was exposed in its truest form. I knew why I was here and what I was born to do. I was here to create."

GS – personal birth story.

What's it like?

Long before the infamy of Covid 19, a philosopher once asked what it would be like to be a Bat? [1] Would it think as we do? Would it experience the world in the same way? Of course, we

imagine that it would, but then all we're really doing is putting ourselves within, thinking of it as just a smaller version of us; something that sees as we do, hears in the same way – albeit with bigger ears, and otherwise makes sense of its perceptions with the same quality and perspective of mind. But no one can really say for sure – which was in fact the whole point of the question: to remind us that all we can ever truly know is what it's like to be us. And what is that you might then ask. Well, that's easy, it's the awareness we have of living, of being here, experiencing the world around us and knowing where we are within it. Now whilst this may or may not be true for other creatures - including bats, the outward-looking, body-centred perspective through which we frame our experience of living seems so much a given norm, that it's hard to imagine there could be any other way of doing things. But is there?

Looking beyond the veil

In his book, "Life after Life", Raymond Moody described a near-death experience which was noted following an acute medical resuscitation [2]. The survivor told his rescuers that whilst they'd been busy trying to save him, he'd been looking down as things occurred, watching the entire scene unfold from a point that was from somewhere outside his body. On the one hand he knew that this was something that shouldn't normally happen and yet it had seemed so undeniably real that he couldn't believe it hadn't. More recently, American neurosurgeon Eban Alexander reported a similar sensorial shift with translocation of living awareness away from the body at a time when deep, septic coma had stopped all measurable brain activity [3].

These and other accounts suggest that the seat of consciousness may not be as firmly anchored as previously imagined, and that the usual, body-centred perspective may be just one of many possibilities available to us. But of course, we know this already for in our dreams each night, most of us experience vast multiplicities of non-ordinary awareness or altered states of being that we simply take for granted as flights of fantasy. In his book, "Journeys out of the Body," Robert Monroe described specific techniques to intentionally induce similar states of transpersonal, or Out-of-Body Experience (OBE) in daytime too, where consciousness could exist replete and fully visceral despite separation from the physical body [4]. Cognitive awareness of self and surroundings remain corporally vital, with the experience most often described as a heightened or more splendid state of normal which could at times lead to an unprecedented feeling of bliss or profound belonging as if having become intimately connected to some greater universal presence or unconditional ease.

Not surprisingly, Out of Body Experiences can transform lives, and indeed they do. For the prophet Elija, the apostle Paul, Saint Francis of Assisi, the Buddha, and the modern spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, this was powerfully so. Sadly however, such revelations seem sparsely scattered, contained if lucky, to the zeal of a few determined practitioners or else the fervour fuelled

of religious rapture or tribal ceremony such as the dreamtime of indigenous Ngangkari or shamanic ritual or more illicitly, from the psychedelic haze of contemporary drug culture. Without the agency of such provocateurs, one might reasonably wonder if the phenomenon was indeed meant to happen in normal life. After all, nature tends only to preserve or promulgate those behaviours that best suit the ability to survive - including the way we perceive the world. The paucity of OBE's, notwithstanding their reputed glimpse of wonder, may simply reflect that they are less advantageous at keeping us alive - unless of course something changes that makes them more able to do so.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl described looking down at his body during the terror of war and internment [5]. He thus felt distanced from the inhumanity and outrage of the horrors inflicted upon him and was somehow more able to survive. To withdraw from the immediacy and acuity of the senses can help to endure, to sustain trials of physical hardship and duress. Similarly, to quell the plethora of the senses, to focus intently may optimize performance in peak states and zones of intense concentration allowing an almost trance like state of deep attention for what needs to be done. In such states, the extraordinary can become possible and feelings of deep, transpersonal connection and grounding can arise.

Pushing to the limits –the energy of childbirth

"In the most intense hours of labour, I became mindless, floating in boundless space between contractions. All thoughts receded. My mind plummeted into an immense silence bathed in love and well-being. I felt a oneness with all mothers who had ever birthed" [6].

A woman's emotional experience during labour may show common themes, beginning with excitement and a need to feel safe and supported as her contractions develop which means she can then focus her energy on getting through things, one surge at a time [7]. Her world then narrows as concentration deepens and she may become less aware of things around her, moving into a 'zone' of timelessness, of dissociation or disconnection with the rest of the world. In this phase, perhaps 10% of women may experience states of altered awareness, including fully-fledged OBE's where the boundaries of self and ordinary reality become less defined and deeper, more subtle levels of creativity and spiritual encounter can occur. These feelings then transition and become more grounded as an urge to push strengthens and a reconnection with the present emerges, often bringing a realization of awe and amazement as the power of their bodies moves them irresistibly towards birth [8].

Pushed away – when care goes too far

"In achieving the safety of childbirth our society may have lost more than it has gained." [9]

Birth however is not always perfect. Whilst it is a natural process, left to itself, it may not always lead towards a desired or

safe ending. There may be pain, unprecedented in its intensity; bleeding, a fearfulness of what lies ahead, of what remains unknown or unexpected. There may be escalating risk or concern that must be managed. Models of care have thus evolved to mitigate, to wrestle control from such uncertainty, to bring order to chaos, to reign-in the freedoms of nature's way. And so, we change. We change things, and more sadly so, we change ourselves. We stop seeing women as mothers or as mothers-to-be; they become patients. We take them from home, from community and on-country, and admit them to hospital to be cared for, to be monitored, to be made right. Labour becomes a diagnosis, an illness, a condition that must be treated and fixed. Natural rhythms are ignored and give way to ever more intrusive cascades of intervention.

Without doubt, neonatal and maternal outcomes have improved, but there comes too a growing apprehension of cost, of over-service, and more distressingly, an ever-widening wound of visceral and emotional discontent that follows thereafter. What began in good faith, what began because we genuinely care, because we wanted to help, has become a mandate. We now do what we do because we feel we have to. We feel we must. We believe it's best. But is it always so?

By institutionalizing the birth experience, we can diminish a woman's ability to participate, to help nurture the power and flow of her body to progress naturally and spontaneously. More subtly, by controlling her experience so arduously, we hide from her the opportunity to encounter an intimate, perhaps sacred awakening of deeper self that might otherwise have occurred. We thus sterilise the possibility of transience, of enchantment. We diminish the extraordinary to something best forgotten. We brush it aside as vagrant, a symptom of momentary dysfunction, or the rekindling of aberrant memory in the fever of fatigue [10].

Pushing back - reclaiming safe passage

Birth is of itself complete, it lacks nothing to make it more so. We have tried to make it better and of course in many ways we have, but at what cost? And for such gains won, how much has been lost? In our desire to make it fit, to conform to modern standards, there may be much that we have taken, that we have forsaken. We may have stolen from it something subtle, an opportunity to transcend normal living and experience an intimate revelation of profound connection and wonder.

The awareness we have of ourselves in the physical world is miraculous, a perspective made possible by the wondrous

workings of what makes us human. Occasionally however, states of expanded, other-worldly consciousness can occur, where glimpses of a far-from-normal reality can pervade our senses with life changing ardour. When we consider the impact that such transformative experiences can bring, we may well grieve for their paucity.

In Australia, over 300 000 women give birth annually. 1 in 10 of these may experience feelings of altered consciousness which for some, may lead to an encounter of unprecedented personal realization and bliss. Imagine the impact that such life-changing experiences could bring. Imagine a birthing space where the unfolding of such deep ritual was nurtured, where we protect and gently support each mother to follow if she desires, the natural rhythms of her body. Where we gave freedom to experience the power of birth, and, if it should happen, the revelation of divine inner being that may enrich her life thereafter. Imagine what this would bring for her little one as she bonds and for those with whom her life is shared. Imagine what this would do to her world. To yours. To ours. It's not just a want, it's a rite worth wanting, a rite worth reclaiming. All we need do, is just let it happen. I think we can.

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