

Celebrating a Return to Earth: Birth in Indigenous Aboriginal, Tibetan, Balinese, Basque and Cherokee Cultures

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DEDICATION

**Among all peoples on earth there is a need
for birth to be a celebration of new life
A witness to profound healing
through transition in relationships,
a true collaboration of science and spirit,
a template for removing the causes of wars,
and a realization of love through collaborative work.**

PART I. BEGINNINGS Time, Space, and Relationships "Birth comes from beginningless time and boundless space," my Tibetan friend began our first talk about birth in Tibetan culture.¹ From an Aboriginal tribal elder, "We have been here since the time before time began. We have come directly out of the Dreamtime of the Creative Ancestors. We have lived and kept the earth as it was on the First Day."² So it is with peoples for whom birth has meaning in a cosmology which includes all their relations—all life and all life forms, land, sun, moon and far-distant stars. For the Aborigine, "The Morning Star is the son of the Sun Woman and the Moon is his wife. The children of the Morning Star and the Moon were the Ancestors of the Aborigines today."³ Cultures with such spacious worldviews naturally integrate in their approach to birth what we divide into separate disciplines—medicine, midwifery, nursing, psychology, spirituality, ecology, education, biology, sociology, politics, economics and art. These cultures emphasize the unity and wholeness of a birthing mother, family, their interdependent tribal, village or extended family, and earth. For them, whether represented in Aboriginal or Cherokee earth paintings, birth has long been celebrated as a return to earth following death and a cycle of learning in other realms. Medicine, in these cultures, refers to creating harmony among sacred realms, earth and earth life. To practice medicine is to use one's holy power to do good for the benefit of all.⁴ Aims and Design I have two major aims for this presentation. The first is to vivify our experience of birth in five cultures where honoring and celebrating a return to earth is an integral part of the birth process. The second is to envision how such an integral view can contribute to our current birth care. Ancient Lineage and Oral Tradition Before going to the birth stories there are two contexts I need to acknowledge. One is that each of these five cultures has survived invasion of their lands, displacement and relocation of major portions of their populations, punishment for their native ways, and the impositions of another culture.^{5,6} The birthways I speak of here are now practiced by a minority who have kept alive an uninterrupted lineage of medicine. According to recent evidence, the Australian Aboriginal story of creation and the world view it fosters prospered for perhaps 150,000 years.⁷ The Cherokee medicine lineage extends 100,000 years.⁸ The Basque, with language roots separate from any others, trace their origins directly to Cro-Magnon man, more than 500,000 years ago.⁹ From the third century on, Tibetan leaders held forums which included healers and scholars from Chinese, Indian and Arabic-Greek medical traditions.¹⁰ With specific relevance to birth, one Tibetan woman we spoke with knew the

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childbearing histories of her families for 70 generations.¹¹¹² A second element in research on indigenous cultures is that all retain strong oral traditions. A significant part of oral tradition is passing on cultural wisdom with heart and presence so that full meaning is conveyed from one generation to the next. In each oral tradition there is much that is held sacred and protected, not to be given publicly, to media or to printed page. To understand such traditions requires passing through tune-honored initiations. So, beyond whatever stories I share, I ask you to simply open to the depth of the field of spiritual and earth energies in which they are grounded.

PART II. BIRTH STORIES FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

As you listen to these stories I invite you to notice where in your body you feel them—heart, throat, gut, eye, top of head, lower back or front, base of spine. Aborigines of Australia I begin with the Aborigines of Australia. The Aborigines refer to the forces and power that created the world as their Creative Ancestors. During the Creation Time of Dreaming, the Ancestors traveled, hunted, made camp, fought and loved, and in so doing shaped a featureless field into a vivid topographical landscape. Before their travels, they would sleep and dream the adventures and episodes of the following day. In this manner, moving from dreams to actions, the Ancestors created life in all its forms. As the world took shape and was filled with the species and varieties of the ancestral changes, the Ancestors grew ready to rest and withdrew into the earth, the sky, the clouds, and the creatures, to reverberate like a potency within all they had created.¹³ In the unity of this world view, Aborigines respect and love the earth and themselves as an imprint of original creation. The Aborigine's goal in life is to preserve the earth, as much as possible, in its initial purity. To exploit this integrated world is to do the same to oneself. The birth story I tell from Australian Aboriginal life is adapted from Robert Lawlor, with whom we stayed on Flinders Island off the coast of Tasmania.^{14, 15} When the early stages of labor come, two women leave their sleeping camp to walk out into the bush. One is very old yet strong and full-breasted, the other is a young woman about to give birth. They stop at a secluded place near a rock which holds water. The older woman digs a slight depression in the earth and makes a small fire of spinifex grass, adding some dried herb leaves from the bag she carries with her.¹⁶ She tells the young woman to straddle the smoldering grass for a few minutes so that the aromatic smoke can engulf her naked body. Then, leading her to a nearby acacia tree, the older woman directs the younger to squat and begins to deeply massage her spine in a circular motion. When she pushes, helping the baby in its descent from the womb, the squatting woman presses her back firmly against the trunk of the tree to brace herself. The tree imparts an energetic alignment to her spine, a birth-giving empowerment from the earth. The old woman scrapes out a hollowed depression in the ground between the young woman's legs, a space for the newborn. At the moment the child emerges, the grandmother has an important decision to make. If it appears to be premature, weak, or badly deformed, the old woman might decide to cover the child with sand and bury it and the placenta in the place it was born. When the child is healthy, as this one is, she bites through the umbilical cord with her teeth and deftly ties it. With one hand she lifts the newborn out of his earthen cradle, and with the other she buries the placenta in the depression. This spot is the place of the child's birth; it will shape his identity and his ritual obligations to the surrounding land for the rest of his life. The old woman holds the child face down for a moment in the spinifex smoke. She rubs the small body with ash and sand and cuts a piece of the umbilical cord with a stone tool, twisting it into a necklace that she places around the newborn's throat. This symbolizes a spiritual connection that will enable the child to learn the language of the sacred knowledge that stretches back to the great Ancestors and before time began. Before she returns the child to his mother, she holds the infant close to her face and breathes into his nostrils his sacred totem names to establish the basis of his knowledge of, gratitude to, and respect for the plants, the animals and the earth. She then wraps the child in the bark of the paper bark tree and places him in a curved wooden gathering dish, next to his mother. The Aborigine tends to see all causation as a combination of physical and spiritual forces acting in harmony with energetic emanations of the earth. In their view, the sperm may prepare the way for the entry of the child into the womb, but the spirit of the child appears in the father's dreams or inner awareness before conception.¹⁷ Women take great care to space pregnancies, nursing children for three to five years and using herbs to inhibit conception. From birth,

nursing mothers talk to their infants about foods to be gathered and what the child's relationship is to each of the people who come and go. There are no strangers, and the child identifies each person with a bond that is familial in quality. In language, the terms imply that others are an integral part of one's own being. Grandparents tell children simplified versions of the myths of relatedness in song, dance and sign language. This early training is preparation for a series of sacred initiations to follow. Tibetans in the Himalaya also begin preparation for a later series of spiritual initiations with birth and early childhood rituals. "Immediately after birth," an old midwife told me, "the child begins to breathe. It is then that the mouth is opened and the symbol Dhih is printed in saffron powder or yak butter on the newborn's tongue. This signifies the seed-syllable of Manjusri, the deity of wisdom. We do this so the baby will speak with wisdom as it grows older. The baby is cleaned with cloth and warm water than has been boiled with saffron or other herbs, incense, or milk for purity. Then you put some butter on the navel, the nose tip and the ears for nourishment. The newborn is wrapped tightly in cotton cloth and then wool for heat. A hat of cotton with oil is made for the baby to wear. It will help him or her to be intelligent, have good blood flow in the brain and make for a bright, lively child. The newborn is never separated from the mother," she said.¹⁸ Throughout the birth process the father recites periodically from the collection of mantras for auspiciousness. Before the cord is cut the father pronounces traditional auspicious words like those said at his own birth. "My child, you have been born from our hearts and souls. May you live 100 years and see a hundred autumns, may you have a long and glorious life, overcoming all ills and enjoying complete happiness, prosperity and fortune."¹⁹ Another way the baby is blessed, protected and connected with her culture is by receiving her name from a lama or even the Dalai Lama. A father will most often go to the family lama, who concentrates full energy on the newborn, and presents a blessed knotted protection cord with the baby's name. After the birth of a baby the family has a quiet time at home. As with Aborigines and Basque, there is a sacred time for mother and family. During these days in Tibetan culture, rituals are carried out to protect the new child. Offerings are made to the deities and protectors, butter lamps are lit and prayers are chanted in the house to honor the new baby. The welcoming ceremony after three days (for a boy) or four days (for a girl) is a time for friends and family to gather, greet, and celebrate. In one of the many rituals enacted, each guest takes a handful of cooked rice mixed with raisins and butter, some to eat and some to throw into the sky for the child's auspicious life. The rice symbolizes both protection for the young baby and the harvest of nine months of pregnancy. Like the Basque and Balinese ceremonies, the Tibetan welcoming ceremony marks the beginning of the baby's relationship with most of the people to whom she will be closest as the years go on, thus establishing her right to receive their love and care throughout her life, as well as bonding her responsibility to care for and love them as she grows older. Like the Cherokee, the Tibetan baby's daily massage with exercise of legs and arms is essential. The Dalai Lama spoke to us about the importance of touch for the development of the brain.²⁰ As is also true for Aboriginal, Balinese and Cherokee, a baby rides on a mother's back or in her arms almost everywhere she goes. The baby sleeps with her at night. If the child cries or fusses she can nurse it anywhere without embarrassment. Other adults and children are eager to lend a hand in childcare, serving to expand the infant's bodily contact with others in the community. All family members raise the child. Like the Aborigines, Balinese, Basque and Cherokee, Tibetans believe in the importance of ritual and ceremony for marking the first experiences in life. The first breath, we saw, was marked by the ceremony of Dhih on the tongue. The first sucking of milk, the first wave or reaching out to parents, the first smile, the first sitting upright, teething, crawling, standing, walking, speaking are all acknowledged with a small ceremony. Physical signs of inner development and capacity for relationship have a deeper spiritual significance. The recollection of these experiences of infancy forms the basis of the rites of initiation for the prized Kalachakra Tantra. Its first seven initiations empower the practitioner to visualize him or herself as an ideal, altruistically active being, in a mandala, or an ideal environment.²¹ Tibetans believe it is the vitality of the first memories from infancy which allows the grown person to reconnect with the purity of life and the experience of other realms, which in infancy were not yet forgotten. Tibetans thus remind us that there may be nothing in life more

energizing or unique than each new learning, like smiling or walking, that can never again be experienced for the first time.²² Balinese in Indonesia On the island of Bali in Indonesia, Balinese, like Tibetans, believe that their opportunities and relationships in future lives depend on their expression of wisdom and compassion now. This sets a high standard for relationships, not only with family, village, temple, art guild and water cooperative but also with other life and the spirits of the land. Balinese also believe in the interrelatedness of all lives. Each person's health is held as an indication of the health of the whole community. If there is sickness in the community, people will gather with offerings, and the dukun, or healer, will guide the dialogue between the village group and its spirits, to find out what is needed, so those needs can be met, and the sickness can leave the community before more people become ill.²³ In the village where we stayed we talked with Ubi, a grandmother, on a porch in the courtyard of her family compound. She showed photographs of her children. "Where were they born, your daughter and son?" "They were born here. Their placentas are here," she pointed, "daughter's to the left of the doorstep, son's to the right, like always. You see the coconut trees we planted to harvest for their weddings." She told about their births. "I had a special place, protected, under a higher bed, so I could hold on to the bamboo above," she showed us with arms and hands how she lifted and swung her body back and forth with contractions. "They came quickly," she said. "My body was strong with dance and work. I had pillows to rest on, placed so the baby slid out from north to south." In the family compound this meant from the sacred space to the visitor's space. "My husband was with me, and his mother, and dukun. After seven days our groups came with offerings and we called the baby its first name. There is another offering, a Balinese month later, and another at three months, when the baby begins to be more in the world. There is another at six months, when the baby is first allowed to touch the earth. The offerings are to keep the spirits from taking the baby back." From another Balinese woman I heard more of the story of what happens before birth. "I married when I was pregnant, as we do. And then I went to the dukun, who helped me to talk to the baby inside me, to find out who she was and what she needed for her purpose in this life.²⁴ Well, this baby was my mother, and in order to come back to Bali, she needed to have her cremation ceremony. She told me a lot about how to prepare for it, and what she needed to be free. All she said worked out, even when it sounded first so hard it would be impossible. All the village groups helped out, and it took some months, but finally we had the cremation, and my mother was satisfied, she was free of her body and all that kept her the old way she was. Now she could come back anew." "And then the talks we had were about what she needed for her new life, what she needed to do and learn next, as an artist and a dancer. I listened to a lot of music, and sang more, and learned some new dances. Sometimes she wanted special things to eat, and my husband and I got those. I noticed how beautiful things are around me, flowers and rice fields and mountains and Bali. My husband, an artist, painted beautiful things for her. We made offerings she suggested."²⁵ As in each of the other cultures, there is ceremony at each stage of Balinese life. Rituals begin before birth for the baby's health, strength and long and productive life. Husbands do not cut their hair until the baby is born. Both mother and father are expected to avoid anger and to read aloud from the holy books. In the last trimester, prayers are offered not only for the baby but for the "four siblings," otherwise known as the placenta, the amniotic fluid, the blood and the vernix. Birth in Bali is a community affair. Babies born at home are most often caught by the father, with the help of the dukun and a female relative who often supports the woman in a squatting position and massages her abdomen. Elder women of the village lend emotional support while most of the other villagers, including young children, hover near the door. From the day of its birth, a Balinese child is a child of the whole community, which will support and nurture it in an atmosphere of exceptional warmth and stability. Still, except for bathtime, Balinese children-like Tibetan and Aboriginal infants-continue to be carried. During the day they fall asleep and wake up while held; at night they sleep wrapped in a cloth in the family bed, most often on mother's arm. Young girls take an active part in caring for their little siblings. Fathers also share in childrearing and are often more demonstrative than their wives, carrying their babies everywhere and talking to them as equals. In arms, the Balinese baby learns the graceful rhythm of community life. As the mother pounds rice, the baby on

her hip absorbs the tempo of Balinese music. As the father paints or carves, the child on his lap receives a wordless lesson in Balinese aesthetics. Later, sitting with one or both parents at shadow plays and dance-dramas, the child learns myth, history and ethics, as well as a Balinese sense of humor.^{26,27} Basque in the Pyrenees In the Basque country of the Pyrenees there is a mystical culture with ancient roots in oneness with nature. As with the Aborigines of Australia, its wisdom is passed on in stories, symbols, songs, dance and jokes which evoke the resonance of laughter.²⁸ Conception is a sacred act, and Basque women and men wait to marry and have children until they have come to maturity in their thirties or forties. When conception has occurred, the mother and father-to-be tell each other stories about the baby and their new life, for the baby to hear-another variation on dialogues with the unborn. They also sing songs that will be repeated during and after the birth. In the Basque mystical tradition, birth is celebrated by the whole extended family. Thus birthing provides continued and sustained family bonding, and the young learn of birth in a sacred family context.²⁹ At conception the mother begins to commit to memory her dreams of the child, along with impressions, stories and events-all seen as part of a dialogue within the family. When a child reaches puberty, or a marriageable age, there comes a time when the story which their mother began at their conception is given them as a gift in the timeless oral tradition.³⁰⁻³¹ Similar to Aboriginal and Cherokee birth stories, the Basque trace the emergence of children to the marriage of the sun and the moon with their offspring the stars. Isata, the Basque child, means child of the sun, or walking star. Cherokee in the Great Smoky Mountains of the American Southeast In telling the story of the Cherokee in the Great Smoky Mountains of the American Southeast I have been asked to make no interpretations, but to use the words given me. So listen. There were dreams before I was born, indicating that I would come, that I'd be a girl child . . . [There may be] communication of the spirit [of the child] to its relatives One always chooses their parents . . . I remember asking . . . my grandparents and my great-grandparents and my great-grandmother . . . I'd say, "Well, if I chose my parents, which I know I did because I remember it, then, in the choosing, that means I was alive before." Then my great-grandfather would say, "Yes, and you are alive now, and the past, the present and the future are this moment." You are taught from the moment you are born. Each of us has a sacred duty, a special gift that is necessary to the people who have chosen to be around us. When I was young my father made this form [a dotted circle topped by a crescent moon] out of earth and talked to me about the gift of life. This is the teaching of the Earth Mandata, of the crescent moon (Figure 1).³²

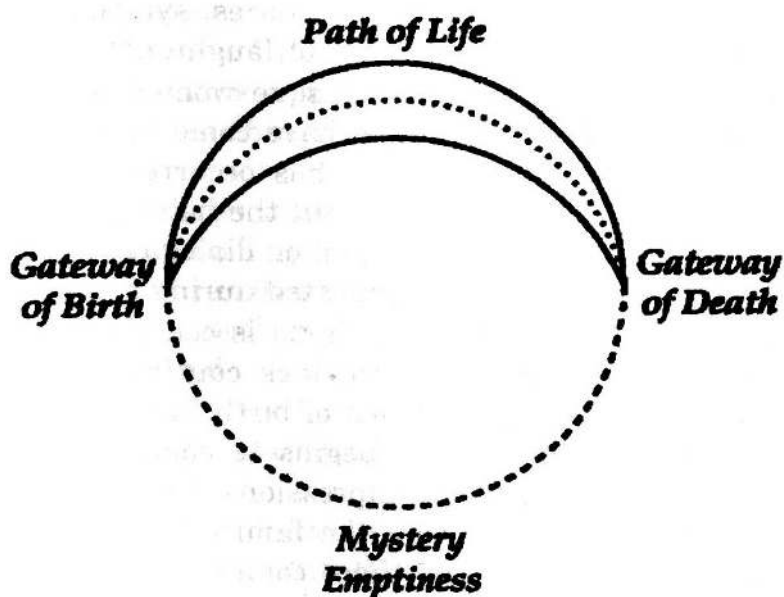


Fig. 1.
Cherokee Earth Mandala of the Crescent Moon

Showing me the simple earthen form, my father said, "This is the path that all beings walk . . . we are all born of a woman, we all walk along the road of life, and we all exit through the gateway." The gateway takes us again into the emptiness, into the Mystery from whence we have come. Each being enters the realm of form from the emptiness, through the gateway of birth, to which one is drawn by desire [and] intention to be. Birth is the tip of the crescent, placing one upon the path of life, and the path travels around the crescent, completing the circle. Thoughts of peace and beauty are cultivated by the pregnant woman. Thoughts of peace and beauty are cultivated by the dying man. Thus it begins and ends. In older cultures where living and dying are centered in the home, death is something that everyone shares without fear. [And so with birth.] We choose a family wherein our gifts may flourish, through which we can complete a cycle of learning. Even when we are within our mothers we begin to hear and feel our family around us. Within the womb the young person is sensing the qualities of its parents' minds . . . and responding to the thoughts directed by other people toward the mother. For this reason it is very important that mothersto-be have a loving support system and an environment as free from anger as possible. When the child is born, the grandparents massage the little one, gently rotating the fingers, the outermost joints, then rotating each large joint of arms, shoulders, toes, ankles, knees, hips, then gently stroking the spine, legs, chest, stroking toward the heart, so the child's potential may manifest and the baby's spirit be fully incarnate. The child's first smile is a most wondrous moment, for the child is reaching out and recognizing relatives. This is a time of celebration and gift-giving by the family. Gifts are given to those elders and wise people with whom one hopes one's child can council. When we were young and asked [questions], the teaching of the crescent moon would be referred to, and occasionally would be drawn on the cabin floor or outside for us to contemplate, to truly understand the beauty of the different stages of life. The most beautiful lesson that our elders taught us was not to rush, to know that everything flowers in its own time, and that each of us is a unique flower and cannot expect our blossom at the same time as another's. We were taught to respect variations. The story of the red clay people was often related to children as an explanation for birth. "The One Who Makes the Breath" blew into the clay figures, infusing them with life and mind. Through this breath all beings are connected; the breath carrying the sacred mind permeates all. This was a reminder to us children to treat the small creatures kindly, as our lives were tenuously linked to our bodies through the One Breath. As the child grows, he or she is carried around with mother or older siblings, always part of the family doings. Children are encouraged to join in. As the children learn to walk they are invited to dance and play drums and rattle . . . [and] grandparents begin teaching various exercises for mental, physical and spiritual development. We were invited to imitate the wind moving through sky, tree and water. There arose common motions of spiral rotation; our attempt to imitate the wind engendered great flexibility. Imitating the birds, deer, fish, whatever we saw, became a way of learning about our own capacities. And finally, The eye of God looks through the eyes of children. Consider how your thought and action affect those yet to be born. PART III.

ELEMENTS OF INTEGRAL BIRTH In this third part, I want to encourage you to reflect on your experiences as you listened to these stories. Where did you feel them in your body? What touched you? What feelings came up? When I looked to see what emerged as strands within the interwoven tapestry presented through these stories, I found some elements of indigenous birthcare that marked qualities and served as reminders of Aboriginal, Tibetan, Balinese, Basque and Cherokee birthcare which illustrate an integral way of birthing, I list them here. Unity of birthing family Community Reverence for all my relations, all life Medicine is a sacred relationship Spacious view of life Respect and love for earth Purposeful rituals Value qualities of life Welcoming ceremony Massage and touch Vitality of each new learning Dialogue with the unborn Carrying close to body Importance of dreams and action Continuity of life Life purpose Gratitude Sacred family time Natural passages Realms of spirit and mystery In these cultures, the interplay of spirit and matter is very close at hand. The child is born from thought into lively baby, from eternity into time, from the womb into the world. PART IV. VISIONS FOR WESTERN BIRTHCARE To wind up, I want to allow a space, a sacred time, for reflection. As you hold

your experience of these five cultures, what visions come of how such integral ways of birthing can endow, encourage and augment our current models of western birthcare? I ask for a moment of silence, before I sound the Tibetan bells. Accept the first images that come. Then open to share them in our discussion time.

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