

Stories from a Journey through a Different Doorway

Jane English

Abstract: This article covers over forty years of exploring the implications of having been born non-labor cesarean in 1942. Topics covered include: the role of dreams in connecting with birth memory, a cesarean native culture, thoughts on parenting a non-labor cesarean born child, technologically-assisted birth and what it meant to “be born,” and suggestions for good non-labor cesarean birth practices.

Keywords: cesarean, non-labor cesarean, technologically assisted birth

This article is an updated version of the keynote talk Jane English gave at the October 2013 conference on cesarean birth held by ISPPM, APPPAH’s European sister organization. You can also find a profusely illustrated pdf file of that talk online at <http://cesareanvoices.com/SHOW-small.pdf>.

I am here as a person born cesarean 75 years ago, a person who has some stories to tell. I am not here as a specimen “c-section” to be studied, nor are my stories scientific data about cesarean birth. But first, I do have a story about science:

A policeman said to a man under a streetlight,
“What are you looking for?”
“My keys,” the man answered.
“Where did you last have them?”
“Over there in the park.”
“Then why are you looking here?”
“Because it is light here.”

Jane English, PhD, born non-labor cesarean in 1942, has since 1973 been exploring the physical, social, and psycho-spiritual aspects that kind of birth. She grew up in a small town in New England, did undergraduate work at Mount Holyoke College, and began photographing while completing a PhD in physics at the University of Wisconsin. In 1970 she decided not to continue with a science career but to do photography and embark on an exploration of consciousness. Her photographs of nature illustrate many books, including a best-selling translation of the Chinese classic *Tao Te Ching*, published in 1972 by Random House. She founded her own publishing business, Earth Heart, in 1985 and published *Different Doorway: Adventures of a Cesarean Born*. Having visited Greenland several times, she has created *The Ceremony Cards: A Living Introduction to the Traditional Teachings of the Far North from Greenland*. Her other interests include gardening, skiing, amateur radio, hot air ballooning, and being with children in an outdoor education program, EarthWalk Vermont. She currently lives in a small home on a dirt road by a pond in northern Vermont, USA. Websites: www.eheart.com, www.cesareanvoices.com, www.theceremonycards.com.

In a similar way, science sheds a strong light, but in a limited area, not necessarily where all the answers are. My science background is as a PhD in experimental sub-atomic particle physics, but this presentation goes beyond conventional science.

A Hungarian anthropologist once said that in his language the word for scientist and the word for shaman are the same. Both the scientist and the shaman journey into the unknown. The scientist looks outside at the physical world. The shaman looks within to the world of consciousness. Both share the stories of their adventures with their community upon return from the journey. Perhaps I am such a storyteller. According to Brene Brown (2010), "*Maybe stories are just data with a soul.*"

I do not have stories of the mother who gives birth by cesarean, nor do I discuss the important question of there being too many cesarean births. My stories are those of a person for whom cesarean birth is a fact. It is how I arrived here on Earth.

The Facts of My Birth

I was born non-labor cesarean in 1942 in Boston; my mother had ether anesthesia, the incision was the vertical "classic" cut, and the cesarean was planned because my older brother was cesarean. The birth was done two weeks early because the doctor had his wedding scheduled near the due date. I was not brought to my mother for 24 hours, and I refused to nurse. My sense is that my mother smelled bad because of the ether. I was finally fed formula after 48 hours.

The Journey

For over 40 years I have been consciously exploring what it means to be born non-labor cesarean. In 1973 I heard about "primal therapy" which involved regression to birth. Soon after that I had an initiatory dream (English, n.d.[a]), leading me to the realization that how I was born was "a difference that makes a difference."

During the next few years the depths of my psyche erupted into conscious awareness through dreams, body work, and psychological process work. Somehow I understood it was important to make a record of my journey through art and journal writing. In 1977, I met Stan Grof and saw his slide show of traditional art and art by his patients that is a map of the journey through vaginal birth. But his map did not fit my territory. So I began to make my own map, using my art and that of a couple of other cesarean born people.

This led to my book, *Different Doorway: Adventures of a Cesarean Born* (English, 1985). After it was rejected by ten publishers, I published it myself, in 1985, just in time to bring books to the 2nd Congress of

APPPAH, where I presented a slideshow of the journey through cesarean birth.

I went on to speak at both transpersonal and perinatal psychology conferences, including the ISPPM conference in 1995 in Heidelberg.

Most recently, six years of working with a traditional shaman from Greenland has led to the healing of things that had frustrated several otherwise capable therapists I had worked with along the way. This has been a long, intense, and ultimately very satisfying journey of unfolding what had been hidden within me and then giving it out to the world for others to use as trail markers on their own journeys.

For a long time I struggled with accepting the rather violent dreams and images that came from within me. How could such a cute little baby be carrying all that? I began to fully understand that what came from within me really is congruent with what I had experienced at birth.

A Dream from 1979

I am at a seminar where a male leader speaks about a process, and about what the person involved would experience. I feel the process is scary. Some of it I see happening to a small naked person. Other times it is happening to me. The leader says, "And we do it like this" demonstrating pulling the head backward, while being arched forcefully back. Pain and resistance arise in my chest. The people around are horrified. Then he says, "And this is cesarean birth."

I experience a great flood of all kinds of emotions . . . Then we are in a plowed field. I am lying on the ground on my right side. The group leader is now a large man with golden hair. We are both naked. He lies on top of my left side, pressing me into the earth. I experience and release all the hurt, fear, and anger I had felt in the birth.

It is a healing. I feel awe and gratitude. Later I am in the same field re-planting some uprooted beets. Someone asks me what had happened, and I describe what I had experienced, but I feel I am not communicating well. Then I am riding in a car with someone who I think is a friend, but she belittles my experience. I feel hurt.

I awoke here, reflecting that the beets are like hearts. I had stuffed them back into the ground. Even in the dream I lost the feeling of awe and gratitude, to say nothing of bringing it into waking. But now, over 30 years later, I have come to terms with my birth and no longer hide my heart.

Some Brief Anecdotes

- Twice I saw a person reacting to a stressful situation in a way that seemed unusual but also very familiar to me. I later found out that each of them was born non-labor cesarean.
- I have a friend who worked as receptionist for her psychiatrist

husband. Knowing me well and knowing my writing about cesarean birth, she was able to tell which of her husband's new patients were cesarean born. They were startled when she asked them if they were cesarean born. "How could you tell?" they would exclaim.

- I have another friend who works as a rebirther and is herself cesarean born. She told me that when she is in a big room full of people lying on the floor, expressing emotions and doing the rebirthing fast breathing, she can immediately tell by how they are moving which ones were cesarean born.
- I was talking and laughing with a 5-year-old non-labor cesarean born boy. He said something about, "a hundred-million years-ago." I asked him, "How far back do you really remember?" "Back to zero," he replied. "What happened then?" "I was born" "What was that like?" "It didn't feel good and it made me angry." "What about it didn't feel good?" He didn't reply but closed his eyes, and his face began to quiver. Then he opened his eyes and talked about something else.
- The rebirther I mentioned above uses this metaphor to describe cesarean birth: Imagine you are sleeping peacefully in a quiet, warm, dark place. All of a sudden a crowd of people burst into the room, turn on bright lights, open the windows and let in a lot of cold air, make strange noises, yank the covers off you, pick you up by the feet and start poking at you. Oh, and during all this your supply of food and oxygen is abruptly cut off and you are supposed suddenly to know how to breathe. Everything you have ever known has disappeared.

For the child, non-labor cesarean birth is abrupt separation, with no preparation.

Birth Learning

One concept that has been useful to me is that of what I call birth learning, what one learns during birth. The context into which a child is born becomes their first impression of the world. Is it quiet or noisy? Too bright or gently dim? Full of open-hearted people or populated by tense efficient people? I think of various indigenous tribes who protect the mother and child in darkness for days before introducing the new being to that great light, the sun.

One of the good things a non-labor cesarean born person learns is that quick change is possible. Just gather a skilled group of people and let them assist you in a huge transformation—without "laboring" over it. This skill is much needed in today's world.

Boundaries

Another issue related to cesarean birth is personal boundaries—the apparent lack of boundaries, or different boundaries, boundaries that are very permeable. Coming into the world without the experience of labor one is like a sponge, taking on the emotional ambiance of the birthing room. And yes, I know it is an operating room, but I like calling it a birthing room to remind us that this is not just an ordinary operation. A new person is coming into the world.

What are the implications of the child being like a sponge? Everyone in the room needs to be aware that, to some extent, the person being born does feel the emotions of everyone in the room. There needs to be a balance of professional competence with a genuine heart-felt welcoming of this new person.

In particular, attention needs to be paid to how the people present feel about all the blood and cutting involved in a cesarean birth, what might be called the “yuck factor.” In the overview dream I shared with you previously, the people there were horrified. The child with its wide-open boundaries feels all this and has no way of not taking it personally. This emotional ambiance is its first impression of the world.

We need to learn to be present at a cesarean delivery, just as it is, to see the beauty of the inside of a human body to be open-hearted and welcoming to this new person. It would be good to have someone there whose sole responsibility is to be connected with the child on an inner level, what some call “energetically.”

The question of boundaries is also about identity, about sense of self. One finds the sense of self in relation to another person. An old Chinese classic text says, “If there is no other, there is no I.”

Worldview

Since I just mentioned “energy,” this is a good point to talk a bit about how this exploration of cesarean birth led me to a much expanded worldview. As my journey unfolded I found myself needing to accept realities that are beyond the ordinary five senses. This would have been problematic for my scientific self, had I not had experience with quantum physics.

That is another whole story that I won’t include here except to say that the wave-particle paradox in quantum physics functioned for me much the same way as a “koan” does in Zen Buddhism. It was a riddle whose answer is a shift in consciousness, rather than a logical solution. Much of my thinking on quantum physics is in my book, *Fingers Pointing to the Moon* (English, n.d.).

During labor in vaginal birth the child is in an intense relationship with the mother. Neither one is really in control and the outcome is

unknown—life or death. Having not experienced this I can only guess, but it seems to me that it is in this intense “no-rules” encounter that one forms a sense of one’s own being, both physically and emotionally.

I spent years searching for such a relationship. My marriage did not provide it, nor did a series of therapy and body-work relationships with their expectations about boundaries. I had no feel for where those boundaries were so either withdrew too far or unwittingly crossed the boundaries and was criticized.

What did work, what brought me home to myself, was a “no-rules” relationship with a traditional indigenous shaman. He understood how to connect with me on all levels and then support me in expanding my ordinary reality connection to him into connection between us in energy and dreamtime and then into a non-specific, global sense of connectedness that is now transforming my life.

Again, the solution required my accepting the reality of something beyond what we know through our five senses.

Open to the World of Spirit

It has been said that the hormones of labor help the mother to forget the pain of giving birth.

Psychologist Thomas Armstrong (2014) suggested that these same hormones make the arriving child forget where they came from, the realms of spirit that are one’s home before birth and after death. He compares the hormones to the water of the River Lethe in Greek mythology, the drink that causes one to forget their previous life in the spirit world as they are born.

So what is the situation for a non-labor cesarean born person? Do we have an easier connection to the world of spirit? I think so. But this does not make us more enlightened as we have not done the hard work of attaining this spiritual opening. I have been told that I seem to have had transpersonal experiences but often have negative associations with them. Is this because as a child what seemed real to me was laughed at and called nonsense by people around me?

The 1884 book, *Flatland* (Abbott, 1884/2016), is the story of three-dimensional beings in a two-dimensional world. In that world a sphere first appears as a point, then an expanding circle, then a shrinking circle, then it disappears. The inhabitants of Flatland think this visitor is strange, even calling it crazy.

Many years ago, when I was visiting with an older woman who was born non-labor cesarean, she listened intently as I spoke of what I was learning about the implications of having been born non-labor cesarean.

Then she interrupted me, exclaiming, “I’m like that too, you mean I’m not crazy?”

We need to be careful to not judge those whose way of being in the world is different from our own.

Laboring With

Let’s consider that we might need to be laboring with a non-labor cesarean born person, after they are physically born. Many people other than the mother get to do part of this labor—the father, grandparents, siblings, and teachers. This can be a time of “giving birth,” of giving the new one the gifts of how to be in this world. It is much better to give the teachings about boundaries and about relationship as gifts, rather than criticizing the cesarean born person for not knowing things about which they never received lessons.

In my own journey dealing with the unconscious judgements I met was as hard as, or maybe even harder than, coming to terms with the actual birth trauma I carried.

A Different Native Culture

Cesarean born people have a somewhat different native culture, especially those born without labor.

And, like any minority, they often find themselves “in trouble” over not meeting the unconscious expectations of the majority.

A woman who had a class of so-called learning-disabled children discovered that 19 of the 21 children were born cesarean. Were they really all learning-disabled? Or just not behaving as vaginally born children might be expected to? The same woman told me of a paper that was published in an obscure criminology journal about the higher percentage of cesarean born people in prisons and mental hospitals.

It is important to remember that this is true of many other minorities as well.

Appreciation of Differences

“Appreciation of differences” was a favorite saying of a cesarean born friend of mine. We would do well to take his advice and remember to appreciate, not judge, the differences of cesarean born people.

This is not always easy to do unless we do the hard work of becoming conscious of our own birth learning, so that we can learn that “my way is not the only way.”

Some Closing Points

- Approach birth as a ceremony, the welcoming of a new person, whether the birth be vaginal or cesarean.
- Make the appropriate changes to cesarean procedures to recognize the child's perspective.
- Some good first steps in this direction are shown in the video, *The "Natural" Family-Centered Cesarean* from the Gentle Childbirth Foundation (n.d.). Also, see Smith, Plaat, and Fisk (2008).
- Accept and welcome, as parts of a different native culture, those differences in cesarean born people that cannot be changed by any technique or procedure.
- Continue to explore what it means to be a person, going beyond the differences and finding our common humanity.

References

- Abbott, E.A. (1884/2016) *Flatland: A romance of many dimensions*. Digireads.com Publishing
- Armstrong, T. (2003/2014). *You're smarter than you think: A kid's guide to multiple intelligences*. Minneapolis, MN, Free Spirit Publishing.
- Brown, B. (2010). *The power of vulnerability*. TED talk https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability
- English, J. (n.d.[a]). Initiatory dream. Details available online at <http://www.cesareanvoices.com/CBart.pdf>.
- English, J. (n.d.[b]) *Fingers pointing to the moon*. Available online at www.eheart.com/BOOKS/fingers.html
- English, J. (1985). *Different doorway: Adventures of a cesarean born*.
- Jentle Childbirth Foundation (n.d.). *The "natural" family-centered cesarean*. Available online from www.jentlechildbirth.org.uk
- Smith, J., Plaat, F., & Fisk, N.M. (2008). The natural caesarean: A woman-centered technique. *British Journal of Gynecology*, 115(8), 1037-1042.