

The Shamanic Dimensions of Childbirth

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Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: There is a growing awareness of the value of "irrational" or psychospiritual aspects of childbirth. Western psychotherapists and midwives are learning to take advantage of an openness to these aspects. These aspects are essential to shamanic healing worldwide. Shamanic tradition is explored and its advantages for pregnancy and childbirth are discussed. Healing practices among the Navajo, especially the Monsterway, are described. Today in Western culture I note a growing awareness of the value of the "irrational" or psycho-spiritual aspects of childbirth. When this awareness is respected and honored, birth can become an experience of deepest transformative meaning. The physiological experience of pregnancy generates a state of psychological flux, as the woman's selfimage and perceptions of reality constantly shift to keep up with the changes occurring inside her. Such shifting often dismantles entrenched defense mechanisms, allowing deeply buried memories and fears to surface. Western psychotherapists who work with pregnant women are learning to take advantage of this new openness to help the woman achieve long-term psychological healing more rapidly than she could at almost any other time (Peterson 1981; Peterson and Mehl 1984; Parvati-Baker 1986 a, b, 1988). In this article, I seek to share some of what I have learned about the shamanic dimension of childbirth, with the hope of encouraging other practitioners to expand their awareness of the power and beauty of the Mystery and its ability to heal. In traditional cultures, the shaman was often the one charged with the responsibility for placating, aligning and integrating the unconscious material that pregnancy and birth evoke. Such traditional healers practiced their skills in a supportive, homogenous cultural context. But today's practitioners often cultivate ancient shamanic practices in piecemeal fashion, without the benefits of a shared consensual framework for interpreting reality. Some of the shamanic practices available to modern perinatal professionals include, as discussed further below, ritual, word medicine, chanting and song, creative visualization, touch, accessing the dreamtime, tapping the symbolic power of animal totems, and enlisting the aid of plant allies. As a shamanic midwife, I have utilized all these practices in my work with pregnant, birthing, and post-partal women. Modern perinatal professionals have much to gain from developing and contextualizing shamanic skills (or "inward skills," as I often call them). Such skills are "software for the consciousness". They can broaden the professional's ability to inspire "freebirth"-spontaneous, unassisted delivery. Meanwhile, the Information Age is enabling shaman-midwives to deepen their inward skills through providing unprecedented opportunity to learn from many cultures still practicing the ancient healings in the context of birthing. Whatever a practitioner's worldview or theoretical orientation toward birth may be, shamanic techniques applied to birth can expand her or his knowledge base, hone intuition, and enhance effectiveness. BIRTH AS MYSTERY Why is shamanism a viable context for understanding the Mysteries of birth in modern times? And why is "the Mysteries" an appropriate metaphor for thinking about birth? Shamanism is the world's oldest healing art, and modern childbirth is in great need of healing. To heal is to make whole. But the modern woman's experience of birth in the hospital ordinarily is one of fear, pain, severance, and separation. The potential exists to make whole this fragmented experience. However, our fragmented society bears the scars of our failure, so far, to achieve this potential. Mother and baby are One until birth appears to separate them. From the wholistic perspective of shamanism, even after birth the invisible connections between the two join them in Oneness. Adopting such a perspective not only facilitates bonding and breastfeeding, but also potentiates a deeply felt experience of wholeness, unity, and at-oneness for mother, father, and child. This shamanic perspective as I understand it sees childbirth as a potentially ecstatic experience, one through which the ego can stand outside itself and

expand the felt experience of Self. Ecstasy is one of the main states of consciousness of the shaman. To bring shamanism to childbirth is to provide a context within which the participants can access the potential for ecstasy in birth. In "Halley's Waterbirth" (Parvati-Baker 1988), I write about the benefits of ecstatic birth for the baby, mother, and father, as well as for the larger family of humanity. To change the primary experiential model of childbirth from pain to ecstasy would provide enhanced sexual relationships, increased bonding, release from unconscious guilt and resentment, gratitude, and grace, leading ultimately to a gentler human species. For when the ego is no longer the domineering "MANager" of the birth process, a more ensouled humanity may emerge. We might see fewer human "doings" and more human "beings" with less egoic struggle. We would be more likely to show reverence to our matrix, our Earth, as a mother deserving of respect if we were freed of our guilt for the pain we caused our birthmother and that we ourselves experienced upon emergence. Our rational minds and its agents, our egos, want to control childbirth, MANage it and make it a safe passage for the participants. But birth is dangerous-dangerous to the ego, which may discover during birth that it controls nothing. Looking at birth as Mystery, rather than controllable event, allows us to move beyond the limits of our egos. THE DRIVE TO CONTROL BIRTH Our attachment to the ego, to the notion of the importance of the individual, separate, rational self is grounded in the conceptual foundations of industrial society. In the 17th century, Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes, and others developed and widely disseminated a philosophy which held, among other notions, that the natural universe is mechanistic, available for explanation through science and manipulation through technology (Merchant 1983). These ideas "fit in so well with the already ancient Western cultural belief in man's right to dominate nature (chartered in Genesis) that by the end of the 17th century they had become the philosophical cornerstones on which rested the belief system of American society" (Davis-Floyd 1992:72). As industrializing Western society became increasingly dependent on this mechanical model of reality, a model that separated not only man from nature but also man's mind from his natural body, Western society developed an obsessive need to make that model appear to be true by making natural processes appear to be mechanical and thus as controllable as machinery. In a recent article, Davis-Floyd (1990) shows how birth, in particular, came to be dominated and controlled-MANaged-through technological rituals designed to make the birth of new social members mirror the production of factory goods. She shows how the science of obstetrics, by channeling birth through technological procedures, was able to create the illusion that it could control this powerful and uncontrollable natural process. An illusion this truly is, for in the reality described by statistics, the American econo-technic management of birth has yielded a disappointing 22nd place in world infant mortality. There are 21 other countries with proportionately more live births than the United States-and understandably, these other countries are the ones that use midwives. I will discuss this issue in further detail later on. For now, let it suffice to say that the fears of nature, of women's power and of death were motivating factors in the commercial industrialization of childbirth. In order to better understand how the shamanic dimension of childbirth differs from our usual cultural notions and perceptions, let us review some of the manifestations of our cultural drive to control birth (a drive that manifests on the individual level as the ego's desire for control of the body) as seen from the shamanic perspective. These manifestations are described below. The Mind/Body/Soul/Spirit Split of Cartesian Rationalism and Western Science When does labor start? When does birth end? The rational, separate mind wants to be able to clearly delineate and control the parameters of birth as a closed system. Such a thrust toward separation and segmentation reflects the Western desire to break free from the endless great round of being. The body pulls us "down" toward base nature, the spirit tries to bring us "up" toward God, and the mind is seen struggling as an intermediary between the two opposites. Birth is pitted against death and yet the two are linked as polarities in continual dynamic tension. Measurement Perhaps no other perinatal ritual has done more harm to the shamanic dimension of childbirth than the egoic rite of measurement. The uniqueness and Mystery of the passage is reduced to numbers, graphs, and statistics. These become the major myth builders for those who use numbers as their power objects-in other words, measurements are tools for MANagement. Though seemingly scientific, such

management is a metaphysical move that disempowers the birthing family by pretending that the expert in attendance knows more about what is happening in the birth process than the ones directly experiencing it. Intuition, feeling, and the possibility for ecstasy diminish as birth becomes a mathematical abstraction. Even time becomes a matter for measurement rather than an opportunity to experience the eternal Now. Rules Hospital birth is governed by rules that remove the responsibility from the parents and empower the expert. In truth, there are no rules in birth. Each birth experience, as with all life experiences, is unpredictable and unrepeatable-in short, a Mystery. Rules uphold the conceptual order of our society-an order based on duality. Rules thus work to divide life's circle into polarities: good and bad, right and wrong, normal and pathological, feminine and masculine, matriarchal and patriarchal, pure and dirty, white and black, young and old, birth and death, and on and on. Yet in spite of the seeming order they impose, rules often contradict and confuse. For example, the dominant medical birth rule of the 1950s was that birthing women should be drugged. Birthmothers of the 1950s were often rendered unsure of themselves at the beginning of motherhood through their "twilight" experiences and the impaired bonding that was likely to result. seeking order and clarity, many turned to Dr. Spock for the rules of early infant care. And an entire generation suffered under the "rule" that babies should be left to "cry it out." Our culture today reflects the results, as incredible violence is unleashed by adult criminals who are inwardly traumatized children crying to be soothed, who would rather be wanted by the police than not wanted at all. Another example is provided by the rule that infant boys should be circumcised. Overriding the birthmother's powerful natural instinct to protect her young from harm, we followed the rule of culture and allowed the genital mutilation of our sons to become the socially "correct" behavior. Extrinsic rules took precedence over trust in our natural desire to shield our young from harm. Misogyny The Cartesian worldview, reflecting the earlier Renaissance Catholic worldview that preceded it (Davis-Floyd 1992:75), holds Woman as defiler, and sees our first matrix, the female body, as polluting and dirty. Many modern medical procedures gild with technology what are in essence sadistic rituals of flesh mutilation performed on the bodies of women. For example, let us consider the ritual of episiotomy that is performed on the vagina at the approach of the potentially orgasmic moment of delivery. Rather than allowing human touch, the medium of the erotic actions that brought about conception, to take precedence at delivery, the expert uses a steel tool to cut the woman's perineum, producing a painful wound. Through the expert who severs the birth Circle, thusly justifying his presence as rescuer, she is robbed of the transformative tension, the shamanic "ring of fire" that connects her to the spiralling movement of her baby. Cutting the umbilical cord intensifies this severance of birth's Circle. Cutting the cord immediately after birth is a male cultural act of rapidly disconnecting the baby from its natural, female origins. The work of Terence Dowling (1987) and R.D. Laing (1976) demonstrates that there is a value to letting be this connection between the baby and its placenta. But the placenta is seen as old, dying flesh issuing from the unclean birth orifice and female body. From the shamanic perspective, cutting the cord is unnecessary as it breaks on its own, in its own time. Focus on Generalities Rather than the Uniqueness of Each Individual Measurement, rules, and misogyny blend to become the farsightedness of medical attendants who can't see the trees for staring too long at the forest. The individual birthing woman is treated in the light of statistical probabilities and guesstimates. Her own intuition and "body knowing," the unique rhythms and flow of her individual labor and birth, have no place in the medical plan for her MANagement. The Body as Machine As Rothman (1982), Davis-Floyd (1987), and Martin (1987) have shown, a fixed, static-state approach to birthing reduces the passionate laboring woman into a thing to be managed. This perspective demands that the experiment be repeatable, proven, controlled. But "proof means that we can't imagine; "control" steals us away from the Mystery. THE MONSTER WAY Shamanic midwifery offers a path for healing not only the symptoms of egoic involvement and desire for control as just described, but also the disease of fear that underlies these symptoms. Shamanic midwifery replaces technological rituals with rituals that enact a profoundly different set of values and beliefs. The rest of this article will focus primarily on the enhancement of the shamanic dimension of childbirth through one such ritual-the Navajo Monsterway. Let me confess at the outset that the Monsterway is

not a prenatal ritual of the Navajo people. It is my idea to bring the Monsterway into shamanic midwifery. When I was first introduced to the Monsterway, I saw immediately that the intention and format of this ritual could be extremely valuable in preparation for birth. Such journeying into the darkness of the Underworld before the return to the Dayworld, to the light, is an integral part of shamanic ceremonies and rites of passage worldwide, including the rite of birth. I know that I am on inventive ground here, yet there does exist a symbolic precedent. In some communities, when Navajo young men were being readied to go to the world wars to fight on foreign ground, a Monsterway was performed for them to act as a War Prophylactic Ceremony. In many ways, going to fight on foreign ground is an apt allegory for a birthing mother going into a hospital. I intend only the best for birthing families by my eclectic application of Monsterway-inspired ritual to prenatal preparation, and I pray that the Navajo peoples will understand. The Monsterway metaphorically describes and honors some of the psychological processes an expecting woman goes through. But before I go into detail about the Monsterway, there is another Navajo ritual I must mention, a ceremony that is expressly for mothers about to give birth-the Blessingway. (It is also performed as a puberty ritual for girls, and upon moving to a new home.) In many areas of the United States and Canada, the Navajo Blessingway ritual for birth preparation has gained recognition for its value in psychological and spiritual preparation for birth (Glass 1991; Lang 1987). The Blessingway as traditionally performed is oriented toward the continual reestablishment of peace and harmony among people (Wyman 1970). This ceremony goes far beyond the American baby shower in connecting the woman about to give birth with the elemental power of birth and with her supportive community. But before this "peace and harmony" of the Blessingway might be achieved, any unresolved disharmonies could first be resolved through the Monsterway. Traditionally, the Blessingway has no upsetting components, no references to conflict, bloodshed, killing, or death. As Leyland Wyman writes: "An effort was made to exclude every shade of meanness from it" (1970:50). In my own practice, I have realized that during prenatal visits, I am enacting, in a sense, many aspects of the Monsterway ceremony-a powerful ceremony that calls for the utilization of all the shamanic (or "inward") skills. The Monsterway clears the road to birth. It satisfies the unconscious "monsters" who might interfere with spontaneous birth. After the Monsterway, the Blessingway may be more successful. The Monsterway ceremony consists primarily of the chanting of a long myth (or creation story) by a medicine man who has studied and trained for this purpose. Numerous versions of this myth exist. (I am indebted to Wyman 1970 for his exhaustive work in this area and refer interested readers to his tome.) Here I will be offering only an abbreviated synopsis of this complex and very long story. In the beginning, as the story goes, Changing Woman gave birth to twin sons who eventually became great heroes. The story of their conception and birth is sometimes included in Blessingways, to round out the story of Changing Woman. But the rest of their adventures are related in Monsterway or Warway or Enemyway ceremonies, for through these Monster Slayers, one encounters the dark forces, the underbelly of "peace and harmony." These adventures of the Monster Slayer twins (perhaps the fetus and its placenta? or the birthmother and birthfather?) focus on the obstacles (unconscious, obstructive forces?) they overcome and the helpful beings-plant allies and power animals-they encounter on their journey in dreamtime to visit their father the Sun (enlightenment? the light at the end of the birth tunnel?). Right after giving birth to these twins, Changing Woman fears that Big Ye'i will devour them, so she hides them whenever she goes out in a hole dug inside her hogan (house). But their existence is discovered. Confronted by Big Ye'i's spies, Changing Woman lies, saying that the tracks they see were made by her own hands, for she longs to have children. The twins ask their mother about their father, and discover that he is supernatural. They leave in search of him, with an ally or monitor named Wind's Child (Little Wind or Big Fly-could this be what in Ayurveda is called the apan vayu, the downward moving wind that brings the baby to birth?). The story goes on to tell how the twins are aided by Spider Woman and many others, how they cross on Spider Man's web the water where the Sun's house set, overcome the Sun's doorguards (Bears, Big Snakes, Thunders, Mountain Lions, and Big Winds), and meet the Sun's wife and their half-siblings. Then they are wrapped in clouds and hidden from their father until his wife can chide him for his unfaithfulness. The Sun

tries to destroy the twins, but they are saved by all the allies that had been given to them on their journey. Finally they pass tests their father subjects them to and are accepted by Him. They are remade, dressed, properly equipped by his other children, and finally, before their father sends them back to the Middle World (Earth), he gives them the Guessing Test—a kind of geography exam. In the story we hear of Talking God ("In the beginning there was the Word . . ."), and Coyote the trickster (and Crow, Raven, Magpie, or Owl and Turkey Buzzard), among many other animal guides. The Arrow People, Changing Woman, Wind People, and Overwhelming or Snapping Vagina all figure in the story, and deserve more attention and interpretation than space allows me here. Spider Woman gives the twins helpful advice and aids—two plumes from a living eagle to ward off evil and carry them over danger. And Hornworm gives his vomit (i.e., medicinal plants) as an antidote against the Sun's poison tobacco. After the twins pass the Guessing Test, they are shot back to earth on lightning (in some accounts, on a rainbow or sunray). Once there they start slaughtering monsters, including Big Ye'i. The twins return to Changing Woman, who at first doesn't recognize her sons. When she does, and realizes that they have slain Big Ye'i, she clutches his bloody scalp between her teeth as she dances. Then the real fun begins! The Monster Slayer twins, as they are now called, overcome a horrendous group that includes Big Centipedes, Water Monster, and Rock Swallows, among others. The Monster Slayer team had also intended to kill Sleep, Hunger, Poverty, Lice, and Old Age, but was convinced by arguments that these would serve useful purposes. Also spared were Cold Woman, Craving for Meat, Desire and Want, the Veneral Disease People, and Death. It is the acceptance of Death that is the cathartic point of this preparatory Monsterway ceremony. Accepting Death as a condition of earth-plane existence allows us to confront the bottomline fear of giving birth. This fear—that mother or child might die—holds tremendous psychic energy. Keeping the fear of Death unconscious keeps that energy repressed. Accepting the possibility of Death liberates that energy and makes it available for giving birth. Let us look at how, in particular, seven "inward" shamanic skills can help us to let go of our fear and reintegrate death-in-birth. Integrity Women often consciously fear loss of body integrity when they are about to give birth. On the unconscious level, this fear attracts many "monsters," among them the pain-generating medical rituals of blood sampling, cervical checks, drug injections, episiotomy, and Caesarean section. In the Monsterway we are given a mythic context for exploring some of the changes our bodies are undergoing during the birth process. For example, Changing Woman dancing with the bloody scalp evokes an immediate image of the bloody birth opening through the pubic hair. That this image is evoked as a dance of triumph and joy, rather than as a loss of body and soul integrity, is healing. Death in this image is depicted as integral to birth. What can occur in the birthdance is a dying to the Self, a transcendence of the egoic control that forever seeks to separate us from our experience. So freed, the birthing woman now has the possibility to experience the Mystery, and to be forever transformed. The individual chanting the story is a respected elder of the Navajo community. All look toward this person as one who walks his talk. While in our culture the birth practitioner is recognized by a certificate, in shamanism there are no certificates, no licenses that authorize intimate knowing. One is either capable or not, and capability is recognized by the tribe at large. There is no malpractice insurance, and, just as for hospital births, there are no guarantees. To the shaman, death is not the enemy, for Death proved its worthiness to walk among us. Alignment with this level of knowledge can remove some sense of fear from the birthmother. She can trust her shaman as an ally in subduing the monsters of her birthing process. These psychological components of fear—the monsters—are embraced, through the mother's and midwife's empathy and integrity in their own lives. This is not to say that shamanic midwives have no fear of death—rather, fear of death is accepted and motivates an expanded capacity for facilitating live birth. Through such alignment, the Monsterway enhances the integrity of the birth process, weaving its threads into the living community of the mother—She who is about to become the First mother and all mothers. Song The throat is the gateway between the heart and the head. It is only by letting the knowledge of the head fall to the heart that we acquire wisdom. As Sacred Song emerges from the throat of the shamanchanter, we resonate with it, opening up our own vocal channels. As "cervix" is "neck" in Latin, so the

throat of the womb opens more readily to pour forth the babe when the throat of the vocal chords pours forth song. Creative Visualization The first glimpse of the newborn is the essence of creative visualization, of taking a conception, an idea, and transforming this into an image, a baby. The images evoked in the Monsterway Chant provide the birthmother with a rich inner drama upon which she can draw during the drama of birth. No outer movie on birth, no matter how good, can give the pregnant woman as many inner tools for removing unknown obstacles that may block her birthcourse. Preformulated, neatly packaged images generated outside her own psyche can never be as effective at evoking both her unconscious fears, and her own resources for healing them, as are the mythical images of the Monsterway. These inner images, far from explicit, are shifting and inchoate, visible only in her own mind as reflections of her own unreleased fears. Thus they can serve her as symbolic tools for carrying her darkest fears into the light. During labor itself, the shamanic midwife does not suggest images, no matter how flowing or creative, for the birthmother to focus on. Instead she allows the birthmother to go to the source-herself-for the creation of new images. This imaging is practiced in prenatal visits, variably, depending on the mother's needs. By going into the Underworld for visits during the pregnancy, a mother becomes familiar with her own wellspring of imagination. She can encounter frightening images and process those feelings before the birthing begins. Even during labor, the fears that might impede the process can be encountered with these imaginal skills derived from the mother's own psyche. Otherwise, fear creates tension, tension creates pain, and pain, especially in a hospital setting, demands some medicative relief (Dick-Read 1960). Touch The Monsterway touches the softest, most vulnerable tissues of self. It reaches into the place where fear hides and shakes one down to the bone. It is one thing to see into the Lower World, the psyche's Underworld, through visualization; yet quite another to feel the powerful touch of emotion. The shamanic midwife may or may not literally touch a laboring woman as a means of offering support. Instead, she encourages touch between the immediate family members, because birth is a sexual and therefore a bonding-experience of great power. A shamanic midwife has no attachment to the mother's falling in love with her. She lets be the erotic connection within the original lovers' covenant between the parents of the coming child. Rather than bond the mother to herself through physical touch, the shamanic midwife vows to enter into the Mystery with her, and to touch and be touched in her most vulnerable soul. There are shamanic ways of touching someone's soul that free, rather than bond. Dreamtime Childbirth is an altered state of consciousness. A birth practitioner in the shamanic tradition practices entering into the dreamtime dimension to explore its magic. When well-meaning birth attendants demand that the mother and father stay in control and be rational, "on top of it," they unwittingly disconnect the family from their ability to access the dreamtime. A shamanic midwife knows her own Underworld, at least to the point that she is willing to journey with others as they discover theirs. No matter how bizarre the behavior, there is meaning within the dreamtime. The Monsterway allows conscious access into the dreamtime, in the form of a chanted journey into a mythic realm where Spider Woman dwells. The Spider Woman image is multilayered, evoking, among other things, the literal hairy birth opening, and woman as weaver and creator. (Once in a vision I saw Spider Woman spinning out all of the universes, each star connected to another like dew drops on a spider's web.) Here the attention is not on mechanical clock or electronic monitor as producer of important information for the rational mind to measure, but on the richness of the dream and the Mystery which gives it birth. Plant allies I have long considered that the use of anesthesia and analgesia in birth is an expression of our ancient and continuing desire to connect with our plant allies, even though in present-day pharmacology little of the natural plant material remains. Plants help to re-earth us, to renew our connection to our Mother Earth. Plants understand how to turn light into food, something every pregnant and breastfeeding mother also unconsciously knows. In the Monsterway, Hornworm gifts us with medicinal plants to aid the journey. A shamanic midwife carries herbs in her medicine bundle and sometimes gives them to the birthmother. Herbs can powerfully assist the labor process and aid post-partum healing. But the assistance provided by plant allies can go far beyond this literal level. The midwife-practitioner of the shamanic way carries the power of the plants within her psyche. She becomes like a plant herself, with portable

roots. She can ground herself, root into any birth's soul and enter into a symbiotic relationship with all the natural elements of growth. Animal Totems Why do domesticated animals need veterinarians to assist in their deliveries, while wild animals know how to birth by instinct? How can one expect to have a natural birth when living unnaturally, in an environment estranged from nature? Wild animals are connected to nature, to birth. I am not suggesting that all pregnant women should move into the forest (though frequent visits might be indicated!). We can imaginably connect with nature, with the animal's instinct to birth, through totems. When I am with a pregnant woman in the ritual called a "prenatal exam," we journey to find her power animals. If a domesticated animal appears, I consider it a red flag. It is the wild animals who aid in the natural knowing of spontaneous birth. In Halley's waterbirth, one of my totems, the deer, came to assist. The birth process was most kind to us both. Immediately post-partum, I turned around to receive my offspring the way deers turn to greet their newborn. From the shamanic perspective, I could see that during her birth, Halley's totems were meeting mine. Among Halley's power animals are the owl and the scorpion. In retrospect, it became obvious to me that the deer's gentleness was a great ally for the sting of birth/death, as Halley delivered without fear, calm and relaxed. For the first three days postpartum, an owl took up residence in the mulberry tree right outside the window of our laying-in room. When I awoke with Halley for nursing, this owl serenaded us nightly. In the Monsterway many animals are heard from, each speaking to our unconscious about the power and movement of the inner totem pole. This inner totem pole is like our spine-it rests in a sacred sacrum. With imagination, we can connect it to the image of the spiralling journey of the birth force. Powerful images, common to many cultures, link the spiralling of the baby down the birth canal to the motion-relationship of pelvis to backbone-images such as of the stirring of the spoon in the cauldron, and mortar and pestle. Spiralling movements permeate all nature, from the microcellular (the double helix of DNA, the motion of the tails of sperm, the movements of the fibers of cervical mucus) to the mythopoetic (the serpent on the tree of knowledge, Hamlet's mill). Animal totems link us with nature. They work to connect us to our body-wisdom, taking us beneath the cerebral cortex, helping us to spiral down past our enculturation into the instinctual dimension, the wilderness of birth. The shamanic midwife participates in perinatal rituals not as a "Mistress of Ceremonies" but as an invisible agent to catalyze the birthing family's own psycho-spiritual re-remembrance of unity. The highest compliment I can receive from a birthing woman is her forgetting of my presence. The shamanic midwife is a healer, not a warrior, rescuer, or lover. She does not pretend to be the saviour, the hero, the boss, or the God in birth. She is more like an animal, a humble yet wild two-legged being who, like the four-leggeds, the finned ones, the crawling creatures and the winged ones, forms one strand of the invisible web of life that connects us all.

SUMMARY The shamanic midwife offers the Monsterway as a perinatal ritual to guide us through our greatest fears. Our dominant culture is sorely lacking in meaningful perinatal rituals that address the unconscious. Even in the Navajo Blessingway, which does address the unconscious, the emphasis is on love and light, peace and harmony. Although these are integral to the fullest experience of birth, the Blessingway performed alone would leave a woman's fears buried deep inside. As birth turns one inside out, the repressed material will come to consciousness. Better then to take courage and journey through the Lower World with these inward skills before labor begins. When the birthpath is so cleared, spontaneous, perhaps even blissful delivery is more likely. Intrinsic to the nature of spontaneous birth is the possibility of the mystical, transcendental experience-the ecstasy hinted at during conception-that we potentiate when we give birth unassisted by expert or machine: This time the pulse of birth feels wonderful! I am building up to the birth climax after nine months of pleasurable foreplay. With one push the babe is in the canal. The next push brings him down, down into that space just before orgasm when we women know how God must have felt creating this planet. The water supports my birth outlet. I am no longer alone in this work. I feel connected to the mainland, to my source. These midwife hands know just what to do to support the now crowning head, coming so fast. How glad I am for all those years of orgasms! Slow orgasms, fast ones, those which build and subside and peak again and again. That practice aids my baby's gentle emergence so that he doesn't spurt out too quickly. He comes, as do I. (Parvati-Baker

1986:92) Ecstasy is a union of time and eternity through love. Eternity is there in each moment of our lives, but we can only know it in the experience of ecstasy. The shamanic dimension of childbirth is an invitation to experience ecstasy. In our busy modern lives, such invitations are increasingly rare. In the shamanic dimension, which is available to all, time is experienced as flowing simultaneously backward through our cellular memories and forward into our genetic potential. To transcend personal history and hopes for the future, shamanism guides us into an eternal moment. There our personal herstories can be subsumed into the realm beyond ego, into the Mystery, the source of All.

THE NEWBORN NIGHT

**My breasts are two hawks
soaring the galaxies
watching closely for the
scurry of lips beneath
brush, of hunger behind
the cry that pierces
the newborn night.**

Babe, I leak for you
my milk aflight
carrying me to heaven
into the starry void
beyond empty longing
into the fullness of time.

We dream together
of fish washing to shore,
of whales beaching, these
sea museums encoded
with ocean mystery
like giant sperm desiring
to touch earth once more.

Babe, you hold me mammal
each wave of need
grounding this free-flying
soul—our tears bonding
as one our floating
spirits searching the
flesh for paradise.

My breasts are two hawks
diving deep into truth
to taste the salty
nectar of immortality.
Let us drink deeply
of one another now
and for eternity.

We will catch God together.

Jeannine Parvati Baker

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