



AUTHOR(S):

TITLE:

YEAR:

Publisher citation:

OpenAIR citation:

Publisher copyright statement:

This is the _____ version of a work originally published by _____
(ISBN _____; eISBN _____; ISSN _____).

OpenAIR takedown statement:

Section 6 of the "Repository policy for OpenAIR @ RGU" (available from <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/staff-and-current-students/library/library-policies/repository-policies>) provides guidance on the criteria under which RGU will consider withdrawing material from OpenAIR. If you believe that this item is subject to any of these criteria, or for any other reason should not be held on OpenAIR, then please contact openair-help@rgu.ac.uk with the details of the item and the nature of your complaint.

This publication is distributed under a CC _____ license.

Chapter 2: Childbirth as sacred celebration

(NB Plus figure 1 of 1 on a PPT slide) –

Susan Crowther (Wordage 7430)

Introduction

This chapter explores how childbirth is spiritually experienced and meaningful within society revealing how childbirth has purpose both individually and collectively. The discourse and mood around childbirth internationally is often concerned with risk, morbidity and mortality yet philosophers O’Byrne (2010) and Arendt (1958) infer that childbirth is a celebration of natality and future possibility, not purely avoidance of mortality. This chapter acknowledges birth as both joy and sorrow, birth as the potential for epiphany, peak experience, moments of self-actualisation and a time of remembrance. The notions of Kairos time (sacred felt-time) at birth and meaningful encounters in and around childbirth is introduced with narrative examples. Something lies quiescent in the background of childbirth gesturing to ineffability, the inexplicable, and what is mysterious and awe inspiring.

It was 3 am when I was awoken to the ring tone of my mobile phone. I heard Sally on the end of the phone breathing heavy telling me it was time. I was her community midwife and we had known each other for several years as she grew her family. I pulled up outside her home gathered my things and walked up the path to her door gazing at the stars in the sky and hearing the sounds of the night; a glorious night to have a baby. Sally was on her knees leaning over the bed with her head buried in pillows. The youngest was awake and playing with his grandfather. Sally’s partner, Tom, was pacing

and yawning. I leaned over to Sally and said ‘I’m here Sally’ and arranged my notes and homebirth equipment. I was concerned as I was unable to contact my practice partner because there was no phone signal. The youngest, David, ran in and jumped on me ‘Sue, Sue midwife!’ and jumped on the bed and began stroking his mum’s arms as she swayed through contractions. Jane, the eldest, was still asleep in the other room. Within a few minutes Sally stood up and declared that she wanted a shower. We all went to the smallest room in the house surrounded by hanging laundry and within minutes Sally was grunting into her throat with a distinctive expulsive eeeeeer sound. She went onto her knees and pushed involuntarily in the bath as the shower continued to drench us all. Sally then turned over as the water level rose in the bath tub and gave what can only be described as an out of this world pushing sound that switched the mood in the bathroom in an instant. The baby was coming - the head stretching and pushing onto the perineum. I went into midwife overdrive and arranged what I needed close to hand. It was cramped and professionally I was alone. Then a baby boy came into the world underwater. Sally took him into her arms as he took a massive intake of breath. Sally burst into tears saying ‘welcome little one, you’re beautiful’. I looked up and saw Tom now with both children sitting on his knees – all three with tears running down their cheeks. David sat on his dad’s knee with his mouth open in surprise. I looked up at the door to the bathroom and there stood the grandfather smiling, eyes moist and nodding. Several hours later I drove home feeling a depth of peace with the world as the sun climbed the morning sky.

The above story is taken from my own midwifery practice and is based on real life events. In that bathroom three generations gathered at the dawn of a new life. In a moment, as I leaned over the bathtub to help greet this new life, past met the present and stretched into a future of possibilities. I felt privileged to be part of this and overcome by the intensity of the moment feeling tears run down my cheeks. As I drove home in the early hours of that day I felt the interconnectedness of everything.

This story gestures to a number of qualities that constitute each and every birth which I have had the privilege to have been invited to; whether at home, birth centre, hospital and even in the back of cars! Each birth, with and without technology, unfolds in a special felt-space, within an auspicious felt-time, and is always an occasion that is embodied for all and always includes being with others who are near, far, seen and unseen. The above story reveals how birth gathers all these into an event infused with sacred significance and spiritual meaning.

The sacred stirs at the edge of the unspeakable in my midwifery practice and this unspeakable or ineffable quality is mirrored in the literature I have read over the years and found in my own research related to childbirth. Birth is simply brimming with existential qualities and an abundance of meaningfulness that often leaves us spellbound and profoundly touched; if we allow it to. To be in and around birth is an opportunity for transformation. Attempting to come to an understanding about the wholeness of birth in a fragmented way is the antithesis of experiences in and around birth childbirth, whether as a birthing woman or those of us present at birth as healthcare professionals, family and friends.

Ecology of birth

There is a wholeness about childbirth which I to refer to as an ‘ecology of childbirth’ which unfolds at each birth (Crowther 2016, Crowther 2014). Yet we need to be cautious of naming

something. The notion of an ‘ecology of childbirth’ (see figure 1) and its implications for how childbirth occurs within contemporary maternity systems is used here as a point of departure in our explorations and is not intended to be taken as a fixed and inflexible notion.

Place FIG 1 here (PPT Slide)

According to Haeckel (1986) ecology is the science of relationship of living things/beings and their environments. What is key in this definition of ecology is the significance of relationships. I would contend that ecology in relation to childbirth is concerned with multiple relationships. It is an interrelated phenomenon comprising an embodiedⁱ quality, a spatial quality that includes felt-space and physical places of birth, a quality of relationality or being with others, a quality of temporality that incorporates Kairos time (explored later in chapter), a dynamic quality of social-political and cultural context e.g. changing policies and practices informing childbirth. Simultaneously every birth includes a mysterious unspoken quality unfolding in and around the occasion [FIG 1]. This ‘ecology of birth’ incorporates ALL types of birth in ALL circumstances.

An ecology of birth is a notion built upon the enigmatic description of Heidegger’s fourfoldⁱⁱ (Heidegger 1971/2001), Smythe et al’s (2016) interpretation of the ‘good birth’ and my own research in relation to the existential qualities of lived-experiences of being at the time of birth (Crowther 2014). Reawakening our collective cognisance of an ecology of birth can bring remembrance of how each birth is potentially a joyful celebration of life and our shared natality. I infer a ‘reawakening’ as I fear we have forgotten or covered up our original knowing. In this chapter I adopt a phenomenological and philosophical hermeneutic lens informed by the works of Heidegger (1927/1962), Gadamer (2008/1967), Arendt (1958), Dilthey (2002) and O’Byrne (2010) to present a philosophical interpretation of birth as spiritually meaningful.

Being-at-birth

The phenomenological experience of ‘being-at-birth’ is drawn from my own doctoral work that explored the lived experiences of being at the moment of a baby being born. When I first examined being there at birth four constituent qualities of embodiment, spatiality, relationality and temporality were revealed. These initial interpretations were not the sole qualities of our human experience at birth. These initial interpretations have now evolved into deeper understanding and expanded into an ecology of birth as depicted in figure 1 and will be revisited throughout this chapter.

Embodied experiences

The rationale for using hyphens in ‘being-at-birth’ is to foreground the unifying quality of the phenomenon, thus ‘being-at–birth’ signals not how we are ‘in’ the event of birth, but how we ‘are’ the unfolding events at birth. This is no less true than when referring to embodied experiences. My study uncovered myriad embodied experiences at the time of birth such as the smiling and tears of the family in the story above. Brenda, an obstetrician, shares how it is to touch a baby for the first time at a caesarean section:

As soon as I reach in and can touch the baby, I feel excited as I get to be the very first one to touch it! I reach in and it’s this first connection with the baby. As soon as my hand goes in and touches the baby I feel a kind of transition. It’s hard because I’m constantly balancing between the medical bit and the connection.

(Crowther 2014, 160)

Touch invokes a powerful moment of transition for Brenda amidst the technological context of a surgical event. When Brenda touches the baby for the first time a special connection is made, an intimate relationship comes into being between her and the unborn baby. The moment is charged with profound intimacy despite the context. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002) to touch is to be touched, it is a shared communication through the body. This touch moves reciprocally. The baby for the first time feels physically touched by someone outside of the womb. The baby and surgeon are instantly thrown into a mutual tactile encounter. Both human beings in moment sense themselves in this embodied exchange; an encounter both physical and ontological. In that moment of tactile intimacy two worlds connect and experience one another in a moment of imminence and transcendence.

My research revealed how birth comprises a totality of bodily senses; touching, holding, smelling, seeing, and hearing. Visceral emotional affects such as weeping, smiling and shaking appeared in the gathered birth stories that pointed to something profound and unexplainable. It is as if these powerful sensual and ontological embodied responses burrow deep within our corporal structure, as Heidegger suggests “down to the last muscle fibre and hidden molecule of hormones” (Heidegger 1971/2001, 232) and beyond into transcendental experience. Merleau-Ponty’s (1962/2002) thesis contends that the body is the primary medium of all perception. We are thus constantly embodied within the world and this is no less so than at birth. Experiences at birth show how birth physically and feelingly reaches out to us and gifts something of significance beyond and within the constraints of our individual experiences. Likewise, the spatial experience of birth is unique and meaningful.

Spatial experiences

Birth place is often referred to in terms of physical structures such as home, hospital or birth centre. Conversely the notion of birth space or atmosphere is the feeling dimension of place, an attuned space, a lived-space which is not necessarily connected to physical places (Crowther 2013). This is not to deny the significance of places of birth. Yet ongoing debates and research agendas concerning place of birth are often ideologically polarising and reveal little about spiritual meaningfulness and sacred significance of different birth spaces. Leaving the debates about birth place to others I focus on the lived experiences of such places of birth and draw our attention to ‘felt-space at birth’.

Heidegger refers to this aspect of spatiality as ‘directionality’; a space perceived differently according to situation and our ways of attuning to it. The surrounding physical world at birth blends and integrates with the felt-space contributing to an ecology of birth. A place of birth is thus not defined solely as hospital or home, but rather feeling safe, friendly, warm, fearful, impersonal, intimate, joyful and sacred. Birth space can thus be a felt space that is spiritually meaningful holding sacred significance. Simone, a midwife, describes how this felt-space at birth transcends the clinical hospital physical environment,

Every time I go into a hospital and it’s very clinical and sterile and clean, there’s still a part of me that says, ‘even though this is a hospital, this is a sacred place because life is brought into the world here, new life emerges here, therefore there has to be something special about that place, something sacred.

(Crowther 2014, 167)

The distinction in experiential terms is that physical place and felt space coexist yet are equally important parts of the whole experience. Embodied and spatial experiences are not divided or separate but are in an interconnected relational whole, they are within the interiority of each other.

Relational experiences

Studies have revealed that the environment of birth is at once integral to the relational engagement and connection of others at birth (e.g. Bergum and Van Der Zalm 2007). This gestures to the relationality at birth and how birth gathers others far, near, seen and unseen into intimate nearness. To be in the world is always to be with-other, for we are never alone, as Heidegger reminds us “The world is always the one that I share with Others” (1927/1962, 155). Birth and being born is thus always in some way to be gathered with-others near and far.

Gathering appears to unfold over the process of each birth intensifying around the moment when a baby is born. Others, maternity care providers, friends, family even community members, come to birth in anticipation of something special, knowing that birth is significant whatever the outcome. Feeling privileged to be at birth was a theme repeatedly mentioned in my own study. Participants reported feeling honoured, privileged and enjoyed to be there when a new infant(s) was arriving.

The advent of a new human being appears to act as a clarion call to others to be near, to help, to gather and greet a new baby. Birth acts as a mobilisation of others into action, everyone answering that call come with an array of responsibilities, skills, needs and differing perspectives (Crowther, Smythe, and Spence 2014). Despite these outward differences

amongst parents, midwives and obstetricians, they come together at the occasion of each birth in a special gathering. John, a father, highlights this gathering quality,

My Mum came up and she stopped in. Then my wife's sister came. It was a bit of a family event starting to brew. Then my wife's other sister came with one of her friends! They all come round because they were excited that baby would soon be here.

(Crowther 2014, 179)

John reveals how a growing mood of intimate inclusiveness occurs as birth approaches. Others leave their everyday lives to be near because something special, momentous is about to happen. This is paradoxically an intimate yet public expression of being alive that inspires a need for closeness. Tui, a grandmother, describes this communal occasion as community is jubilant about the new baby,

There was this lovely kind of parade down the street. People were waving out their windows and cheering! It was lovely. I remember feeling just warm and exciting. It was great with everyone there, lots of little kids.

(Crowther 2014, 182)

Like a warm fire in winter bringing others together around the family hearth for warmth and light so too John and Tui describe how birth gathers.

Berg, Ólafsdóttir, and Lundgren (2012) showed the importance and significance of relationships creates an affirming space at birth. However, are pre-formed relationships a determining factor in spiritual meaningfulness and sacred significance at birth? Are prior relationships essential to attune to this specialness at birth? Not necessarily. Being at birth was shown to be special in and of itself. Even when birth is amongst others with no prior

relationship the choice to attune to a special mood at birth remains (Crowther, Smythe, and Spence 2014). Something about birth seems to gather others near into a shared space and embodied experience. Even being physically present at the moment of birth is not essential to be part of this gathering. My study revealed how others gather from afar in their feelings and aspirations. For example, a mother explains how a she made a phone call to her father who lived far away. As she spoke of this important phone call she wept. The power of the occasion reaches out and touches beyond the immediacy of the birth space; a moment in time that seemingly overflows with temporal significance.

Temporal experiences: Kairos time

My study revealed how something in the moment at birth changes. As Merewether (2013) aptly describes “there is a light that comes into the room when a baby is born”. This moment, or moments, in time when a baby is born gestures spiritual meaning and sacred significance:

Simone [midwife] says it is a moment of “*Beautiful naturalness, a universal happiness in the room*”

Carol [obstetrician] always feels “*happiness in the room when the baby arrives*”

Lorna [mother] remembers this moment as gifting a “*precious jewel, beyond special, a moment of grace*”

Diane, [midwife] describes the moment as beyond words “an ooh feeling, a whoa or whoo moment!” and

Karl [father] speaks of a mesmerizing quality, ‘it is just ‘woo’, just watching and listening, just looking at him, focussed right in, magnetised’.

Seemingly birth unfolds in a moment of time which can harbour inexplicable and unspoken mystery that captivates and intoxicates. Time is a complex experiential quality of each and every experience. Clock time as a lineal process of structuring and controlling birth was explored by (Downe and Dykes 2009). Clock time is lineal in nature such as the ticking of seconds one to the next, never repeated, always in a forward direction. Cyclic time is akin to the seasons of the year and menstrual cycles. Maternal time is the intimate time as mother and baby come together in relationship (Dykes 2007). Yet these interpretations of time do not describe fully the quality of time at birth. Time at birth gestures to another quality of time that I have reported more fully elsewhere - a Kairological or Kairos time (Crowther, Smythe, and Spence 2015). The qualities of Kairos time:

- Ever new possibilities
- Critical, opportune moment
- A time like no other
- Transformative
- Peak experience
- Visible and invisible
- To be in fullness of our Being
- Coming home
- Interconnectedness
- Overflowing meaningfulness

If you now think back to the birth story at the start of this chapter and subsequent quotes in this chapter you may see how Kairos consistently reveals itself as a special quality of time in around childbirth. Perhaps you can feel and appreciate the depth and vastness of meaning overflowing when a new human baby joins us? Even if you have never been physically present at birth; ponder now what that may be like. For myself and many others being at birth is a unique moment in human life: an experience unparalleled in its generosity to gift such penetrating intimacy. As a colleague who had had 40 years of midwifery experience said to

me ‘when I drive home after a birth I feel I love the world!’ Perhaps this intimate touch gifts a trace of something beyond our everyday mundane lives?

Kairos time at birth draws near the ineffability of life felt in a mood of wonder, openness and deep interconnectedness. To be thrown into this felt-time is to be touched by potent imminent and transcendent qualities. Imminent meaning our individual visceral responses and how birth directly inspires us personally. Transcendental meaning infers more than our individualised experiences gesturing to otherness and our shared knowingness that is both within and beyond ourselves. Such meaning thus epitomises our connectedness and interrelatedness across time, places and people (whether seen, unseen, near and far).

These temporal connections may be more emphasised in different cultural cosmological belief systems based on ancestral worship and reverence. For such cultures it would be less problematic to articulate ancestral reverence than for many Anglo-Saxon cultures. For example, most New Zealand Māori have a deep reverence for their ancestors because ‘Whakapapa’ or genealogy, is a fundamental principle that permeates their whole cultureⁱⁱⁱ.

By revealing the above four qualities (embodied, spatial, relational and temporal) within experiences of being at birth we begin to foreground a quality of mystery at birth that is transformative.

Birth as transformative experience

Transformative experiences in and around childbirth hint to something shared and collective. At times this transformative experience is unconsciously known and tacit, yet at once spiritually meaningful. Joy at birth as a potent mood turns us towards and awakens us to something significant at birth. The nature of this awakened transformative experience may

come 'all at once' and 'gradually change us'. For example, peak experiences appear to catapult us into different awareness with new understandings recognisable to self and others. Maslow (1964) coined the term 'peak experience' to describe moments of joy in everyday experience. Birth has been described as the happiest moments in life, highlighting peak experiences which manifest in a shared joy wherein individual experiences unify with others as described earlier in this chapter. Simultaneously experiences of birth have been described as a powerful self-actualising experience for mothers (Cheyney 2011, Lokugamage 2011) and fathers (Lahood 2007). Peak experiences do not have a lineal progression as does the movement to self-actualisation yet both emerge from experiential data about being at birth. What is evident is that an experience of self-actualisation and peak experiences are connected to meanings central to birth itself. In other words birth can provide meaning, fulfilment of purpose and be personally transformative for all whether as a peak moment in time of overwhelming joyful experience or a gradual process of being self-actualised. Paul (2014) defines a personally transformative experience as,

...life-changing in that it changes what it is like for you to be you. That is, it can change your point of view, and by extension, your personal preferences, and perhaps, even change the kind of person that you are at least take yourself to be.....substantially revising your core preferences or revising how you experience being yourself.. (16)

The personally transformative experience of being at births certainly resonates with my own experience as a midwife and what I have repeatedly witnessed working with parents and colleagues. Deciding to become a midwife in the early 90s seems a world apart from the lived reality of midwifery I experience today. The choice at the time could never have been made

on the rational choice of knowing the full extent of what it would be like to be a midwife. Being a midwife has radically changed how I experience who I am both epistemologically (knowing how I come to know anything) and personally in ways that are impossible to rationally understand. Making the choice to be a midwife and predict how my life would unfold after that choice was not possible. I have been transformed by my multiple experiences of being at births which have fundamentally altered my professional and personal outlook on life in ways I would never have imagined prior to the choice to enter a degree course in midwifery. Likewise, for a birthing woman the transformative experience of becoming a parent may leave pre-birth desires and assumptions about life forever transformed in unknown ways. As Paul (2014) continues,

...you face a certain kind of ignorance: ignorance about what it will be like to undergo the experience and ignorance about how the experience will change you. (32)

I remember the looks of revelation on a friend's face when assisting me at a mutual friend's homebirth. Within months my friend who assisted me applied to be a midwife and never looked back on her career change. We never know how each birth will affect us, touch us and change us. Being at birth can be profoundly transformative, opening us to peak and self-actualising experiences that are significantly spiritual in nature leading into areas of life not previously considered, desired and known to us. Often these experiences gesture towards a shared quality that transcends the concerns of our individual lives.

Shared Natality

At each birth, we are confronted with the majesty of a continuum of life begetting life that reminds us of our interconnectedness with others; past, present and future, as a Maori grandmother explained to me ‘*to be at birth is to welcome the past which meets the future in the present moment*’. Kairos time, as described above, is a conjoining of past, present and future. It is a time in our lives of profound connections. To be attuned to our shared natality is to be “grounded in the present moment, supported by the past that is arriving and the openness of a future that is calling” (Todnes and Galvin 2010, 4). Birth thus reaches out and touches us in Kairos gifting something unseen and invisible; a numinous encounter with life’s shared mysterious continuance.

The philosophical notions of generation (Dilthey 2002) and natality (Arendt 1958, O’Byrne 2010) are, I would contend, central to the meaning of birth for each of us. There is a flow of life generation to generation which gestures towards continuous possibility, hope and creativity as reflected in Arendt’s thesis of natality and Dilthey’s intergenerational journey of existence. Their theses hint at how each birth is meaningful. Dilthey’s concept of generation is embodied, social, historical and political pointing to a unifying wholeness. This intergenerational experience of connectedness for birthing mothers has been highlighted elsewhere (Carter 2009).

Our shared natality is our collective experience at each birth when we accept the invitation and open ourselves to meet and embrace the great mystery of being alive. A baby brings possibility for newness, a life to be lived, an unfolding potential for actualising dreams yet to be dreamt and realised. Arendt (1958) reminds us birth is a miracle that holds the potential to positively progress the world. Birth is an event in human life that lays bare our nature, a nature which constantly unfolds new beginnings and reveals to us our ability to be beginners

of something new. Our shared natality is an innate human condition that reminds us that we are both natal beings and mortal beings. As one midwife after 35 years in practice said to me ‘*to understand birth this way is to come to know birth as sacrament*’. It is about awakening to our shared relationship to an extraordinary moment of magic and transformation.

Birth is the primary numinous event. It is our major metaphor for life and coming into being. We talk about birth of the universe.... it is how the world came into being. It is the first act of magic - physical testament to the continuity of human and all life

(Razak 1990, 168)

Every story needs a beginning, each life needs to be born. Each birth is testament of our shared innate mystery of being alive; a mystery that hints of the infinite unknown that stretches out before birth. Kairos at birth is thus a moment bringing us face to face with an enigmatic mystery at the centre of our being; from where and to where is our origin? Science may help us understand where and how we arrive physically yet “...that we are here remains mysterious...invites question and frustrates our attempts to provide answers” (O’Byrne, 2010, 20). As O’Donohue (2012) poetically reminds us a “... *baby is a creature fresh from eternity*” (29) and beyond our limits of understanding.

We are not the centre of birth, we are part and whole of the experience. The moment of birth is unable to be broken into parts it is always an ecological process involving interweaving relationships with others, environments and what we bring. Birth is thus an interconnected wholeness, our shared history and our commonality; it is a dynamic emergent ecology and testament to life’s unending creativity. To witness birth is to be fascinated and inspired and filled with embodied gratitude in our tears, smiles, gentle voices and tender touching, as Tui

(grandmother) states it is “*like having a smile all over your body that spreads and doesn’t go away*” (Crowther 2014, 234). It is a moment of sacred celebration.

Childbirth as sacred celebration

Seemingly childbirth beckons and gathers others near, gifting the possibility to ‘see’, ‘meet’ and ‘connect’ with each other anew. Birth is thus symbolic and self-evident of beginnings that are transformative. It is not just a baby being born but others are being reborn into new relationships. Birth invokes a gathering, makes community; draws us nearer and authenticates a truly being-with unlike most other experiences in life. In our togetherness at that precious yet vulnerable moment we are spellbound by life’s continuing magnificence. If we open ourselves at birth to the celebratory quality of the occasion, we experience a joyful unifying phenomenon inducing spiritual feelings. Spiritual meaning and sacred significance at birth is shared beyond the birthing room. Each birth is a remembrance of our continuance into hitherto unknown possibilities.

When imagination is allowed to move to deep places, the sacred is revealed. The more different kinds of thoughts we experience around a thing and the deeper our reflections go as we are arrested by its artfulness, the more fully its sacredness can emerge

(Moore 1992, 289)

I would urge us all to ponder deeply and attune to the sacredness at birth in all circumstances. The dynamic social-political and cultural context of birth informs much of what we do. Have you noticed how protocols and policies fade as the birth experience fully engages us? This is not to deny the purpose of practice guidance. At birth things can and do go wrong. There are

times when birth is experienced as dread and misery, and times when biomedical interventions save and improve lives. At such times birth's mystery remains yet is often covered over and hidden (Crowther, Smythe, and Spence 2014). This does not diminish the wonder of birth. What I point to here is how each birth can be meaningfully experienced in all situations e.g. the homebirth and the elective caesarean section. Is one of these births any less significant and meaningful? As Liz Smythe and colleagues suggest a 'good birth' is more than the type of birth (Smythe et al. 2016). What is highlighted in this chapter is how birth is an existential transformative and uplifting experience that has for the most part been hidden and forgotten in the current context. Childbirth as sacred celebration needs to be foregrounded and guide our actions in all circumstances.

Towards an ecology of birth

It is evident that false dichotomies and silo thinking are unhelpful in understanding the ecological wholeness of birth. Dichotomous and polemic attitudes that inform the much of the context of birth are the antithesis of spirituality and risk covering up something of significance and meaning. My fear is that what is now known becomes forgotten, and far more concerning for us all, we collectively forget that we have forgotten! If such a time comes, spiritual and sacred experience at birth will become solely personal and left unspoken, perhaps relegated to what is least important in contemporary childbirth. This is apparent in many of the behaviours and discourses amongst maternity care providers where services are devoid of relational models of care and human experiences are not prioritised. Despite often feeling inhibited due to contextual demands of the systems in which we practice something extraordinary at birth continually calls us to 'let our guard down'. This can be especially challenging when births are complex.

Sacred celebration may be delayed due to necessary interventions and circumstances yet joy can still awaken and be anticipated. This requires tact and attuning to events beyond the practical urgent actions undertaken (Crowther, Smythe, and Spence 2014). This is a message of hope for those who find themselves completely positioned in technology or trauma who may feel they are bereft of meaningful experiences at birth. Whilst I would not deny the usefulness and necessity of technology at birth, caution is required lest technology covers up something of significance at birth; ‘Whatever trust has been built up, perhaps over generations, is fragile to the winds of change’ (Smythe et al. 2016, 30). This vulnerability needs to be acknowledged so that we safeguard childbirth from narrow reductionist perspectives that diminish our intergenerational trust in childbirth thus hampering an ecology of birth. It is crucial that we honour the ecological wholeness of each birth as a time of shared celebration.

Context holds power and can undermine our best intentions. Selin and Stone’s (2009) contend that birth culture, particular in the west, has become so entangled with risk avoidance strategies that it is in peril of being reduced to a “sterile, safe, vacant experience” (xv). McIntosh (2012) also reminds us that how a society interprets birth is fundamental to how a society functions. Allowing birth to be construed as anything but celebratory, meaningful and significant would be a travesty. Authoritative obstetric and indeterminate knowledge are both part of contemporary birth yet meet in an uneasy co-existence. Technology should not be telling us what birth ‘is’ but assisting us to hold birth safely when required enabling spiritual meaning and sacred significance to surface. We need to collectively reclaim something special at birth by sheltering the celebratory experience.

Birth should not be hurried and rushed for fiscal, philosophical/clinical orientation, buried under workloads or managerial reasons. The current reality of many maternity systems juxtaposed to often unspoken spiritual transformative experiences at birth are incongruent. Collectively we need to pay closer attention to the specialness of birth and appreciate the “celebratory over the clinical” (Cheyney 2011, 535). Do those at birth have a responsibility to nurture and enable sacred celebration to flourish? I appreciate that birth can become mundane when health care providers are there at one birth after another yet I would urge a revolution of services in which we can all work in congruence with the sacred transformative experiences. What if we do not address this? Does a loss of meaning and purpose in and around birth leave mothers bereft of something important on their journey to motherhood? There is a pressing need to attend to the wholeness of birth. We all need to re-evaluate society’s shared meaning of natality and move towards systems of care that support an ecology of birth.

Practice implications

Sensitivity at birth awakens and frees spiritual meaning and brings it into presence. Yet at times idle chatter, clearing equipment, changing of shifts, entry of unknown others, knocking on the door or using a mobile phone can and does disrupt birth. For example, midwives dashing and rushing in and out can create an atmosphere that lacks calm (Huber and Sandall 2009). It is not only what we do at birth that is important it is also how we are being there. Peak experiences at birth are supported when there is midwifery spiritual presence, empathy and kindness (Moloney and Gair 2015). They contend that without such sensitivity and relational depth mothers’ can be left feeling traumatised and spiritually distressed after birth. Their conclusions highlight once more the significance of relationships and being with others in sensitive ways. Other chapters in this book draw the significance of this out further.

Many families, midwives and obstetricians already know that birth is profoundly significant and meaningful yet they can act insensitively at this precious time. We need to question whether our current maternity systems, practices and ways of being safeguards birth as sacred celebration or not. There are many practitioners working tirelessly to safeguard the sacred at birth and I would like to exonerate those who have the courage to continually notice and celebrate the sacred at birth wherever they practice. Although their example is a beacon of hope in the discordant discourses challenging modern maternity systems, they need to be heard and appreciated otherwise their light will diminish. For any ecological system to survive relationships between living beings and their environment needs to be nourished and enabled to flourish.

Conclusion

Birth as sacred celebration is revealed in this chapter through an ecology of birth. I have revealed how birth is brimming with spiritual meaning and sacred significance and call for us to foster gentleness, tenderness and humility at birth. Those at birth need to preserve and protect the ineffable qualities at birth with respect and reverence. Even in busy maternity care we can be humbled by mystery. Opening ourselves to the possibility of a sacred mood at birth brings us recognition of something of significance that calls out to us silently in the habitual turbulence of modern maternity care. This is something treasured that we must safeguard so that it continues to 'be'.

If we treat the moment of birth with carelessness and brutishness we risk losing the rarity of the gift of a Kairos moment; a gift that calls us to a threshold in which we can dwell in delight and where the invisible comes into presence. It is a moment that celebrates our shared

remembrance of natality as life begetting life. Each birth brings hope and possibilities of better tomorrows. Birth nears the world of our shared natality by shining a light on the occasion and assails us deeply touching us in a timeless moment conveying our unified existence beyond institutional structures, discourses, and social and professional differences. When we are confronted by the intense directness of our shared human lived experiences at birth a mood and memory of something close awakens. In that moment, there is an apparent choice to turn towards the mystery or not. If we turn and attune to the mystery we are at once startled by what was known but unspoken.

Attuning to this remembrance beckons us to be tactful and safeguard an ever unfolding ecology of childbirth; an ecology interwoven with spirituality through and through. Everything coalesces at birth revealing an ecological living system that needs nurturing to survive. Foregrounding spirituality in this way hopefully provokes our collective re-imagining of birth in the 21st century. To begin, just listen and allow yourself to feel. Natality's sacred celebratory call continuously whispers in the corridors and rooms of our hospitals, birth centres, communities, homes, midwifery and medical schools.

Epilogue

This chapter opened with a birth story, and ends with a poem in honour of the many births I have attended as a midwife.

*Suddenly...
now I see the connection
with life's eternal beating heart
I stand in awe*

*Tactile warmth and silky hands
scent of life's bodily fluids
the beauty of life's first breath and cry!*

*Relief passes over me
Apgar scores and warm towels –
must note the time!*

The clock hangs on the wall in a timeless moment

*In and beyond time I gather
with-others I belong
smiling with tears of joy flowing
I expand out into space within and without earth's containing places
I touch and become touched by messenger of joy*

*She comes to remind me
that sweet possibility of
new beginnings, of
ancestors providing new tomorrows*

*In a sudden treasured moment
I'm found home; reminded of who I am
As inheritor I retain a trace
I come to know - remember
how we together belong in life's holy constancy*

(Crowther 2014, 250)

Notes

ⁱ Embodied experiences refers to how the body is the medium of our perceptions (Merleau-Ponty 1962/2002). Experience and bodily sensorial sensations are thus inseparable. For example a joyful experience is both our material body, such as tears of joy, as well as the lived experiencing of the joy. As Heidegger (2001) contends we body our experiences, that is to say we embody them.

ⁱⁱ Heidegger's (Heidegger 1971/2001) philosophical notion of the fourfold is a central aspect of how we dwell as human beings in all situations we find ourselves. The fourfold has four components: earth and sky, divinities and mortals which are an inseparable unity that cannot be divided into separated components. Each component is interconnected and in the interiority of the other. Heidegger claims that human beings are not only a being in the world, but are always part of this fourfold. For further description read Heidegger's (2001) Poetry, Language, Thought (full reference given at end of chapter).

ⁱⁱⁱ Any reading on Maori culture is my own interpretation. From my understanding there are two broad main differences in worldview; a western individualism that was juxtaposed to the Maori collective living that is more interconnected and less hegemonic

with a spirit-world consciousness that informs Maori Tikanga (values/customs and rules). The intention here is not to delve into Maori beliefs as I am not Maori and have not been immersed in Māoritanga (Maori culture) and remain largely naïve about Maori culture and history. Reference to ancestral cultures in this section is simply to provide a wider context.

References

- Arendt, H. 1958. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berg, M., Ólafsdóttir, O. A. and Lundgren, I. 2012. "A midwifery model of woman-centred childbirth care - In Swedish and Icelandic settings." *Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare* 3 (2):79-87. doi: 10.1016/j.srhc.2012.03.001.
- Bergum, V., and Van Der Zalm, J. eds. 2007. *Motherlife: Studies of mothering experience*. Alberta, Canada: Pedagon Publishing.
- Carter, SK. 2009. "Gender and childbearing experiences: Revisiting O'Brien's dialectics of reproduction." *NWSA Journal* 21 (2):121-143.
- Cheyney, M. 2011. "Reinscribing the birthing body: Homebirth as ritual performance." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 25 (4):519-542. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1387.2011.01183.x.
- Crowther, S. 2016. "Towards an Ecology of Birth." Royal College of Midwives Annual Conference, Harrogate International Centre, UK, 19th-20th October 2016.
- Crowther, S. 2013. "Sacred space at the moment of birth." *The Practising Midwife* (December):21-23.
- Crowther, S. 2014. "Sacred joy at birth: a hermeneutic phenomenology study." PhD, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences, Auckland University of Technology.
- Crowther, S., Smythe, L. and Spence, D. 2014. "Mood and birth experience." *Women and birth : journal of the Australian College of Midwives* 27 (1):21-25. doi: 10.1016/j.wombi.2013.02.004.
- Crowther, S., Smythe, L. and Spence, D. 2015. "Kairos time at the moment of birth." *Midwifery* 31:451-457. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2014.11.005>.
- Dilthey, W. 2002. *Formation of the historical world in the human sciences* Translated by Rudolf A Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Edited by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, *Selected works / Wilhelm Dilthey ; v. 3*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Downe, S, and Dykes, F. 2009. "Counting time in pregnancy and labour." In *Childbirth, Midwifery and Concepts of Time*, edited by C McCourt. London: Berghaun Books.

-
- Dykes, F. 2007. *Breastfeeding in hospital :mothers, midwives, and the production line*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gadamer, H. G. 2008/1967. *Philosophical hermeneutics*. Translated by David E. Linge. Edited by David E. Linge. London: University of California Press.
- Haeckel, E. H. P. A. 1986. *The history of creation: or the development of the earth and its inhabitants by the action of natural causes*. Translated by E. R. Lankester. Vol. 2. London: H. S. King and Son.
- Heidegger, M. 1927/1962. *Being and time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie and E Robinson. New York: Harper.
- Heidegger, M. 1971/2001. *Poetry, language, thought*. Translated by A Hofstadter. NY: HarperCollins.
- Heidegger, M. 2001. *Zollikon seminars: Protocols - Conversations - Letters*. Translated by F. Mayr. Edited by Medard Boss. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press.
- Huber, U. S., and Sandall. J. 2009. "A qualitative exploration of the creation of calm in a continuity of carer model of maternity care in London." *Midwifery* 25 (6):613-21. doi: 10.1016/j.midw.2007.10.011.
- Lahood, G. 2007. "Rumour of angels and heavenly midwives: Anthropology of transpersonal events and childbirth." *Women and Birth* 20 (1):3-10.
- Lokugamage, A. 2011. *The heart in the womb*. London: Docamali Limited.
- Maslow, A. 1964. *Religions, values and peak experiences*. Ohio: State University Press.
- McIntosh, T. 2012. *A social history of maternity and childbirth: key themes in maternity care*. Edited by 1. London: Routledge.
- Merewether, J. 2013. *Heart and hands - A history of the struggle to protect healthy childbirth in Australia*. Australia: Go Girl Productions.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962/2002. *The phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge Classics.
- Moloney, S., and Gair, S. 2015. "Empathy and spiritual care in midwifery practice: Contributing to women's enhanced birth experiences." *Women Birth* 28 (4):323-8. doi: 10.1016/j.wombi.2015.04.009.
- Moore, T. 1992. *Care of the soul*. NY: Harper Perennial.
- O'Byrne, A. 2010. *Natality and finitude*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- O'Donohue, J. 2012. *The four elements: Reflections on nature*. London: Transworld Ireland.
- Paul, L.A. 2014. *Transformative experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Razak, A. 1990. "Toward a womanist analysis of birth." In *Reweaving the world: The emergence of ecofeminism*, edited by I Diamond and G.F Orenstein, 165-172. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Selin, H, and Stone, P.K. eds. 2009. *Childbirth across cultures: Ideas and practices of pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum, Science across cultures:The history of non-western medicine*. NY: Springer.

Smythe, E, Hunter, M. Gunn, J. Crowther, S. McAra Couper, J. Wilson, S and Payne, D.
2016. "Midwifing the notion of a good birth: a philosophical analysis." *Midwifery*
37:25-31. doi: 10.1016/j.midw.2016.03.012.

Todnes, L, and Galvin, K. 2010. ""Dwelling-mobility": An existential theory of well-being."
International Journal of studies health and well-being 5444:1-6. doi:
10.3402/qhw.v5i3.5444.

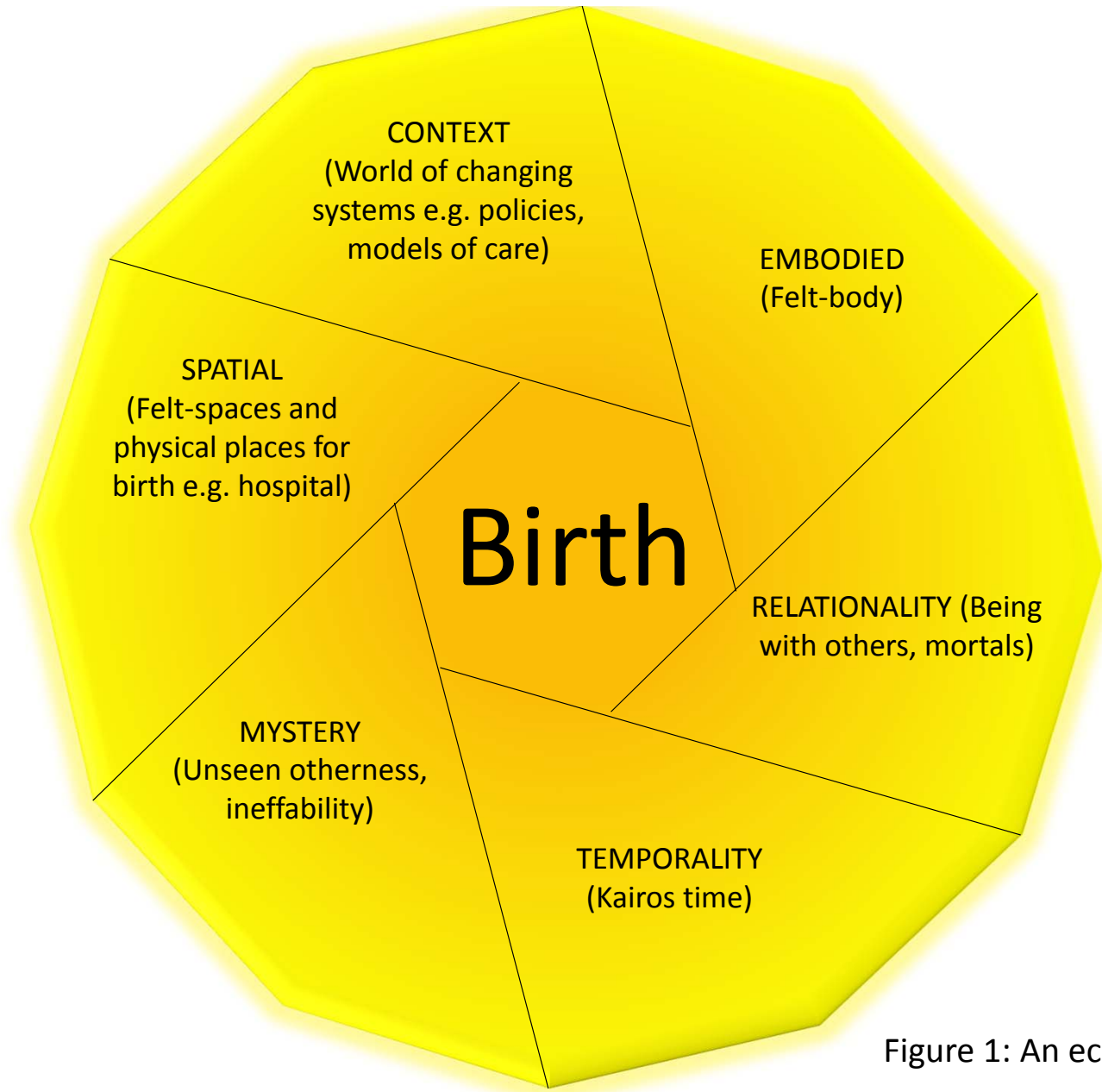


Figure 1: An ecology of birth (Crowther, 2017)