



Bring Forth Your Birth Story

A Self-Guided Mini-Retreat

"There is no greater agony than
bearing an untold story inside you."
-- Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*



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Welcome

I've long dreamed of a common language for telling birth stories, a unifying way to share about childbirth as a personal rite of passage regardless of where it takes place, how it unfolds, who is there or how many years since it occurred.

Birth in our culture is treated mostly as a medical event, so clinical language often is the mother tongue for describing the experience. Sometimes it's related as a war story, told with relish and drama, while for other women the process is so distressing as to be silencing. Women who birth without medication or intervention, possibly at home, bring a different vocabulary that may seem foreign, off putting even, to those unfamiliar with it. Their stories can spark difficult emotions in women for whom birth was disappointing or even traumatic.

What if we drew a big wide circle around all mothers and called every single experience just "birth"? Could we metaphorically join hands and create such a circle for ourselves? This mini-retreat hopes to do just that. As a Mother's Day gift to you, Bring Forth Your Birth Story is an invitation to step into your own sacred space and spend time reflecting and creating to you're your unique birth story in a powerful, empowering way.

Preparation

You will need a few supplies in addition to this handout:

- Journal (or writing paper) and pen
- Regular or pastel crayons, markers and/or watercolors
- Paper for drawing or painting, possibly large size

In addition, choose one object to bring with you on your retreat that represents in some way the particular birth story you wish to bring forth. It might be a photograph, a statue, an object from nature, an article of clothing. If in doubt, try to follow with your first impulse rather than thinking too analytically about this selection.

Time for the retreat can be tailored to your schedule and preferences. You could set aside a couple hours on a single afternoon or engage activities one at a time on different days. To optimize your retreat session(s), I suggest not only gathering the materials in advance but also considering where and when you wish to be on retreat. Envision yourself in a mental space of relaxation and contemplation.

- Would home be most conducive? Or at a park, coffee shop, library, etc.? What physical setting best creates inner calm for you? The space can be arranged with flowers, candle, special cloth etc. as your resources of time and energy allow but it's not required. Do what feels simple and easy for you.

- Would you prefer to be all alone or invite a few friends to bring forth birth stories together? Another option would be for a group of friends to engage the retreat individually and then come together to share as part of the Honoring segment.

Entering Sacred Space

“The first thing to do is to lift your foot. Breathe in. Put your foot down, first your heel and then your toes. Breathe out. Feel your feet solid on the Earth. You have already arrived.”

--- Thich Nhat Hanh

On the appointed day, give yourself time between your ordinary routine and the retreat activities in order to breathe and to settle into your own body as sacred space in the setting you have chosen. Below are a few suggestions to choose from to relax into your body and transition away from daily life, but you may have a preferred yoga or other movement routine instead. Follow your own inclinations here.

- Walking -- Walk mindfully for however long you like, feeling each foot step, noticing the Earth beneath you, the air and sounds and fragrances all around.
- Finger labyrinth -- Using a pencil or just your finger, trace the path on the labyrinth image provided as the last page of this handout. Breathe in and out before beginning and notice the sensations as you follow the circuitous line inward. Pause in the center, just breathing and listening to nothing in particular. Then trace the path outward. Repeat the labyrinth if you like.
- Standing tall -- Stand with your feet about hip width apart, toes facing forward, and bring your arms overhead. Stretch up as far as you can, even going up on tip toes. Then with feet flat again on the ground and arms still above your head, turn your hands inward and let your fingers fan like the branches of a tree. Feel yourself both anchored down into the Earth and also soaring up to the sky. Breathe in and out.

Surfacing the Story

“I sometimes find that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind. At these times, I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure.”

--- Albus Dumbledore, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K. Rowling

I love the scene in Book 4 of the Harry Potter series from which the above quote is taken, because it illustrates such practical wisdom from the Hogwarts headmaster: Simply allow

thoughts and memories to flow out and then take a look to see what's there. This seems particularly useful when reflecting on major events with many different aspects like giving birth.

At this point, you'll need the symbolic birth object you selected and blank paper or your journal and a pen.

Place the object in front of you and bring your full attention to it. Look at it gently, with curiosity and openness. What does it say to you? What does it convey to you about your birth experience? Maybe get up and walk around it, seeing it from all angles. What memories of your birth does it bring to your awareness? Let them arise and expand in your consciousness.

What are you seeing? Who is there? What are the colors? What is directly in your line of sight?
Are there sounds that you remember?
Are there particular smells that you associate with these memories?
What are the touch sensations in this scene?
What is going on inside you, your emotions and reactions? What are you saying inside yourself?

When you are ready, begin jotting down what you recall. Just words and phrases are good, no need for complete sentences or correct grammar. Try to focus on describing in as much detail as possible the events that unfold, from your physical sensations and emotions to words that are said to you or in your hearing, words or sounds that you utter, movements you make, the temperature and lighting of the room. From the comforting to the fearful to the euphoric to the traumatic.

After you've written as much as you want, pause and just breathe quietly. Then imagine yourself taking a step forward, closer to the scene you envisioned. Now what do you observe? Write down any additional details that surface.

Before going on to the next activity, you may wish to take a little break to walk or move as suggested in the Entering Sacred Space section.

Playing with the Story

Play fills the mind and soul with meanings.

--- Linda C. Mayes

Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity.

--- Kay Redfield Jamison

What does it mean to play with a story? At first I started to call this section "Integrating the Story" or "Synthesizing" it, but those words felt too weighty. What's needed is to let the story loose, to let it move within us and to experience that freely, gently, openly – *playfully!* Without

judging or blaming yourself for anything. I might have named this section “Dancing with the Story” to suggest that same lightness and movement.

You will want to have your drawing and writing materials handy for this time. Read over your jottings, letting your eyes move softly over them. Notice if any words or phrases stand out to you and perhaps circle or underline them. Consider choosing one or more of the following to approach your story another way, to play with it. Notice also whether some other expression occurs to you and follow that lead if you wish.

- Draw your birth as a landscape – What was the climate? What does it look like? A forest? Desert? Is it hot or cold? Windy or still? Combination of many?
- Create a map to depict the birth journey – Is it a well-paved route with landmarks and crossroads? A trail through the woods or winding up a mountain? A voyage on unknown seas? Or is your map organized around people or emotions or phrases or sounds?
- Distill down to the essence – Write your birth story in six words.
- Dive in further -- Choose one word or phrase that you circled or underlined and draw an image in response to it. Or start a paragraph with these words and keep writing for ten minutes. Repeat this process with more phrases as you wish.
- Embody the story – Set aside all materials and let your body be the medium. Begin by standing or sitting in stillness and allow ideas to come intuitively. Listen to your body. What series of poses, movements or gestures tell your birth story?

Honoring the Story

“I now see how owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.”

— Brené Brown

Having explored your birth story in depth and then responded through creative expression, now is the moment to exhale, to embrace the story and yourself fully. Honoring your story can take many forms. Here are some suggestions to do on your own.

- Write a letter to yourself – You are a more experienced and knowledgeable person than before you gave birth. From this place of wisdom, write an affirming letter to your birthing self. Congratulate her on the strength and fortitude she displayed and assure her of your enduring love and acceptance.

- Make a card for yourself –From your wise woman position after having given birth, create a congratulatory card for yourself as a new mother. Make it colorful with crayons or paints to convey your love and acceptance.
- Create a personal altar – On a shelf or chest of drawers or other furniture, set up a space to display your drawings and/or writings from today’s retreat. Lay a special cloth on the surface and include your birth symbol and any other items you wish to add, like flowers, candle, found objects from nature, statues, etc.

A group of friends might want to gather and share stories together using this simple format.

- Sitting in a circle, open with a song or poem or the sound of a chime.
- Take turns sharing what you’ve composed as your story. Give each person the gift of simply witnessing and hearing – refrain from comments on anyone’s expression.
- Allow a brief silence after each person’s sharing.
- Conclude with hugs and refreshments!

Closing

I hope this retreat has been an enjoyable and rewarding experience. If you found it difficult or distressing in any way, a few resources are listed here. Grief and trauma can be part of birth for a wide variety of reasons, and I hope you will find the support you need.

Postpartum Progress – a peer to peer organization raising awareness and providing support for mothers experiencing depression, anxiety and other mental health issues
(postpartumprogress.org)

Solace for Mothers – providing and creating support for women who have experienced childbirth as traumatic (solaceformothers.org)

Improving Birth – advocating for evidence-based care and support mothers who have experienced traumatic births. They offer an extensive list of resources for follow up support. (improvingbirth.org; see the Trauma Toolkit tab)

The Compassionate Friends – support for families after the loss of a child at any age. (compassionatefriends.org)



About Peg Conway

Peg is a writer specializing in the spirituality of childbirth and the holiness of everyday life. She is the author of *Embodying the Sacred: A Spiritual Preparation for Birth* and offers birth retreats for women of all ages and stages. She also blogs at pegconway.com and serves as an elected official in her village.

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