

The Importance of Birth Stories
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As a publisher of fertility literature, I have been reading essays about birth for the past six years. As a birth stories “junkie,” however, I’ve been collecting these kinds of stories for even longer. Though there are plenty of people who aren’t particularly interested in discussing pregnancy or parenting, birth is a human ritual that *everybody* participates in. Just like everybody dies, everybody is born. And regardless of our individual choices relating to parenthood, or our struggles with infertility, we are all part of families and communities where birth occurs. Thus, over the years, I’ve discovered that just about everybody has a birth story they can share—if not their parents’ story or their own story, then a friend’s or relative’s story. There is a profound mystery at the heart of giving birth: the affirmation of life, the continuing generations, the triumph of one individual working with their body and battling the odds against potential problems to bring a child safely into the world.

In my session on the importance of birth stories, we discussed the following questions:

- *What stories did you hear about birth when you were growing up?*
- *What stories about your own birth did you hear?*
- *Who shared their knowledge/experience of birth/motherhood with you?*
- *What stories did you hear about other people’s births or birth experiences, such as your mother’s or your grandmother’s experiences?*
- *What were your expectations of the pregnancy/birth process? What was the reality vs. the expectations?*

The discussion surrounding our knowledge of birth and birth practices was intended to challenge us to consider this question: Why are birth stories important?

- *Why are birth stories important personally?*
- *Socially?*
- *Psychologically?*

- *Educationally?*
- *Politically?*

Each participant had wildly different experiences in regards to their personal knowledge of birth handed down from family members. Some had heard stories from their mothers and had determined they didn't want to repeat those experiences. For these women, the knowledge about their grandmothers' and mothers' experiences giving birth empowered them to make decisions about their own pregnancies and births. It gave them a reason to be active participants in birth, rather than passive recipients of a medical professional's expertise. Through the social act of telling birth stories, these women were prepared psychologically for birth in a way that wouldn't have been possible if they'd never heard these stories.

Some participants had heard nothing about birth from their female relatives and were determined that their kids would know more about their own births. At least three of the participants said that they repeat their child's birth story every year on his or her birthday, despite the fact that their kids groan and roll their eyes when they bring the story up. For these women, passing on the knowledge about birth is critical—they want their children to know the particulars so that they can make informed decisions about birth when they reach that stage in their lives. But even more important, they tell their children's birth stories because they want to give their child a sense of their own belonging, a belonging that is wrapped up in their birth story. By letting their child know the details of their birth, these parents are saying, "You're a part of me. You belong to me and nobody else." They are giving their child a foundation and an identity with which to face the world.

All the women agreed that, no matter how much they knew before giving birth, the experience was different than what they expected. Though the information imparted from experienced mothers was helpful in alleviating fears, preparing for the experience, and learning to trust your own body, in the end result, nothing could completely prepare you for something that is both so physical and also so spiritual. One participant said that, based on her mother's experience, she thought she'd be pampered and have a few days of rest in the hospital. She sure was surprised when she experienced nothing of the sort in her all-too-brief hospital stay.

We ran out of time and were unable to discuss the importance of birth stories on a political level, but I'd like to say here that earlier that day, I ran into a birth activist who lobbies for women's rights to have midwife-assisted and home births. She told me that her most effective political maneuver is to march individual women into the offices of members of congress and ask them to relate their own birth experiences. She claimed that individual birth stories are more effective in eliciting a response from members of congress than data and statistics.

In conclusion, we discussed our own experiences with hearing or telling birth stories, and what birth stories are able to achieve. They are far more than entertaining; they have a deep personal, social, psychological, educational, and political purpose. On a personal and social level, they provide a sense of belonging and security, assert a particular identity as somebody's child or somebody's parent, or connect two humans together through the sharing of stories. On a psychological or educational level, they can empower men and women to make informed choices about birth, as well as prepare them for what to expect when they give birth or assist a partner in giving birth. On a political level, personal birth stories can influence politicians and buoy policy changes. My obsession with birth stories, it turns out, is shared by many.