

Birth and men

interview by
Jenny Chapman

photo
Brooke Patel

Jenny Chapman lives in Eltham with her son Crusoe, cat George, and chicken Jayne. She constantly endeavours to live simply amidst her chaos, to parent confidently (not perfectly), and to laugh. (Out loud. A lot. Mostly at herself.)

Rhea Dempsey website and contact:
Birthing Wisdom
www.birthingwisdom.com.au

The birth of a baby is one of the biggest events in a couple's life together, and on an individual level. Birth as a rite-of-passage, for both the mother and father in the making and indeed for their relationship, requires an emotional and psychological shake-up. As in any rite-of-passage, the roles we take on before, during and after, and the expectations we have of each other, can affect us in our ongoing relationship. Rhea Dempsey has been a childbirth educator, counsellor, activist and birthing attendant for over thirty years. In a recent interview with Barefoot, she introduces a thoughtful viewpoint on the male role in the rite-of-passage of childbirth. In particular Rhea has in mind how the emergence of a (psychologically) masculine model of support during birth may free couples from unrealistic expectations of each other.

RD: In the deep psyche, the role model for being at birth, is a female-centred model; mothers, sisters, blood sisters, tribal women, wise women... In our present culture I know we've got male doctors in there, but at the deepest archetypal level, in terms of a rite-of-passage it's a women-centred thing.

Now we're bringing the fathers in.

I reckon what happens in the main is that birthing women are projecting onto their partners, an expectation that they (the men) will know how to support them in labour like women do. Whereas—they're men! There ought to be a different role for the father. At the moment they're...trying to either follow how women attendants are at birth—intuitive, or how doctors are—controlling.

I don't think we've yet seen, or only in small instances, what a father's role at a birth could really look like.

We're getting a glimpse of a new role, which is as Lover...facilitating the mother's hormones, through their sensuous loving connection. With the father being at the birth, the strength of the couple's physical, sexual and hormonal connection is able to facilitate the birthing physiology and therefore the mother's birthing instincts—this is a new possibility.

There's also the role of father as Witness. Now this asks a lot of a man at birth. Unlike women who attend birthing mothers, he is not supported by archetypal motifs laid down in his deep psyche. He doesn't have the template for bearing witness to the primal women's work of birthing. This role of Witness requires a capacity to remain trusting, solid and focused in the face of what women's strength* looks like in birthing—and it can look pretty scary!

Often for fathers this role shape-shifts into the role of Protector. Now if the role of Protector is activated in service of the mother's capacity, by protecting her from distraction and interruption—boundary-riding to protect the space—then that would definitely be useful. But so often the essence of the Protector role is influenced by the father's distress at the intensity of the mother's work, so he wants to save her from the pain and effort; to protect her from facing her own rite-of-passage. When this happens the Protector morphs into a Saviour with major consequences to the mother's birthing potential.

So men who accept this journey, consciously, have to find their way.

They can take some guidance from a woman's way of being at birth, but they sort of have to stake their own claim on it. This might be part of what a true 'masculine' role at birth might look like; as Lover, as Witness, and then of course, as Father. 'Calling the baby in', being present, attuned and bonding with the baby. These are all aspects that will form the core of what that rite-of-passage is for the father, which at its core is to come into an emotionally responsive, nurturing place.

Of course, neither father nor mother come through a birth unmarked. But how they process birth—before, during, after—and their individual roles when in that space, will dictate what sort of a mark is made, and how that mark affects their future lives in relationship with one another.

*To understand better how Rhea uses the term 'strength', in labour, and how the wrong kinds of support can be so detrimental, please read her article The Wounded Mother www.wonderfulbirth.com/Services/ViewServices.asp?Ref=2316 

