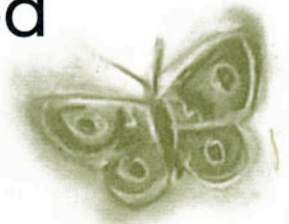


The journey to motherhood

The soul work of pregnancy and birthing



words

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artwork

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A woman's journey through pregnancy, birth and on into mothering, is rich in threads and colours woven from the tapestry of her life lived till this point and her dreams and expectations on into the future. It is also suffused with her authentic self, her essence of being; her soul energy. Pregnancy, birth and mothering offer women unique possibilities for experiencing and developing their authentic selves—an opportunity for soul growth. It is fundamentally 'soul work'. This notion of soul work is informed by perspectives, ranging from eastern and western religious and spiritual philosophies, through to existential and Jungian psychology. Soul work is the conscious effort we make in life to be authentically and mindfully present to ourselves and others, in ways which offer growth, depth, value and true human relatedness. Potent opportunities for soul work are often found when we are confronted by painful life processes and times of personal change. The journey to motherhood is full of such wonderful opportunities.

For each woman the issues and challenges to be embraced and worked through on this journey, will be at once personally unique and yet also archetypal. They come out of social and cultural expectations and conditioning, out of her present situation, out of her past and also out of the deep places within her feminine psyche activated when she faces the universal drama of birth and transformation.

These challenges become opportunities for soul work.

The process of birthing is the physical enactment of transforming the mother from mothering and nurturing on an unconscious, biological 'womb' level to mothering through choice and will; thus she is consciously taking on the responsibility for her child. A woman births herself as a mother as she births her baby. The qualities and intentions she brings to her birth create foundations for her on-going mothering.

Feminine principle


The flow of hormones which orchestrate conception, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding also, of course, amplify behaviours and feeling states arising from evolutionary design. The bonding 'tend and befriend'

behaviours, the drifting altered consciousness, the shifts in body clock rhythms, the intense protective surges, are all designed to ensure a thriving offspring. These instinctive behaviours and energies relate to the feminine principle and are intensified during pregnancy, birth and mothering. And yet it is the qualities from the masculine principle which hold sway in so many domains of our present culture. For contemporary women seeking to find power and place in the world outside the home, the manifesting of feminine energies during pregnancy, birth and mothering, rather than being enjoyed and embraced, can instead present a deep internal conflict, leading many women to actively resist and control their expression. This resistance to the expression of instinctive, feminine energies is leading to choices which separate women from an intimate engagement with these mysterious sensuous experiences of female embodiment. This internal conflict when played out at a cultural level is adding to the growing acceptance of high intervention rates in birthing, resulting in what I call the 'labour by-pass era'. This in turn is impacting negatively on breastfeeding rates as well as influencing early baby care regimes which increasingly encourage 'control over' rather than 'attunement to' our dependent babies. There is a need for women to become strong in their instinctive feminine natures in order to claim power in birth and mothering. This need calls forth opportunities for soul work both for the individual woman and also within our collective consciousness.

Sexuality

The passionate, uninhibited, sexy, free spirit so encouraged (demanded) as a present day aspiration for women can be placed under great strain during pregnancy, birth and early mothering. Culturally we are seeing the emergence of the sexualised 'yummy mummy'; fulfilling this role though, is often at the expense of fully expressing our instinctive feminine energies. Personally and culturally, the attitudinal and psychic work—the soul work—of integrating our sexual self with a nurturing mother-self seems yet to be accomplished. With this dualism firmly in place, the conflict in women between these aspects of them-





selves—the culturally encouraged ‘sexual vamp’ and the reproductive nurturer causes a debilitating conflict in a woman’s psyche, sometimes an unbridgeable divide, which impacts on birth and breastfeeding.

However there is a wonderfully potent opportunity for harmonising these aspects in our feminine psyche. When women embrace the intensity of birth and surrender to the hormonally orchestrated passions of ecstatic birthing energy; when they give themselves, uninhibitedly, to the demands of labour; find their ‘birth song’ and ‘birth dance’; find their primal orgasmic rhythm with its building intensity, peaking and releasing, contraction after contraction until triumphantly releasing their babies; then they may have a new experience of their authentic sexuality. This would be soul work indeed.

Girl – maiden – woman – mother

This is the central developmental pathway of life, for the majority of women. It is a journey made within all aspects of a woman’s being, punctuated by physical happenings in her body. To birth her conscious mother-self, a woman will call upon lived experiences of herself as: baby, dependent daughter, maiden, independent woman, woman in relationship. Her pregnancy will take her, either consciously or unconsciously, through a process of revisiting these aspects of herself. Hopefully in this revisiting she finds much to encourage a belief in her capabilities and trust in her ability to open to the unknown adventure of birth and mothering. Ideally a pregnant woman’s life experiences have already enabled her to grow psychologically through daughter/maiden/woman so she is confidently standing on the threshold of emerging mother, strong and secure in her own abilities to nurture and take responsibility for her baby. However for some women this process of revisiting may instead bring forth ‘ghosts’ that haunt the pregnancy, assail the labour and visit the nursery. For these women intentional soul work can offer an inner strengthening and the gift of generational healing.

Ambivalence

For women on their journey to motherhood, any troubling themes which create debilitating internal conflicts will manifest in strong feelings of ambivalence. Ambivalence is natural in change processes. We often want and yet fear and resist the change at the same time. Ambivalence creates a state of

upheaval, with emotions swinging between opposites and extremes. Ambivalent feelings, about such a major transformational event as bringing a baby into our lives, are normal and to be expected. However given the psychologically demanding issues already mentioned, for some women, this normal ambivalence can become prolonged and intensified. Unresolved ambivalent impasses can manifest as resistance and blocked energy in our body systems. This emotional and physical interplay is most likely to manifest at points which require increased active engagement by the woman with the elemental force of creative energy surging through her. If there is unresolved ambivalence then the occasions in birth and breastfeeding, which require a more active surrender to intense or painful body process, may become stalled to such an extent that, without support to work with the underlying issues, intervention becomes necessary.

All ambivalent feelings need processing; they need time to be resolved. They are difficult, uncomfortable feelings to sit with, especially if women become self-critical and feel guilty about them. Accepting ambivalent feelings and finding a way to tolerate them as they are worked through, offers another opportunity for soul work thus awakening in women much needed resources for birth and mothering.

Reflecting on these conflictual themes, you might wonder that it is possible for any baby to be born; for any breastfeeding relationship to be successful. In many cases the wisdom of the body takes over and women surrender to the process enabling them to find their own creative pathway. However many labours do stall and breastfeeding rates are precarious. Perhaps an awareness of and conscious attention to these conflictual threads may facilitate a way through the birth and to successful breastfeeding, as well as a resolution of issues which will ultimately support the emerging mother.

The journey to motherhood in its complexity can overwhelm and afflict us. Equally though these challenges and demands may, with support and intentionality, be claimed as courageous processes which develop our soul capacity. Hopefully honouring the journey to motherhood as soul work will support a renewed sense of the potential and importance of conscious birthing and conscious mothering.