

## Mothers' rite to the Goddess

By Ruth Ostrow

DUSK is falling. A group of women is sitting in a circle, around an altar, singing an ancient mantra: "I am the Goddess, I am the Mother, I am the Goddess, I am the Mother ..." over and over, holding hands, rocking. This is true secret women's business. The preparing of a sister for childbirth.

It's a ceremony called a "blessing way" or "birthing way" where women gather around the expectant mother and offer her our wisdoms as old crones, wise witches, mothers, soul sisters or mentors. It's based on shamanic or pagan ritual and has a wonderful Celtic flavour to it -- of something mysterious and profound.

Candles and incense burn next to tokens or sacred objects we've brought to represent our womanhood. Some women have brought photos of their own children, one woman has brought a symbol of her little girl who died at birth, there are sad things, happy things, leaves, crystals, words written for the coming child. A friend weaves gardenias into a lei to put around our sister's neck.

We sing to her, we stroke her belly, we rock her in our arms, and then the sharing begins. Each woman in the circle shares her experience -- of childbirth, of being a mother, or just of being a woman. Any truth she wishes.

Earthy advice abounds, what to massage, where, before and after labour, and with what oils and potions, feminine wisdom of the ages. I find myself becoming more and more agitated. And I realise I'm having "blessing-way" envy. Where was my birthing way before I went into labour?

My experience was 360 degrees opposite to this. No "I am the Goddess" -- no stroking by gentle hands in the period leading up to my daughter's birth. I was pinched instead. Pinched until my skin was red raw.

Quite literally. The only gathering of women I was part of was a very un-sacred weekly ceremony called birthing classes. Women, like humungous whales, and their partners, would lie on the floor, being taught things we'd never remember in the panic of childbirth.

But one thing that I'll never forget was that the teacher wanted to prepare us for the experience of contractions so we wouldn't be shocked by their severity. She informed the men in the group to pinch us hard, and as regularly as possible, to prepare the body for pain. Thereafter, like something out of the Pink Panther films, my husband would sneak up on me and pinch the softest parts of my body, or torture me with those childhood horrors called Chinese burns.

Of course when my first contraction hit, all this was laughable. Standing in a phone booth because my phone was out of order, my husband watched in horror as I suddenly disappeared like Maxwell Smart going down into the bowels of the earth. Except I was lying on the ground rolling in agony. The pinch was more like being in the pincers of a giant lobster who was crushing my bones, or having a shark tear out my organs.

"I found childbirth to be orgasmic," says one Earth Mother in the circle. "My contractions were more like expansions, each expansion opening me to Source."

Another brutal flashback: the sterile hospital, being rushed in, the contractions so severe as to make me vomit with each.

"Unripe! Like a green banana," the bossy nurse said to me, her fingers poking up inside. "That's why the contractions are this severe," she said, as I seemed to be losing consciousness. I could see my husband's pincers coming towards me, or was I delirious?

"The baby hasn't engaged yet, you're not dilating and yet you seem to be in labour," the nurse was saying as I thrashed about, screaming to the uncaring heavens. "These strong contractions are ripening you very quickly." Not quickly enough. The agony went on for two days.

Sacred, sacred, and then it's my turn -- the green banana. I decide to speak my truth. I'm feeling a bit awkward. My experiences were so different to this. So isolating, so frightening. There was no sisterhood to prepare me and offer wisdoms. I was away from my family at the time. I felt very out of control, and apart from my husband and a darling sister who did their best, I felt very alone.

And to my surprise, women around the circle begin nodding. "Yes, yes! Exactly!" Most of them -- exports from various cities around the world -- had children in the same chaotic way as I had, removed from nature, the grand Feminine, and each other. Only a couple had been blessed.

"Let's have a retrospective blessing way," suggests one woman. We can sit in a circle pampering and preparing each other. We all start laughing. Hard and deep as wild crones do, vowing we'll meet in the coming weeks for our rite.

It's not too late to capture it -- the sacred in the mundane. No more contractions around our memories, just a blissful expansion, expanding out to Mother Nature, as we ask her to heal our wounded wombs.

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