

# **A Day You'll Never Forget— The Day You Give Birth to Your First Child**

***By Penny Simkin, PT***

It happens to every pregnant woman. Other women, even strangers, old and young, approach her in the grocery store, elevator, at the bus stop, almost anywhere, and embark on the "When I was pregnant..." story, or "Let me tell you about *my* labor!" A swelling belly seems to be an invitation for this kind of well-meaning, sometimes helpful, but sometimes inconsiderate sharing of "wisdom."

Why do women want to talk about their birth experiences, even years later? It is pretty clear that this day in a woman's life is not just like any other day. It is the day she became a mother, her partner became a father, and her parents became grandparents. But it is much more even than that. It is a landmark in her personal development.

Let us think about the nature of labor and birth. No other event encompasses all these for a woman: pain, emotional stress, unpredictability, exposure, vulnerability, and possible physical injury or major surgery. Once completed, she has also undergone a permanent role change that includes responsibility for a dependent, helpless human being. Moreover, all this usually takes place in a single day or less. It is no wonder that women tend to remember birth vividly and with deep emotion! And it is most gratifying when women remember with joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment.

This article describes a research project that investigated the long-term memories of women who took childbirth education classes and gave birth between 1968 and 1974<sup>1,2</sup>. These special women agreed to explore how well they remember their birth experiences years later, and what impact the births had on them as individuals. As was the custom in their birth classes, they wrote and submitted their birth stories to their teacher soon after their first babies were born. Then, between fifteen and 20 years later, they were asked to write the story again, so that the original and later versions could be compared to see how accurate their memories were after all those years. The women also took part in a lengthy interview to discuss the long-term impact of their childbirths on them and their families.

The women remembered very well what had happened and how they felt. The two birth stories were remarkably alike despite the many years between the two. Although details such as which breathing patterns they used, and the names of their nurses tended to be forgotten, they remembered other personal "little things" very clearly and described them similarly in the two stories.

For example, one woman remembered her bag of waters breaking in the living room, and her husband scolding the dog, thinking the dog had wet the rug! Another woman remembered being "mesmerized" by a paper bag taped to her night stand—she even described the blue flowers on the bag! She stared at that bag for every contraction and will never forget it. Another remembered the excited ride to the hospital, when she and her husband were singing,

"We're off to see the baby, the wonderful baby of ours," to the tune of "We're Off to See the Wizard!" All the women remembered details about going into labor, arriving at the hospital, what their partners did (or did not do), and some of the thoughts they had while in labor.

They also remembered both positive and negative things that were done to them by their doctors and nurses. Some remembered soothing back rubs, praise, kind encouraging words, but others (the minority, thankfully) remembered being told to "Stop doing that breathing right now," being threatened with, "If you think this is bad, just wait..." or their husbands being told to leave. Most remembered the actual delivery and their feelings when they saw and held their babies for the first time. Some remembered large painful episiotomies that took weeks or months to heal.

Most of the women reported a great sense of satisfaction when they recalled their first birth experiences. Their satisfaction was based on feelings of accomplishment, of being in control (of both their responses to contractions and of what was done to them), and a feeling that their birth experience enhanced their self-esteem. But more than a third felt quite dissatisfied -- that they were not in control, they did not accomplish anything important, and the birth lowered their self-esteem or made them angry.

The most important finding of the study was that the women's satisfaction was *not* associated with the length or difficulty of their labors, or the need for interventions or pain medications. Their satisfaction was associated more with how they were treated by their doctors and nurses, which seemed to have a great impact on their sense of accomplishment and control, and their self-esteem.

Nine of the women wept during the interview as they recalled events that took place 15 to 20 years before! Some wept from joy: "It was the best day of my life," "...my Mount Everest!" "I *know* I accomplished something." Others wept from remorse: "Because of what I experienced in the delivery room, I felt powerless." "I was too embarrassed to make a big fuss...I didn't want to be a nuisance to the nurses." "I kind of blamed myself at one point that I had had a cesarean....When I was feeling bad about myself and thinking of all the things I couldn't do, that was one of them. I couldn't even have that baby naturally. No one ever told me I was doing a good job."

It is clear that women do not forget their birth experiences, even years later, and their memories are vivid and accurate (though hazy about what happened when narcotics were in effect). They remember not only facts and events, but also feelings. If they were well treated and given an opportunity to participate, they are likely to remember the experience with joy and satisfaction.

Why don't you research this yourself? Ask your mother, grandmother, or other women about their birth experiences. Although their initial response may be, "Oh, that was so long ago..." do not give up. Ask specific questions, such as, "How did your labor begin?" "Do you remember anything about your nurse, doctor, or midwife?" "Tell me about the birth." "What was Dad (or the baby's father) doing?" "What was it like when you first saw me (or your baby)?" Unless they had drugs that clouded their memories, they will be able to tell you a great deal about what happened and how they felt.

As pregnant women, you can learn some very important lessons from your own research and from this study. Most important is that you also will always remember your experience in giving birth. The memory will be vivid and deeply felt, and may influence how you think about yourself and about birth generally. Feeling in control (not necessarily of the labor, but of your response to it and of the decisions being made) and feeling well-cared for are more important to your long-term satisfaction than whether your labor is easy or difficult, normal or complicated, long or short, painful or pain-free.

Because it will not be "just another day" for you when your child is born, do what you can to make your child's birth a good memory. Choose your doctor or midwife and your place for birth carefully. Those choices will determine to a great extent how you will be treated and how you will remember the birth, and also, possibly, how you will feel about yourself. Prepare yourself by learning what to expect and what to do so that you will remain an active participant in this most meaningful experience. And surround yourself with supportive people who will treat you kindly, respectfully, and with dignity.

Twenty years from now, as you tell a pregnant woman about your birth experience, let us hope it brings tears of joy to your eyes (and hers) and a renewed sense of wonder and awe at your accomplishment.

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1, Simkin P. Just another day in a woman's life? Women's long-term perceptions of their first birth experience. Part I. *Birth* 18(4): 203-210, 1991.

2 Simkin P. Just another day in a woman's life? Part II: Nature and consistency of women's long-term memories of their first birth experiences. *Birth* 19(2): 64-81, 1992.