

THE OTHER SIDE

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The Cost of Life

A MOTHER EXPERIENCES INCARNATION

The baby was a week overdue. As I packed and repacked my small bag of things to take to the hospital when labor began, I cradled the three-inch Celtic cross in my hand. A replica of an ancient cross on the Scottish island of Iona, it had a cool, smooth base made of stone from the island. It brought together several strands of my life: my faith, my interest in medieval things, and my love of the outdoors. I also packed a crucifix from Mexico—a bright yellow straw form of Jesus on a wooden cross. I was hoping that my husband would be able to hang it on the wall of my labor room.

My plan was to use either the cross or the crucifix as an object on which to focus during labor. The Lamaze classes I had attended recommended having a focal point to draw one's attention away from the pain and onto some external object. They suggested a picture of a baby, a teddy bear, or a photograph of beauty in nature. Even a crack in the wall would do, they said, to focus your eyes and fix your thoughts. Though I appreciated the Lamaze training, I expected labor and birth to be a terrible ordeal, and I knew only strength from God would get me through it. Thus a sign of God's presence, and particularly of Jesus sharing in our earthly pain, seemed an obvious choice for a focal point.

My labor began a few days later

with a sharp contraction about midnight. "Oh no!" I thought, "If the contractions are this bad, how will I ever endure it?" When another one came several minutes later, I told my husband.

"Do your breathing," John said.

"I don't know how," I replied.

"You don't know how to breathe?" he asked incredulously.

"I forgot." All the Lamaze techniques had flown from my head in the urgency of the pain even though we had practiced them that day and every day for the previous two weeks.

"Breathe in with your nose, out with your mouth," he said, demonstrating with his breath to get me going. I was so grateful. I began doing the proper breathing, roughly. But at the height of the contraction, the amniotic sac broke, and the fluid gushed out as I ran for the bathroom.

Things went downhill from there. During the next seventeen hours, the pain climbed from one threshold to another. I would consider one threshold unbearable but learn to endure it. Then I would experience a more severe level of pain.

We got to the hospital at 1:30 A.M. By 8:20 A.M., my cervix was only four centimeters dilated; the nurse said, "Your labor pains aren't strong enough. The doctor may have to induce stronger labor with Pitocin."

I shuddered. "I think they're strong enough. I don't see how they could be any stronger."

I was glad to advance to the "hee-hee-hee-ho" breathing pattern that Lamaze suggests for the four-to-eight-centimeter phase of labor. But rather than those syllables alone, I converted them to a prayer: "Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Lord." It was a simplified version of "the Jesus prayer," a prayer discovered by an itinerant Russian mystic. His spiritual teacher taught him how to "pray constantly" (as in 1 Thessalonians 5:17) by reciting a simple prayer while breathing in and out. While drawing in breath, one prays, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God." Then while exhaling, "have mercy on me, a sinner." After repeating it many times, the prayer becomes "Jesus . . . mercy." But the phrase that flowed off my tongue as my eyes moved toward the straw crucifix at the beginning of each contraction was, "Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Lord," with the last word as a plea. Later the last word became "Help."

Doctor Lovera Miller appeared for the first time at 10 A.M. I begged for a painkiller. She reluctantly said I could have Demerol if I insisted, but it would slow down my labor, make me more nauseated, and possibly make me lose control. I had already vomited, and I sure didn't want to slow things down; so I grudgingly agreed to continue with-

out it.

I looked at the crucifix high on the wall. (The Celtic cross was usually blocked from my sight by my IV equipment or by John.) "You suffered to bring us to eternal life," I thought. "You birthed us spiritually, and now I understand some of the price you paid on the cross. Help me to birth this one child physically." Deeply conscious of Jesus' pain on the cross, I felt Jesus caring about my pain in childbirth.

Learning the incredible value of human life, I thought of all the people in the world and all the people I had ever met. Each had been brought into the world by the incredible suffering of a woman. Amazing. Each human life costs this much suffering. Women learn the value of human life in childbirth. Many men never learn it. All the male-female psychological differences suddenly became clear to me. Someone went through this for me, I thought. How valuable each of us is.

I changed labor positions, and for a while I was able to look out the window during some contractions. After five days of continuous rain, the last two had been radiantly sunny, and I looked out at the snow-covered San Bernardino Mountains under a hard blue sky. It was March 20, the spring equinox. I imagined myself no longer heavily pregnant, no longer in pain, tramping across the snow-covered slopes alone, striding freely and joyfully. "This gift my mother gave me," I thought, "a body that can stride across snowy hills. This gift I give. I suffer now so that later someone will walk joyfully across snow-covered mountains." Bright snow and free movement—my images of the joy of earthly life—resemble medieval descriptions of heaven: the brightness of God's presence and lightness of the soul as it moves about like a beam of light. Months earlier I had pondered bringing another human being into this sad and fallen world, but on this day I identified with Jesus in giving the very best thing—the joy of earthly life, as Jesus gave the joy of heavenly life.

By 1:06 P.M., I had finally dilated to eight centimeters. The final phase of labor, called "transition" to birth, was beginning. It was supposed to be the most painful phase but usually lasted only twenty to sixty minutes. Mine lasted four hours. I was now doing the quickest, shallowest breathing. "Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Lord": six shallow breaths followed by a larger exhale with several of the whole se-

quence for each contraction.

By 3:20 P.M., the dilation had made virtually no progress. The doctor gave me a choice of a Caesarean, the medication called Pitocin to increase the contractions, or a forceps delivery. But she had to do another Caesarean before me; she urged the Pitocin while I waited. I agreed weakly. The day before I had considered a Caesarean the worst of all possible options, but a few hours of labor had convinced me that it was by far the most desirable of my options.

My relationship with Jesus on the cross changed dramatically during the last few hours of labor. I couldn't think complex thoughts about suffering to bring about physical or spiritual birth. I just fixed my gaze on the straw crucifix and wondered numbly, "Why does it have to be so painful? Why did you plan it this way, God? Wasn't there any other way to reproduce human life? Why the pain? Why, God?" I wondered if Jesus had complained as I was complaining, and I remembered that Jesus too had asked, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Of course. Jesus too felt abandoned in pain and suffering as I did. "Nevertheless not my will but thine be done."

When the Pitocin finally took effect just before 4 P.M., all meditations ceased. I was wild with the pain of the first two new and stronger contractions. The biting cramp in my lower abdomen was sudden and unbearable. I grabbed for the mattress, John's hand, anything to grip. Unfortunately, I grabbed his left hand with his wedding ring. He yelped with pain and removed the ring to give me his hand again.

Then suddenly as I was clenching his hand, my whole abdomen flashed rigid. My body was trying to push the baby out while the cervix still wasn't dilated enough. I knew the only solution was to relax my muscles again both to ease the pain and to permit the cervix to open the last two centimeters. By the third or fourth of the new contractions, I managed to keep my abdomen relaxed as the Lamaze class had taught. I begged for the Demerol; whatever it did couldn't be worse than this.

Somehow my eyes still moved to the straw crucifix the second each contraction began. After the Demerol, a synthetic narcotic which relaxes muscles and supposedly takes the edge off the pain, the cross kept splitting into two crosses about a foot apart. With a strong effort I could force them together into one crucifix. I still did the shallow

breaths: "Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-Jesus-help."

But soon I just melted back into the arms of God. Breathing with exquisite care and using only the top inch or two of my lungs so as not to add to the pain below, I gazed on the fuzzy crucifix and nestled in the comforting arms of God. I was cradled on the Mother's bosom: "Like a child upon its mother's breast, my soul is quieted within me" (Psalm 131:2). I experienced God as female. I was crying out to her, and she was comforting me deeply. I dimly realized that I had been praying to God as male all day—perceiving Jesus on the cross as very male, in keeping with the usual earth-bound outlook—and that male God was distant from me. He could not comfort me in this extremity, not the way this close-by, embracing Mother God was doing. (Later I would connect this experience to the medieval tradition of Jesus as Mother, birthing us on the cross.)

As I rested in God in my pain, the Pitocin and the Demerol combined to open the cervix to the full ten centimeters. At 5:10 P.M., a nurse phoned the doctor, still finishing the Caesarean, to hurry over. I was given permission to push, but I wanted to say, "No, I won't!" Pushing stretched my skin and muscles and bones to their limit as I advanced to a new and final threshold of pain. The doctor ran into the delivery room where I had been wheeled and asked if I had any objections to an episiotomy. "I want it! I want it!" my mind screamed, but simply mumbling that response was a great effort. (In the weeks before, I had discussed avoiding the episiotomy if possible.)

Soon with searing, ripping pain the baby's head was out. On the next contraction, I felt the rest of the body slither out. The terrible crescendo of pain had reached its peak and was now gradually easing. Each moment there was less pain; small pleasures returned.

"It's a . . . girl," the nurse informed me. The day before, I had considered the sex of the baby of foremost importance, but now it registered as a footnote to the end of pain.

Pain is over.

And you got the girl you wanted. Rosamond Arthur Eggebroten. Nine pounds, fifteen ounces, twenty-two inches. Twenty-four minutes past five o'clock. No episiotomy. My age: thirty-three years—the same age as Christ on the cross.

In the weeks that followed, I looked

at the people who passed me on the street. "You are so valuable," I thought. "Someone suffered to bring you into this world, and Jesus suffered to bring you to heaven." I looked at each of my students when I went back to teaching. Even the least likable had a tangible aura of value.

Since then that consciousness of the incredible value of life has faded, but occasionally an experience triggers it again. I have two more daughters now, and their births (after relatively brief labor) renewed that consciousness.

Today my daughters and I went to see the new baby of a friend who for many years had fought infertility. Now at age thirty-nine, Britt has a beautiful

daughter through a Caesarean delivery. She reported how valuable it was to her to approach the surgery with the mindset of Christ approaching the cross, choosing suffering to bring new life. Women have done this through the ages, and their spiritual lives have been richer for the choice.

Mary, mother of Jesus, uniquely undertook both kinds of suffering: that of pregnancy and childbirth (women's age-old suffering to bring new life) and that of the crucifixion (seeing the precious life she had borne crucified to bring eternal life).

In a world of hunger, torture, disease, and war, we need to remember the immense cost of incarnation—of acquir-

ing bodies. Each mother pays this cost for her child. Mary paid it for Jesus. And Jesus paid it for us all.

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