

Birthing with sisters

“When someone else speaks of a similar experience, it can evoke the memory and bring back the feelings, which restores the experience. Only if we speak from personal experience does this happen. This is why we need words for women’s mysteries, which, like everything else that is of women, seems to require that one woman at a time birth what she knows. We serve as midwives to each other’s consciousness“.

Jean Shinoda Bolen

“Crossing to Avalon”

On a quite afternoon, as Scotland’s weather seems to show it’s magic with mist and rain. We were drinking tea in Nicola’s kitchen and talking about womanhood, sisterhood, birthing and life.

Me: Nicola, tell me, about your doula journey, how did you get to this point where you are now? How did you become a doula? I know you may have talked a hundred times about it, but maybe some new angle...

Nicola: Well It’s really good to think about it every time. I have a very fortunate set of circumstances. I came to have my children in this community where everybody seems to have babies at the same age as me. My sister was there with me and had already started her family, and my family. Nobody was really bothered, they had their babies easily. I was really fortunate, because I had never thought how frightening it could be.

Me: So you were not damaged?

Nicola: Yes, I think I wasn’t (laughing). I was protected. All the bad things that I was told, It just didn’t sink in. I don’t know why, maybe that’s the way I am. I never expect things to go wrong. I am upset with people when things go wrong, but I get more upset about the brutality of bad treatment. When the midwife comes sometimes it is just the government health program, it’s not midwifery. It becomes a tick box exercise, like OK “I had you in the hospital”, “Ok, I am filling out my notes”, “Ok, I am going”. No words like “Hurray, you have a baby, it’s great” or “how you guys doing?”, “how do you feel about it”.

Me: Working through all these years, do you think this attitude changes?

Nicola: I think they don’t have time and resources to practise true holistic midwifery. I think it is getting worse, because they are under more pressure now. When I had my first baby twenty years ago and I had named midwife, I really connected with her. I will never forget her. She caught my baby and I was told to go to the postnatal ward at 1 o’clock in the morning, and my husband is going home. I was in my early twenties. She obviously saw my face and she told me “I am going to take you there”. She took me upstairs and she sat at my bed for about 2 hours drinking tea with me. This is extraordinary in our health service. This is never happening in our local hospital today. No midwife is coming and sitting with you. It’s just not going to happen, because they are so overstretched. It would be like disappearing from their job for two hours.

Me: This is the thing, that amazes me all the time, how birth is related to initiation. This is such an intense experience and you are very vulnerable at that moment. If you get stuck in there, it can be so damaging and painful, and you will have to walk a long way to heal these wounds. It seems like a lot of women are carrying birth traumas in our time.

Nicola: It’s shedding. You have to shed. My last daughter is in puberty and she is in this hormonal “I am angry”, “I am crying”, “I don’t know what’s wrong”. I gave her a cuddle and said “we are really lucky that we have this shedding, that you can shake all the things that you have to shake off to become a woman”. We have this before every cycle. In our bodies we have to shake off, to prepare for a possible new baby. It’s happening in the menopause, in your wise age. A lot of women are really angry having premenstrual stress, or they don’t know why they are so angry when they are pregnant. Its very important to go through it, not to be medicated, to have somebody with you who knows about this. It’s sad, that most people don’t have that.

Me: I think we are coming to this question, how would you explain, what you do as a doula?

Nicola: I had to think for a long time about this. I decided, that a doula should be the ultimate faith bearer. She always believes everything will be ok – in an almost worshipping way. Even if something happens, it’s still going to be ok. You believe, that woman will walk through whatever she will have to walk through. It can be hard, but eventually it will be all right. You have to be the person with your feet on the ground. You have to give them love. You have to really give them love.

Me: It seems, that doula work is so related to the shamanistic way. You go through something, that seems like chaos. The shaman tells you, that's the principle of life, that's how it works. Suddenly everything clears out. It's like Jung would say, in every chaos, there is a cosmos.

Nicola: I think, that midwives were shamans. You still find midwives around the world creating ritual and ceremonies. I was talking to one Native American guy, who used to be in a difficult place, but now he is helping the young people when they are in the same situation as he was. He is using traditional ceremonies and rituals. When I asked him what he does for a living, his answer was: "I am healing the next seven generations and the previous seven generations". He is saying, that the good birth, and a good birthkeeper is also doing the same thing. If you have a good birth, you are healing seven generations back and seven generations in front. So the good birth keepers are shamans, and these are authentic ones.

Me: It reminds me that when I was pregnant, everybody was expecting that I will give birth the same way as my mum and grandmother did. It's such a powerful feeling, when you go the different way, when you have the opportunity to experience, to relate to these powerful events in a different way. It's something like healing in your mother line and you can pass something different to your daughter.

Nicola: Oh yes, it's such a powerful healing, that you can change that pattern, you can break it, you can almost break the spell. I had a talk with one woman. She was expecting her second baby. Her first baby was stuck in some way, when she was pushing. It was the same when her mum was giving birth, and her grandmother too. So yes, it might be something physiological, but it might also be some psychological pattern. She has to think about it and discuss it with her daughter. To work something out.

Me: Do you see any changes in relation to birth in the women that you are helping?

Nicola: No...Well it's more popular now. They are and will always be women, who are giving birth. There are more people, who realise that the national health service is broken and that there is a lot of things missing, and there is some danger in that struggling system. I had one woman, and she was so badly mismanaged, from the medical point of view, they created so much more risk for her, she may have been better birthing in her room on her own.

Sometimes I think, that you have to hit the wall, to jump back. Something like that is happening in our hospitals.

Me: In my country Lithuania, we saw, how dads came to the birthing room. Now it seems normal and is encouraged even by staff. But doulas are something new and a lot of rejection is going on. I hear a question – why do you need other person? If you have the father at the birth.

Nicola: Women were having other woman come and be around them when they had babies. When they started to go to the hospital eventually somebody said, you can't bring your mother anymore, because they are getting in the way. So it's natural for women to be with other women during birth.

I have seen much research, that showed, when a doula is present, the father is more relaxed and active during birth.

It's really important to remember the history, how fathers get into birthing room. We campaigned for men to come to the birthing room to protect their woman, because they were so violated and brutalized. Now this is the cultural interpretation, that you are there as a man, and this is bonding, watching your child being born and supporting your woman. But it's not how it started. In hospital everybody is listening all the time to see if something will go wrong – they listen to the babies heart beats, they check her blood pressure, everything around is geared for something going wrong. Usually when something goes wrong or risky, dad will listen to midwife, of course. The subtext is that you have to listen, otherwise your wife and baby will be in danger. So they always act to keep their child and mother alive and well. This is natural and very healthy. For dad to go what his wife would say and not what implied risk from health care provider would be radical.. So that's why doula should be there in the first place. She is someone different, saying like me, everything will be all right. You have choice – this is your decision.

Me: I think women bring different things to birth. It brings a lot of things in our life too. I want to ask you about sisterhood. I have this impression that more and more women are gathering, sharing their experiences, talking and appreciating their womanhood. How do you see those things?,

Nicola: Well, I think this is a natural part of society and the problem is, that we destroyed our society. We've gone from the village to the town, to the city and we lost the community. This is an unnatural way and a lot of problems come from there, like the epidemic we have of depressed women, who are basically drug addicts with prozac and the like. I saw my mum taking everything from the doctor, pharmacy and everything she could get her hands on to deal with her difficult unsupported situation.

What we do with our older ladies here? We treat them so badly and make them so lonely that we have another epidemic of mentally ill older women and then we put them in the care home. Its awful. I need these women – my children need these women – this should be the easiest and most appreciated stage of our life. The natural and healing way for women is to go together.

Me: I am reading this extraordinary book about “Dreaming sisters” by Diane Bell where she studies Aboriginal women’s lives from a woman’s perspective. A women has this big house, where old women, widows, lonely women live there. The wise women are in charge. You can go there, just to sit with other women, to spend time, to get help, support, to live there. They have their rituals, celebrations. It made me feel, that this is the way how women become strong and secure. You have all the time this sisters, where you can find help, support and peace.

Nicola: Yes, it’s so true. That’s natural human behaviour. This is Fitra, the Arabic word and it’s so true. Fitra is our inner nature or our code that we are born with. Like a baby knows where to find a breast. You feel this in your body. You respond to those kind of things, because that’s how we are supposed to live.

Me: There was a lot of devaluation in women’s relationship. It felt like it’s ok to be in the family and the relationship are important and respected there. But when women go out with their friends, society sees it like shallow time – gossiping, shopping and pink fluffy stuff.

Nicola: Yes, I think we really have to stand up for that and say “what’s wrong with women getting together?”. We have to be that person that stand’s up and says “grey hair is beautiful, old age is not ugly, that’s the sign that I went too far”. Every other culture in the world appreciates it as wisdom, beauty, knowledge. You have to be the renegade. One of my teacher says, that you can tell the renegade by the arrows in his back. I am looking forward to being a grandmother and having grandchildren, everybody is running away from this among my peers. But I am getting shot on that, because it’s not an easily understandable thing in our culture right now. So we need more people standing up and saying “shoot me down, I don’t care, but I believe...”

Me: I’ve noticed, that men started to appreciate those women gatherings too.

Nicola: Definitely. It’s really good for a man to have a strong woman with a good circle of friends. This is the problem with the common structure, if we don’t have it, we put everything on the men – they have to be the mum, the aunty, friend, lover, husband and so on. It’s impossible for one man to carry all these roles.

Me: I think womens circles are very important when you have your baby. Those Australian aborigines can’t understand how woman in our society with a little baby is living alone in those flats-cages and sometimes spends all day long alone.

Nicola: Yes, and I think it breaks a lot of them.

Me: I want to ask you about postnatal support. It seems, that a lot of things are happening to prepare women for birth, but the postnatal period seems a little bit more left out. What do you think?

Nicola: I think postnatal support should be just as important. We have to undo a lot of miseducation, for example about breastfeeding, it used to be understood that the bottle is safer, easier. We have to get the basics. We have to talk more about the rest period after birth. We have to spread the news, to talk, that this is going to be better for you, you will be happier, you will have calmer baby, you all will get together as a family.

Me: In old cultures they have this ceremony after birth. In Lithuania the women went to sauna, and after that it was the celebration to welcome her to the society. How do you think, what’s the meaning of that?

Nicola: It’s very important to honour your transitions as human beings. We do really badly in this area. We are not honouring toddler’s, teenagers, we do nothing for menopausal women, we do very little for parents. We have some baby showers but little of any depth.

Me: But sometimes it seems like more for present, then for spirit.

Nicola: Exactly, empty. I think it is really important for women, after doing such a big job, to be acknowledged, to celebrate this with close ones, to hear, that “we are here for you”, “you are fantastic”, “here is food”, “we are here to help you”, listening to her grandmothers stories with their babies is really important, this is giving everything that they need.

Me: What do you think the most important thing for taking care of women postnatal?

Nicola: I like to cook. Because I believe, that with cooking you can really nourish people.

Me: Yes, one of the most vivid memories most people have are their mums cooking, all these tastes, smells, warmth. It nourishes not only your body, but the soul too.

Nicola: Yes, the food is really important. It makes a good environment to hang out, to talk. This is very natural way.

Me: I've noticed, when you are doing some kinds of work like cooking, grass picking, sewing, the talk goes very smoothly and very deep. It's like healing.

Nicola: This is relative, I think, to different brain activity. It's like meditation, knitting and something like that. You busy your hands and it's related to your brain. We need that more.

So lot's of talking. The feedback that I get, the good doula does a lot of listening. I always say to doulas, that you have to go in like the best mother that she could have. So you are not judgmental, you are encouraging her. Of course you can be firm if you feel that. But loving and caring is the most important thing. "Go take the bath, I will be with the baby", "I will wash your hair", "I will make soup for you"...

Me: It's so good to listen to that.

Nicola: Yes, I know. I would like to have that. We all need that and we all should have that.

Me: What are the happiest moments for you as a doula?

Nicola: Well ...seeing parents happy in their bed with a baby, having had the birth that they wanted, appreciating the impact that made on their lives. That's the happiest moments. It's such a good start. My best moments are after VBAC birth. When a woman had a caesarean the first time, and she is told that her body doesn't work properly, you are broken, you are useless. When you love her, prepare her, give hope and trust her and being there, when she gives birth vaginally and saying "I am not broken at all, I can give birth" This is so empowering and a healing experience, to have a normal birth after caesarean trauma. You can transfer it to your life. In a broader sense.

It helps us believe, that we can do a lot of things, if we want. It's really powerful. Birth does that, for growing women in society.