

Ten Centimeters The Art of Giving Birth in Everyday Life

by

Todd F. Eklof

August 21, 2005

Meister Eckhart once said, “From all eternity God lies on a maternal bed giving birth.”¹ He also said, “What does God do all day long?” God gives birth.”² Theologian, Matthew Fox, an admirer of Eckhart, writes, “every time we birth beauty or justice or compassion, we are cocreators with God birthing divinity itself.”³ What he means by this, in his own words, is that “the *imago Dei*, or image of God in every person, is precisely the imagination or the capacity of each person for creativity.”⁴ What is meant, then, by both Eckhart and Fox, is that the Universe is still being birthed, that Creation is not finished, and that we, each of us, is both being birthed by it and giving birth to it. Or, as cosmologist, Brian Swimme puts it, “Though the originating power gave birth to the universe fifteen billion years ago, this realm of power is not simply located at that point of time, but is rather a condition of every moment of the universe, past, present, and to come.”⁵

If, then, as Eckhart said, “We are meant to be mothers of God,”⁶ what is the best way for us to go about it? If we look to physical birth as our example, we realize there are actually three stages of labor, the *dilation stage*, the *expulsion stage*, and the *delivery of the placenta*. The last two stages together usually take somewhere between a few minutes to less than two hours. It is the first stage, the dilation, that accounts for most of labor, taking an average of 6 to 20 hours, though sometimes much longer. This is the stage during which the cervix expands from zero to ten centimeters and the expectant mother must resist the urge to push in the wake of increasingly painful contractions until her body is fully prepared to deliver.

As a metaphor, this stage tells us three things about giving birth; first, it’s not an easy process; second, we must have patience; and third, we must make room. So, to begin with, maternity involves a willingness to endure pain and suffering. It is the *via negativa*, the negative path, the dark night of the soul. In his book, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Gerald May, M.D., talks about the many times during his practice he tried to help his patients cope with their suffering. “Often we were able to discover ways of easing the pain. Sometimes, we even found a sense of meaning in it. All too often though, our preoccupation with finding relief left little opportunity to look for meaning. This is the curse of a health-care system dedicated only to fixing problems, a system too streamlined to be concerned with what’s happening to people’s souls.”⁷ This is the reason May left his medical practice after 25 years to devote himself fully to what he calls, “the art of spiritual companionship,” of which, he writes, “the priorities are reversed; we continue to care about easing suffering, but the meaning is what’s most important.”⁸ Later he would discover the truth of this principle first hand. In his own words;

I was diagnosed with cancer in 1995, which I thought was a bad thing. But the experience brought me closer to God and to my loved ones than I'd ever been, and that was wonderfully good. The chemotherapy felt awful, but it resulted in a complete cure, which I decided was good. I later found out it may also have caused the heart disease that now has me waiting for a heart transplant. At some point I gave up trying to decide what's ultimately good or bad. I truly do not know.⁹

Indeed, it is this not knowing, this sense of mystery, of darkness, that turns out to be one of the Dark Night's greatest gifts. "To be immersed in mystery," writes May, "can be very distressing at first, but over time I have found immense relief in it."¹⁰ This relief is the opposite of clinging—that which Buddhism says is the cause of all suffering. This is why Matthew Fox refers to the *via negativa* as the path of "letting go and letting be." Once we learn to let go, there is tremendous relief because we're no longer responsible for controlling everything that happens in our lives. "It takes the pressure off," says May, "I no longer have to worry myself to death about what I did right or wrong to cause good or bad experience—because there really is no way of knowing."¹¹

The *letting go* part is difficult enough because we have to release our desire to control our lives, which means sometimes letting go of our dreams and desires. But the *letting be* part can be even more difficult because it means relinquishing ourselves to remaining in difficult places, remaining in the pain, in the dilation, resisting our urge to push. In the *tarot* letting be is the Hanged Man, usually depicted as a person hanging upside down on a cross. So letting be is a form of spiritual or psychological crucifixion. It can be very difficult and painful. It means being stuck in a job, or in a bad relationship, or with a debilitating disease or injury. It means having to stick around in a world that seems upside down because it's contrary to our expectations. But the great thing, as difficult as it is, about letting be, is that it allows us to stick around and work on our hang-ups.

The second lesson dilation teaches us about spiritual birthing is patience. Again, as Gerald May puts it, "As far as I can tell, the dark night of the soul is endless."¹² Just as a mother enduring labor must remain patient amidst intensifying and increasing contractions, we cannot rush the process as tempting as it is to do so. Sometimes the best we can do is learn to live with the pain and find what relief we can between contractions. May says, "*The dark night is nothing other than our ongoing relationship with the Divine.* As such, it must always remain mysterious, dark to our understanding and comprehension, illuminated only by brief moments of dawning light. And as such it never ends; it just keeps deepening, revealing more and more intimate layers of freedom for love."¹³

This leads us to the third part of dilation, *making room*. Just as the cervix expands its space in preparation for delivery, each of us, as mothers of God, as cocreators, is called

upon to stretch and expand our hearts, minds and souls. Unlike the cervix, however, which we know must dilate to 10 centimeters, or, approximately, 4 inches, we never know the limits of our spiritual opening because there are no limits. Again, *the dark night is nothing other than our ongoing relationship with the Divine*. Hence, just as dilation is the longest part of physical labor, spiritual dilation is unending. And just as the Universe itself is continuing to expand, continuing to dilate, our minds and hearts and souls are most in harmony with the cosmic forces when we continue to expand ourselves.

As a minister I have come to understand that making room is the most sacred work any of us can be involved in. The tendency in most congregations, however, is to measure our successes based on the number of people showing up for church. This is the corporate mindset that boasts success with signs that say “One Billion Served.” If this were truly the case then small churches like ours should close our doors and head for corporate mega churches like South East Christian. But I really don’t think church ought to be about who comes and who goes, about who stays and who leaves, but about the kind of space we create. Church work is a labor of love, and like any labor, the lengthiest and most important stage is dilation. The success of a church, therefore, is not measured by its quantity but by its quality, and the quality of church has to do with the type of space it creates. A corporate mega church that has thousands of members and millions of dollars, but remains narrow and closed-minded, and teaches bigotry and hatred, is not, in my mind, a successful church. But a church, no matter how few or how many attend, that is welcoming, open minded, inclusive and diverse, is as successful as it can be.

Matthew Fox writes about *Eclessiogenesis*, which means, “birthing the church.”¹⁴ It is the Spirit, he says, that “births the church in ever-new ways.”¹⁵ So, churches that aren’t always expanding, not in their numbers and income, but in novel ways of relating to each other and to changing times, aren’t in harmony with the maternal forces forever expanding and giving birth to our entire Universe. But our churches are only a place to put birthing into practice. “If we cannot transform our institutions,” writes Fox, “of which church is a significant one—we are lost and most likely the earth itself is also doomed.”¹⁶ The point is we must begin to put the spiritual practice of dilation, which is, hopefully, exemplified in our churches, into practice everywhere in everything we do, including in our work places, our schools, and our governments.

Perhaps there is currently no greater example of what we’ve been talking about than Cindy Sheehan, the mother who lost her son in Iraq, and has since captured the heart and attention of much of our nation by patiently waiting to talk to the President outside his ranch in Texas. The loss of her precious child, leading to her recent divorce, accompanied by the sudden and unexpected stroke suffered by her own mother, is the epitome of this spiritual experience we call the Dark Night of the Soul. But rather than resist her pain, or push prematurely, Cindy Sheehan has used her own suffering to patiently birth something new and positive for our entire world. In so doing she has single-handedly begun to accomplish what hundreds of thousands of war protestors have

been unable to do for the past several years, sway public opinion. For this reason, she is both mother and midwife, helping to rebirth the mother in us all by recognizing the preciousness of life and our need to relinquish the destructive and fruitless practice of war. We should remember that Mother's Day itself originated in 1872 when Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, suggested it be a day dedicated to world peace. Just as the birth process harmonizes with cosmic forces, genuine birth produces harmony and peace.

Indeed, all of us are mothers, giving birth to God, to each other and to ourselves, whenever we open our hearts, minds and souls to each other and to the world around us. And each of us must figure out what ten centimeters means for us, how far we can stretch, how open minded and open hearted we can become. And though we may never open fully, we practice birth so long as we remain engaged in the process.

¹ Fox, Matthew, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1995, p.93.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Swimme, Brian, and Berry, Thomas, *The Universe Story*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 1992, p.17.

⁶ Fox, *ibid.*

⁷ May, Gerald, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., New York, NY, 2004, p.6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. p.2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. p.132.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Fox, Matthew, *Creation Spirituality*, Harper San Francisco, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 1991, p.125.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.126.