

## Chapter 1

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### The Midwife

The mother  
is far enough in front of the child  
so that she cannot actually hold onto the child,  
but she stretches out her arms; she imitates the child's movements.

If it merely totters,  
she quickly bends as if to grasp it—  
thus the child believes that it is not walking alone.

The most loving mother can do no more  
if there is to be any truth  
in this matter of the child's walking alone.

KIERKEGAARD

### A Brief Description

**M**Y DAUGHTER WAS BORN on Thanksgiving Day, and even though my ministry is hospital based, this was the first birth that I had attended. I suspect everyone remembers the first time they witness a birth. While I had seen videos of birth before, the only way to appreciate the electricity in the room is to be there.

It's difficult to talk about myself. The problem isn't even "oneself"—no, the problem is my self and my particularity. And we'll touch on this several times throughout, but we are dealing with a metaphor that literally drives people to their own experience. I am an author, locked into my experience, seeking to use a metaphor that drives readers to their experience. Hopefully,

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somehow, this can be our metaphor. Spiritual director Margaret Guenther concedes readily, “It is all too easy to see the birth imagery in Scripture (and in the language of popular piety) as abstract, bloodless, remote from human experience. Yet if I were to name my own most profound spiritual or theological experience, without hesitation I would cite the birth of my three children.”<sup>1</sup> To be sure, there are many ways in which the metaphor cannot speak to the vibrancy of life as we know it, but if a vibrant life is a spiritual life, perhaps Guenther’s conclusion is inescapable.

My wife had planned very carefully to have a natural birth, which meant, among other things, that there would be no pain medication. In order to accomplish her plan, she enlisted the help of midwives.

Midwives are a different kind of healthcare provider in today’s world. It is difficult to contrast them to other providers, because no one would disagree with them outright. They believe that the body functions quite well normally, although there are rare exceptions. They try to normalize birth as a human event, and less of a medical crisis. Tone is everything. It is hard to typify the character of a midwife. Like many women, they are strong, but the courage and confidence of the midwife are remarkably inspiring. And that’s not an accident—she needs to be inspiring, and that confidence is one of many preinterventions to make sure things are set up for success.

At my daughter’s birth, we were also assisted by a doula, which is Greek for “servant.” She is there to support, and she did many of the things that are traditionally connected with midwifery. She was able to help get what my wife needed, and she had an implicit understanding of what those needs might be. It might be food, water, sometimes a shoulder to lean on, or even counterpressure on the back. Perhaps most importantly, she knew what to say, although our midwife also had a way with words. Words were very important.

It may also be helpful to emphasize that although I was there, and it was necessary that I be there, there were so many ways in which I could not step into the midwifery role. I wasn’t the midwife, I was the husband. It may even be the case that a mother prefers to rely solely on her mate—I’m sure that happens. I’m sure that there are many husbands out there who may be more helpful than I was, more experienced and able to do some of those things. Some, but not all.

But one of the things that I saw there as husband was that the role of midwife is necessarily *particular and exclusive*. Midwifing is a very specific

1. Guenther, *Holy Listening*, loc. 1017–19.

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way of standing next to someone, and it excludes other ways of being. It is adaptable, yes, in our case our doula and midwife had to complement each other because each would normally have operated differently in the absence of the other. But adaptable or not, to be someone's midwife is to know them in a unique kind of way. The entire relationship is contextualized around one purpose; a purpose that any two people will experience very differently.

So what follows are a few observations that are true of midwives in general. Some of these may seem repetitive, but each carries a special nuance.

It is utterly implicit that the *midwife does not have the most important job*. It is crucial to remain clear about where the locus of accomplishment lies. Midwives try very hard, but they are not "laboring." Human beings are very resilient and capable of tremendous change. In spiritual midwifery, the locus of agency rests in the one who is mothering, and not in the "expertise" of the helping professional. Socrates makes this abundantly clear. He says in the *Thaetetus*, "My art of midwifery is in general like theirs; the only difference is that my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in the travail of birth. . . . But the delivery is heaven's work . . ." <sup>2</sup> Socrates is only a partner involved in a much bigger drama.

While the midwife is not the one doing the principal work, there is such a thing as a good midwife or even an inexperienced midwife. *The good midwife is the one you don't notice*. The midwife is an important position, and those skills require practice and development. Spiritual midwifery puts the practice into practical theology.

*The birthing process is fundamentally dynamic*. Movement and trajectory are a lot more important than pathology and diagnosis. Midwives are not detached analysts; they are engaged catalysts. Most of the skills and interventions they have are about movement and restoring the motion of the soul. All effort is directed toward facilitating movement—it's not about finding an answer and it's certainly not about getting someone else to agree. Everything is directed toward the dynamic process.

A tension emerges here in the writing. The paradox arises to where I need to try to describe transition to the uninitiated without defining transition for those who have experiences of their own.

2. Quoted in Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 279n.

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More than “agents of change”—which has become cliché—midwives are *guides through transition*. Transition can be the most frightening and disorienting part of the natural and unmedicated birth process and it is so unnerving that no one would choose an experience like that. Physically speaking, the body changes its entire work of opening to the work of birthing the baby. For a moment, the body seems untrustworthy and that is terrifying. Midwives, therefore, assume the responsibility of leading others through life’s greatest transitions.

In her groundbreaking work *Holy Listening*, Margaret Guenther spends an entire chapter embellishing and translating the midwife and birth metaphor as it relates to spiritual midwifery. She writes:

The first stage of labor ends in a period of transition, which can be frightening, even terrifying if it is unexpected. Even when the transition is understood, it is of surprising power. The birthgiver is gripped by tremendous force and feels that she has somehow lost control. Everything is suddenly too big and too powerful. All the weeks of careful preparation and instruction seem inadequate and trivial. The birthgiver had thought she was prepared and “knew just what to do”—and now it doesn’t work! She might even feel betrayed: no one has told her the truth, or perhaps no one has previously confronted and understood the truth.<sup>3</sup>

The chaos and confusion here are organic; it’s not the confounding from without but the terror from within. What’s helpful here is how Guenther translates this to the spiritual life. She says, “In the birth process, the dark, seemingly chaotic period of transition is the time of greatest discomfort and—at least from the birthgiver’s viewpoint—greatest need for the supportive presence of the midwife. In our spiritual lives, too, it is a pivotal time. The old ways no longer serve.”<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noting that theologian Karen Hanson concurs: “One of the first things a midwife must learn is *what travail looks like!* And, seeing it, not to shrink from it.”<sup>5</sup> Here, she is using the biblical term to describe the part of childbirth that is so frightening. It is this old notion of travail that is so organic to transition.

What is crucial here is to see the value of good midwifery. The timing could not be more important. This is a hard time and true help is needed.

3. Guenther, *Holy Listening*, loc. 1205–8.

4. *Ibid.*, loc. 1208–11.

5. Hanson, “The Midwife,” 206.

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“The lonely times of transition can be terrible, for they are times of spiritual homelessness.”<sup>6</sup> Even when things go well, support is needed. “One of the unwelcome surprises of transition is the sense of loss that inevitably accompanies self-transcendence and new growth.”<sup>7</sup>

*Midwives are prepared and they have enough experience to understand what people need.* This could really be two points. By being prepared, midwives have already set things up for success. Many dangerous things are avoided before they ever gets to the level of danger. Beyond that, they have enough experience with the territory to know what people are likely to need. Some of the work may require give-and-take, but there will also be points where guidance is necessary. As with so many specialties in healthcare, patients cannot be expected to self-diagnose. They can report experiences of pain and that communication is required for good healthcare, but they need the guidance and expertise of the midwife.

An experienced midwife is very powerful. *While they do have skills and techniques to draw on, they also know how to get out of the way.* A lot of their expertise lies in blending in with the background. It is assumed that people are capable and empowered.

From the perspective of spiritual direction, Margaret Guenther put it this way:

The midwife is present to another in a time of vulnerability, working in areas that are deep and intimate. It is a relationship of trust and mutual respect. Unlike most physicians, she does not fear that her professionalism will be threatened by a degree of intimacy with the women who have come to her for help. She is willing to be called by her given name, even as she addresses the birthgiver by hers. She does things with, not to, the person giving birth.<sup>8</sup>

## Jesus and Socrates

In studying spiritual midwifery and spiritual rebirth, there are two major sources with whom we need to dialogue from the West: Jesus and Socrates. The first question is, if they are both talking about spiritual midwifery, and

6. Guenther, *Holy Listening*, loc. 1215–16.

7. *Ibid.*, loc. 1252–53.

8. *Ibid.*, loc. 1042–45.

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if their practice of it is similar to each other, are they in some way talking to each other? What is the relationship between Socrates and Jesus?

There are some token similarities in the lives of the two men. Both were famous teachers and neither wrote anything down. They were also both executed by the state, for controversial teachings on the nature of piety, corrupting the youth, and general disruption of the state. In very rough analogy, both of these men sacrificed their lives for the sake of an idea. But can we do any better than these generalities?

We know that the two movements have influenced each other. Early Christianity relied on the apparatus of Greek thought for the evolution of its theology. And we also know that subsequent movements in philosophy, such as that of the Neoplatonists, were also important in the overall history of Christianity. But was there any earlier connection?

Hard to say. Jesus and Socrates were about 400 years apart. Jesus lived around the Jordan region and Socrates was halfway across the Mediterranean in Athens. We know that through Alexander Greek culture had spread much farther than the Sea of Galilee and that there are plenty of other people farther from Athens than Jesus who were familiar with Socrates. We also know that Jesus was an excellent student and was quickly recognized as a teacher, though we don't know the details of his education. The historical record shows that Jesus was very familiar with the stories and texts of the Jewish tradition, but there is never any kind of direct reference to Socrates or anything else, for that matter, that might be associated with secular philosophy.

But even though there are a lot of questions that can never be answered, one fact remains unshakable: both Socrates and Jesus relied heavily on the metaphor of the spiritual rebirth.

As it turns out, there is a passage in John—and only in John—that holds the metaphor (John 3:1–21). Jesus is talking to his friend Nicodemus about the spiritual kingdom and says the only way to enter it is to be born again. That sounded very familiar. Socrates said that he saw himself as a spiritual midwife. In the *Theaetetus*, he says that his “concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in the travail of birth.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus, on the other hand, is talking about the experience of spiritual transformation and what that feels like for the one who is transformed. It's like being born again. That image was so powerful that there is an entire branch of Christianity that defines itself in terms of being born again. Socrates takes this metaphor

9. Quoted in Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 279n.

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from the other side of the dialogical relationship. Socrates talks about what it's like to be a spiritual midwife. Both Jesus and Socrates seem to suggest that the person giving birth and the person being born again are one in the same.

Just to be clear and accurate, Jesus uses the metaphor of “born again” once, but also references the “time of travail” and “birth pangs” (John 3:3, John 16:21, Mark 13:8, Matt 24:8). Most of all, the rhetorical structure of spiritual midwifery is a structure that Jesus uses throughout the Gospel of John. This is a favored methodology. It's also helpful to emphasize that this metaphor occurs only in the Gospel of John. John is a philosophical writer from the same hometown as Heraclitus—Ephesus. John seems to borrow the idea of the Logos from Heraclitus. Both John and Socrates were influenced by Heraclitus. While certainties about Jesus and Socrates will always be hidden, it does seem that there was a very, very early relationship between the two movements that followed.

Heraclitus is an enigmatic figure, and tradition has given him the moniker “Heraclitus the Obscure.” There are few remaining details about his life, so many of its secrets buried by history. But it's important to appreciate that the term has more to do with the mysterious and mystical nature of his teachings rather than his lack of notoriety; Heraclitus, indeed, is the archetypical riddle wrapped in the enigma.

### Heraclitus and Midwifery

By birth, Heraclitus had the rare opportunity, limited only to nobles, to get involved in Ephesian government. But for some reason he chose not to. He chose to withdraw to the hills outside the city. Disgruntled by the problems of society, he became a hermit and developed his teachings. Some of these teachings were written down and have survived through quotation.

The impact of his teaching is significant even if remains “obscure.” For one thing, Heraclitus said the Divine Spirit was like fire. Like other cosmologists, Heraclitus envisioned the Immortal Principle in elemental terms. The Immortal Principle is ever-burning. Fire also appealed to Heraclitus because of its dynamic properties. Flickering flames are always changing, even as they change other things. He says, “All things equally exchange for fire as does fire for all things.”<sup>10</sup> Fire brings heat and illumination. Fire cooks as well as consumes. Fire then becomes the essence of all transaction. Fire and heat are the

10. Quoted in Geldard, *Remembering Heraclitus*, 158.

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dominant metaphors in Heraclitus's work. It is immeasurable to what extent Heraclitus influenced later Christian terminology of the Holy Spirit, where in the Pentecost story the Holy Spirit is also depicted by flames.

Heraclitus is also credited for introducing the concept of the *logos* to the West. The *logos* is the ancestor of logic, as the name suggests. It is often translated as "word." When John begins his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word," the term that actually occurs there is *logos*. Apparently, John saw fit to tie his understanding of the incarnation of Jesus with the older Greek notion of the *logos*. John's analogy, of course, is brilliant. Back in Genesis, in the beginning God creates the world by speaking, saying "Let there be light, let there be dry land," and so on. John takes it up a notch. John says that God spoke, yes, and the Word was God and the Word was with God. Then the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The *logos*, says John, is none other than Jesus Christ. This transitive equation of Jesus and God anticipated the later concept of the Trinity by at least a hundred years.

The association of John and Heraclitus is not an accident. The patron deity of Ephesus was Artemis, hunter goddess and twin of Apollo. In some stories, she was a fertility goddess and a moon goddess. As was the custom, Heraclitus would have deposited his writings at the temple of Artemis. The temple no longer exists today, but it served as a cultural center of such fame that it brought Ephesus to global prominence. Five hundred years later, John had access to Heraclitus's writings. John was from Ephesus, wrote there, and would have easy access to Heraclitus's philosophy.

Socrates was much closer to Heraclitus than John was, only a generation apart. The Athenian held the Ephesian in high esteem. When asked what he thought of Heraclitus, Socrates said that he liked what he understood, but that he would need to be a Delian diver to really get to the bottom of it. The Delians were known to be deep-sea divers.

It's hard to find Socrates's commentary on Heraclitus, so this is an important nugget. This might be misattributed or a favorite colloquial expression of the time, but scholars are quick to point out that this is a superlative remark coming from Socrates. The Oracle at Delphi had pronounced Socrates the wisest man in Athens. Legend has it that the secret to Socrates's wisdom was that he knew that he didn't know anything, as opposed to all the experts of the day that thought they knew everything. For the man whose wisdom is a kind of holy ignorance, what Socrates is alleged to have said can only be seen as superlative praise.



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The metaphor of spiritual midwifery is a key shared term between Socrates and Jesus. It's a metaphor with so much traction that it catches on and defines the Jesus movement (note again that, to this day, many Christians define their spirituality in terms of being born again), even though the metaphor only appears in one of the four Gospels. What's more, the metaphor also conveys the similar rhetorical technology that is employed in the dialogues of Socrates and Jesus. The irony of Socrates helps makes a lot of sense out of the mystical parables of Jesus.

Further, the influence of Heraclitus is a powerful connection between classical Greek philosophy and Christianity. In the same pericope where Socrates describes himself as a midwife, he reverences the goddess Artemis. Throughout the dialogues of Plato, Socrates references and reverences many gods and goddesses in accordance with the theme. What's important to realize here is that by alluding to Artemis, Socrates places himself in the school of Heraclitus, who had deposited his writings in the temple dedicated to her.

The strong fingerprint of Heraclitus in both the Gospel of John and Socrates's statement on midwifery is another confirmation that we are right to consult both Jerusalem and Athens.

### Summary of the Midwife

- The role of midwife is necessarily particular and exclusive.
- It is utterly implicit that the midwife does not have the most important job.
- The good midwife is the one you don't notice.
- The birthing process is fundamentally dynamic. More than "agents of change"—which has become cliché—midwives are guides through transition.
- Midwives are prepared and have enough experience to understand what people need.
- While they do have techniques to draw on, they also know how to get out of the way.
- Spiritual midwifery rests on a set of philosophical and theological ideas that weave through John, Heraclitus, Jesus, and Socrates.