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The Shamanism Magazine

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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)



SACRED BIRTH MATTERS

*Life enters and exits
via a sacred gateway,
where the timing and
outcomes are beyond
our control*

EMMA RESTALL ORR

head of the International Druid Network, reflects on the need for birth preparation from her own personal experience and offers some suggestions from the Druid and Pagan rites for conception, birthing and welcoming a new baby

Life would be a good deal easier, I have often thought, if one could believe absolutely in a god or goddess who held us in an exquisitely assuring embrace of love

As a Pagan Druid, an animist practising a religion based upon powers of nature, I have no such luxury

And at such times when life looms over us like a great storm cloud waiting for a moment to break, that luxury even more alluring

If only someone would hug us and tell us, with a sweet divine certainty, that it will all be alright ...

Life, however, isn't always alright. Nature is merciless, and the powers of nature don't always flow in our favour



The process of conception is a part of life which reminds us that nature doesn't work by a code of justice. It can be utterly brutal ... and now and then someone gets hurt, sometimes badly.

Though at any time on the journey into conception we can invoke a deity that guides us, a goddess who brings strength, or we can call for ancestral human wisdom, the natural gods of birth are not loving mother gods. The divine forces of birth are closer to those of death.

Even in comfortable Western culture, a good number of women and infants die each year, despite our highly trained obstetricians, midwives, surgeons, drugs and medical

technology. In countries where poverty disallows such aid, and those where religion and tradition keep abortion illegal (even where mother and child are at risk), the bloody business of giving birth is more obviously connected to dying.

In our culture, most women have options about whether and when to have a child, and understanding the risks, it is remarkable how few chose never to. That force within that aches for satisfaction is one of the most powerful a woman can feel: the whispering song of a powerful goddess. Lust, love and rage can fill us completely, inspiring sometimes disastrous behaviour; the craving for a child can provoke equally

inappropriate action, for this can be a blindly selfish goddess indeed.

The teachings I was given in Druidry express clearly that we have no 'god-given right' to bear children. Nature both gives and takes life, at times in ways that seem both random and unconditional. It is not nature that holds the balance for us in the short term; it is our own responsibility to create sustainable relationship with the land that holds us. Having a child will affect not only ourselves and our families, but the wider world, human and non-human. Too often we rationalize our emotional animal instinct, the deep genetic craving, and, blinded by that powerful - almost visceral - need, think that we have adequately justified our decision. We submit to the hunger of that goddess.

It is something worth considering very carefully indeed.

In our easy western culture, many wait until they have saved enough money, yet what does a baby need? The answer is very little, and parenting is a good deal easier that way. For the first four or five months, all you need is a place to wash and dry cotton nappies, a half dozen baby t-shirts and socks or warmer suits (all of which can be found in second-hand stores or through local community sales), a sling to carry the baby in, and a box with a soft blanket in which to put him when you need a break. Unless we intend to be a fully paid-up participant in the immoral consumerism of our society, preparing for a child is not about money.

Many use that reason as a way of delaying the moment, sure that they will never be good enough. Yet it is only by being awake to the child who comes that we find the healing and learning needed.

OFFERINGS OF DEDICATION

When we do find the clarity and courage to make the decision, the next step is dedicating ourselves to it. In Druidry, the priest encourages us first to lay offerings at the altars we keep to honour our ancestors, calling to those who have lived before, and in doing so calling for the flow of consciousness to move into us, for the song of life to be sung within us. So do we create

space, opening to the opportunity of a new life. Only then, once the grandmothers and grandfathers have been honoured, do we make offerings to that seething goddess of ovulation and conception who cries out deep inside, and in doing so we reach for the current of nature that provides that spark of germination.

Through this dedication process we are inspired to make all the appropriate changes needed in lifestyle, such as the mother's diet, and a good few months of detoxing is worthwhile. We can use the opportunity to deepen our awareness of and relationship with the earth, the sacred mud that feeds us, the environment that is our home, by honouring the gods of the land, seas and sky.

Because a new child so radically pushes at relationships, more often creating stress than naturally positive bonds, the woman's dedication to conceive should also flow into working on the relationship with the potential child's father. Of the rituals and priorities we make during this time of preparation, this is one of the most important.

When we do find ourselves pregnant, once we have found our

feet again, we have the first opportunity to welcome the spirit, and establish that the space created for this new life will be respected and well crafted.

Once again, the ancestors are honoured whose blood flows in the mother's veins, whose genes are blended in the tiny zygote that will become the foetus. We give thanks too to the spirits of the land, of wind-breath and water, of mud and corn. And we consciously create a space for the new spirit to grow into, delineating it symbolically on the family or ancestral altar. By our ritual we dedicate again to the journey ahead, we welcome this new consciousness, this wealth of potential, that brings with it the stories of our grandmothers and grandfathers.

And so committed once again, we have a chance to explore and adjust

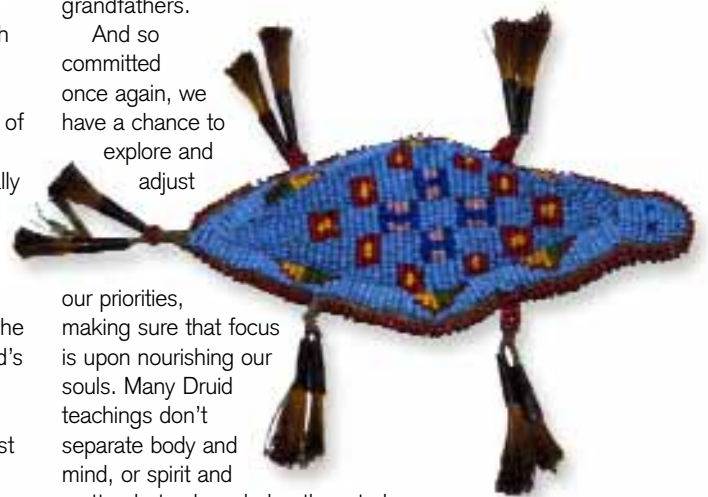
our priorities, making sure that focus is upon nourishing our souls. Many Druid teachings don't separate body and mind, or spirit and matter, but acknowledge them to be made of the same stuff: energy held



Left hand page:
Cihuacoatl:
Aztec mother-goddess of birth and of women who died while giving birth.

This page - left:
Berber baby's charm made of glass beads.
Below: Native American umbilical cord bundle in the shape of a lizard.

Bottom: A wash in smudge smoke helps bring this Sudanese baby into the world.



An important part of preparing for the birth is dealing with fear. The majority of first time mothers in our culture have never been present at the birth of a child and they don't know what to expect

within the song of life. Being pregnant is a wonderful time to feel this wholeness of body and soul, allowing ourselves to be wakeful to the wonders of food, of sexuality, of texture, of scent, of music, as our senses heighten and our bodies change. It is a time to play.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Of course, sometimes we become pregnant without inviting a spirit into our family, our bodies seething still with the energy of our ancestors, with life. Must we keep that child? Certainly, there is no sense within my spiritual tradition that abortion is wrong. In nature, brimming with extraordinary life, possibilities emerge and recede. Making a considered decision about the viability of a pregnancy,

of responsible parenthood, is a more honourable way of engaging with our families, ancestors and environment, than making the journey with fear, resentment and inadequate resources.

Every day countless women miscarry. From a seer's perspective, the cause is often a simple but undetected physical problem. The Druid teachings emphasize again that there is no justice in nature and, though it may allow us to feel comforted, often there is no point, no deep spiritual reason. However, lack of commitment provoked by fear or uncertainty can also loosen the threads. Indeed, a ritual with a seer who can communicate with the spirit (often, at this early stage, perceived as an adult or older

child), where the commitment of all concerned is discussed, can facilitate a wanted miscarriage or halt one that is threatening. At this point the rites are made to find a shared confidence once again.

Where a spirit leaves, a rite of parting is valuable in order to acknowledge and accept the change, and find the path of healing. At such a time the wild seas of hormonal change can be intensified by emotional storms. In such rites, again we honour the ancestors, and all those affected (who have strength enough to attend) have an opportunity to express their thanks for the learning, and a chance to adjust and share their vision of the path ahead. At such rites, we close the space opened at conception. This is a painful moment, sometimes it is necessary to do the rite gradually over a period of time. As ever in Druidry, the older generations are present where possible, affirming the power of the flow of blood and genes, of stories and song, of life as a natural current that holds us all.

TOWARDS BIRTH

Where things are going well, by around twelve weeks after conception, the foetus is fully formed; it doesn't look like a perfect human, but all the necessary specialist cells are there in basic form, each holding that magical spark of ancestral song. From that point, it simply grows.

It is

often at around this point that there is a sense of the spirit connecting or committing to the body in the womb. As the placenta begins to function a sensitive mother can often feel a shift, a confidence that the pregnancy is working, and here is the second opportunity to welcome the child. Commitment to the new life is affirmed, witnessed and celebrated.

An important part of preparing for the birth is dealing with fear.

The majority of first time mothers in our culture have never been present at the birth of a child and they don't know what to expect. The unknown can be terrifying, and women are all too keen to tell the horror stories of birthing their own children, processing the trauma still, which

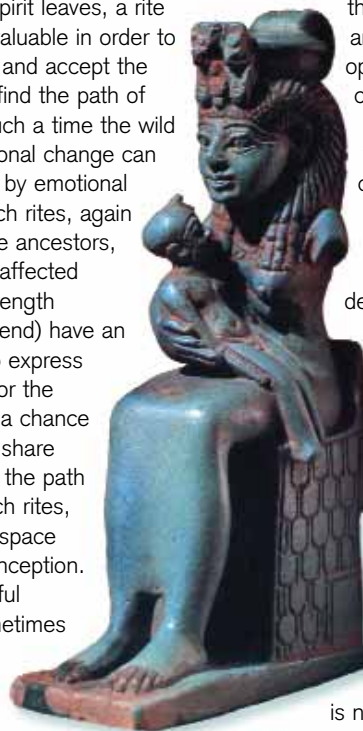
is not always helpful to those wondering what will happen.

However, finding women who will tell positive and realistic tales is important: seeking out the stories of our mothers and grandmothers allows us to honour them at this time when, spiritually, they are so close. Such stories, rich with sharing and celebration of natural strength and kinship, are a powerful part of our heritage and so useful to be a part of.

PLANS AND CONTINGENCIES

In preparing for the birth, a profoundly useful exercise is to go through all the possibilities that might arise. It is a hard thing to do, acknowledging *everything* from a perfect birth scenario to the possibility of the baby having a disability, from drugs or procedures that may be offered when the mother is in too much pain to think, to the nightmare of both mother and child dying. With reverence for the gods of nature, we hold before us each possibility and, as a couple or a family, decisions are written down that may need to be made in the midst of trauma, when there are no clear minds to make them.

This is not to invoke anything, for



This page - top: The original model for the Christian Madonna and child - Isis, the Egyptian Mother Goddess sits with her son Horus on her lap.

Bottom: Back view of a baby shawl and integral hat from Northern Pakistan, covered with magical protection charms.

Opposite Page: Astart, the ancient Sryian Goddess of fertility.

we don't focus on the negative, but consider the whole spectrum, crafting the best course with whatever the gods present us. So do we not shy away from the dark gods, from the places of the unknown, of death and pain, of denial. This is a time when death is close, watching our journey. That needs to be acknowledged.

Walking wakefully, with courage not fear, we begin to make decisions about how we might give birth, creating the temple that will be the place in which the spirit first breathes. Where will this temple be?

It is easy to imagine a temple can only be made at home, with candles and none but those we love and honour. But, if a home birth is not possible, we can gather up the essentials that allow us to be in sacred space, small items that we can take with us into the hospital, which will inspire us to be fully present and spiritually awake. This may be a photograph of a grandmother, some herbs or music; perhaps no more than a chalice or wedding stone. We decide too who we would wish to be present, in body and in spirit.

The sixteen or so hours of my son's labour was spent dancing and singing with my husband in our little rural home, bathing, laughing, breathing in the warm birthing tub that took up the entire kitchen. The community midwife, a beautiful woman, laughed with us while I bled and sang, until nobody was laughing, the ambulance screeching through the lanes as I was driven the dozen miles to the nearest emergency maternity unit; I ended up under general anaesthetic as my womb was cut, and my son pulled out and sent straight to the ICU. Yet our preparations paid off. My husband knew what I would want in the situation because it had already been decided. And somehow we knew it was our journey to walk and we walked it.

At such times, focusing on the richest relationships we have, with those we love, we have access to immense strength. It is through them that we must remember that our mothers and grandmothers have sung the songs of such pain. These ancestral songs, a chant, a prayer, a reminder through the mess of it all, are sometimes lifesaving.

Hospital culture speaks in a language that implies, unless we

can pop out a child like warm butter, we have failed. They talk of 'failure to progress', of an 'incompetent cervix', and mothers find themselves ashamed if they get into trouble, if they need help or can't succeed as the medical authorities would wish. Although birthing is natural, not all women are able to do it with complete ease.

It is worth remembering that, in Britain, a mother has a legal right to take her placenta home. It will be disposed of quickly, so it is worth telling the medical team that you will want it before you go into the final stages of birthing. A hospital will no doubt consider you mad and you may have to insist.

But what would you do with it? Most women bury it, offering the blood back to the earth, a gift to the gods of the land, in honour of our grandmothers.

PRECIOUS FIRST MOMENTS

The first breath of a new-born child is important, and to be involved in the cutting of the cord is one of the most poignant in giving birth. And awareness of the first breath is magical. The air is not just a colourless blend of chemicals, but rich with energy, sound, light and emotion. So it is important to do what we can to ensure that first breath is one of gentleness and love.

The first moments, when the child is given into our arms, are precious. We share breath, warmth, stillness: life flowing through the blood of past and future. The softer the lights, the least sounds, the most gentle environment is crucial for a body that has so far heard all through the muffles of a belly wall. And it is in those first moments that we give some of the most exquisite gifts to our children, of love and assurance. A new-born infant's senses are overwhelmed in those first moments, and it is often a familiar sound that soothes the soul. So we can sing again the songs the little one has heard us sing from within, songs of soothing, of calming, of time passing and moments breathed well.

NEW SACRED ZONE

It may take a few hours or days, but after the birth there is a transition to be made. For we have worked with deity of birth and death through this powerful gateway, and now we must begin our work with the spirit forces

of mothering, seeking out their wisdom as that internal bloody bond transforms into an external milky one.

GETTING SACRED HELP

If a child is born in hospital, the coming home is another opportunity for the welcoming rite to be done. Here, upon the altar to our ancestors, where the space was crafted for the new life to join our family, we can leave offerings of thanks to the gods and the dead. And we celebrate!

It is now that we begin truly to forge our relationship with the goddess of mothering. And it is not long before we find that she is a natural force not only of loving care, but of immense emotional strength, a protective power - stronger than most warriors - of patience and giving. For the first months of motherhood take many women to the edge of sanity.

On occasion our own survival instinct overrules the mothering hormones, and it is in these moments that our Druid teachers guide us to sit at the altar to our ancestors, and weep with our grandmothers who have faced the same torment of sleepless nights, and a baby who won't stop crying! And when our tears are dry, for we've felt the flow of life moving through generations, we make offerings to the goddess of motherhood, breathe deep - and keep going.

And when on a warm day, without the unnecessary of nappies or clothes we are lying together on a bed or in the grass, and the little soul smiles at the tickling whisper of the wind or breath, chuckling like a mountain brook, we know too that the joy we feel deep within is the same joy our grandmothers felt, and have felt for thousands and thousands of years.

It is in these moments that our teachers guide us to sit at the altar to our ancestors, and weep with our grandmothers who have faced the same torment of sleepless nights, and a baby who won't stop crying!



Emma Restall Orr is a spiritual teacher and priestess and spokesperson for Druidry, head of the international Druid Network, Chief of the Order of the Yew, and former Joint Chief of the British Druid Order. She teaches courses worldwide, and lectures on, environmentalism, Druidry healing, and women's spirituality.