

Dando a Luz

REDISCOVERING THE ANCIENT WISDOM IN BIRTH

By Robert M. Biter, M.D.

there exists a moment just before a baby takes that first breath that holds a significance only paralleled by the final one. These short periods of in-between, the sacred pauses before our entrances and exits, provide us with an opportunity to bring the light, to reflect upon the beginnings and endings of life, and to subtly adjust to the fact that the world has changed forever as someone new has just arrived or departed.

For those of us fortunate enough to have supported people at the beginnings and ends of their journeys, we know these moments well. Yet, I wonder, have we allowed their importance to be diminished? For those of us who have dedicated ourselves to confronting a troubled healthcare system, are we remembering to honor birth as a process of bringing the light?

Insights and Light

As a National Health Service Corps Scholar, I began my career after residency working with predominantly Latina immigrant women who became my (sometimes reluctant) professors of Spanish. I learned the words to describe the process of birth and gained the ability to conduct a medical interview and explain the risks and benefits of procedures in my patients' native tongue. I asked about *dolor* (pain) or *cólicos* (cramps), and described the process of bringing a baby into the world as *parto* (labor, work). These are some

of the words we use to describe birth that can betray us.

Only recently, while spending the last six months working in Mexico, some 15 years after first struggling with a language that I never formally studied, did I hear another Spanish phrase to describe giving birth: *dando a luz*—literally “to bring the light.”

I was immediately overwhelmed by the beauty of this expression and simultaneously saddened that it has become forgotten by the hundreds of Spanish speakers who served as my first translators. The omission of this reference and its lack of an equivalent in English seemed to clearly illustrate the basis of the obstetrical crisis we face around the world. While the specifics may differ, the issues surrounding maternity care invariably involve replacing the sacred with fear, trading technology for the natural beauty of human reproduction, and carelessly trampling over the rights of women.

In doing so, it should be noted that outcomes have not improved. It has recently been reported, for example, that the maternal mortality rate in Texas has nearly doubled during the last decade despite increases in the intervention and cesarean rates. When I first learned that *luz* literally meant “light,” but also “power,” I wondered whether the removal of this phrase from our vocabulary paralleled our removal of power from birthing women, who are the only ones capable of bringing the light. I became further obsessed with linguistics after discovering that *parto*, a



distinctly feminine physiologic process, was, in fact, being described by a masculine verb.

Recalling my years of Latin studies during my Catholic high school education, I looked to the derivative of this word “labor,” or *parto*, that has replaced the phrase *dando a luz*. The Latin derivative was never meant to describe work, but rather “to prepare”—to prepare for a new life, to ready oneself for the process of welcoming another to the planet. I became determined to return light and power to their rightful place in birth and death.

My dedication deepened to the worldwide nonprofit Seaside Giving, which provides an opportunity for women with few resources to experience the power of a natural birth and to experience their own power as they “pay it forward” by completing a service project in their communities. In doing so, these women, after bringing the light with birth, continue to bring the light to themselves and the world around them.

As I continued to contemplate that we come from and go to the light, I was reminded of how my family recently loved my sweet mother to death in the home where she lived her entire life, and of the lessons I learned from losing a young father to cancer when I had just become old enough to drive a car. Bringing the light to birth and death allows love to transcend grief, honors the most significant moments of our existence, and inspires us all to live our lives more consciously in between.

I acknowledge that this process might seem esoteric

or somewhat academic in nature. I realize that my ability to currently travel the world after removing myself from the constraints of most of my worldly possessions remains a rare opportunity only made possible by the loving support of amazing friends. While some may contend that contemplating the beauty of birth and death may be easier surrounded by the tropical beauty of the Mexican Riviera, the following thoughts may help us all to bring the light, even if we find ourselves struggling to balance the daily responsibilities of our lives.

Reclaiming the Sanctity of Birth

Remove fear. Rather than encouraging bravery, we have an opportunity to remove the power of irrational fears from overcoming us emotionally or creating an environment in which birth is perceived as scary and dangerous and devoid of the beauty of light. By using techniques such as aromatherapy and essential oils, guided imagery, and exploration of our beliefs hidden within our theta brain waves, we can directly impact that powerful part of the brain that integrates our emotions and perceptions of our experiences. The power of the amygdala is undeniable. It’s the part of the temporal lobe that, when stimulated by our senses, memories, and levels of consciousness, immediately ignites the survival instinct or deep sense of self protection. When we utilize modalities to illustrate that we are safe, that old patterns can be eliminated, and that our experiences of

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emotional events can be less uncomfortable, the power of this aspect of the limbic system can similarly be harnessed to remove fear. Only after fear is removed can there be space for the power of light to return to the birthing woman, the baby she is welcoming, and those supporting them.


Bring light to ourselves. As we welcome the light for the women and babies we support, are we welcoming the presence of this light in our own lives? Spending quiet time in meditation, contemplation, or prayer frequently has the power to transform our own life experiences. Identifying when we are not treating ourselves as worthy, or not living our lives more deeply after being allowed to bask in the warmth of observing and assisting the beginnings of life, can mirror the light for ourselves and our loved ones. This process requires an equal exchange of energy, a respect for those assisting and those assisted. Bringing light to ourselves does not diminish the light of others or create a disharmonious paradigm of the healer and the wounded. Rather, the light expands and creates a more luminous world for everyone. Seaside Giving contributes to this equal exchange by offering an opportunity for women to become fully engaged, financially supporting their births only upon the completion of a project of service for their communities.

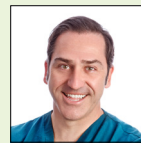
Harness the power. After we set the intention to allow the ancient wisdom of birth to return to the process, there exists an opportunity for this powerful light to transform us. Immediately after women under my care would birth their babies, I would sometimes whisper, “Remember this moment. When you find yourself struggling or vulnerable, remember how powerful you are. Look at what you just did.” Years afterward, many of them who experienced a tragedy or loss, or who were tempted by old patterns of addiction, would tell me how my encouragement to harness the power of that moment became a great source of strength.

It is well-documented that the time of pregnancy and birth is when lifestyle changes, adherence to therapeutic recommendations, and development of healthier dietary practices are most successful. What we frequently overlook is that it’s also possible to achieve a similar transformation in our relationships with ourselves and others, to awaken to a more conscious life and to remember our worth, our ability to contribute, and our opportunity to arrive at abundance.

Return birth to its central place. Rather than relegating birth and death to hidden corridors in sterile hospital settings, allowing these precious moments to take place surrounded by beauty and family permits an entire community to be healed. Similarly, being mindful of our

vocabulary describing the beginnings and endings of life will gradually return to us the ancient wisdom offered us from remaining present and open to the light. The design of the Seaside Giving centers being created worldwide intentionally offers a central architectural depiction of *dando a luz*. Light will stream from the ceiling facade into the entire physical structure during the day, and will be illuminated into the sky at night whenever a birth is taking place. While protecting the privacy of the birthing family, this will provide a continual and repeated reminder to an entire community that life is beginning, as the light will be visible to the surrounding areas. Imagine if the practice of closing curtains and turning out the lights to signify a death in the family was similarly reversed, so that the windows are opened to reveal a powerful light to celebrate the journey, rather than its end?

Regardless of religious tradition or social constructs, light has always symbolized the power of beginnings and endings. Even in a world when technology has crowded our ability to connect with nature, when our ability to seemingly transcend time and space with advanced transportation and communication capabilities has expanded, we still pause to marvel at the incomparable beauty of the colors and patterns of light during sunrise and sunsets. We remain surprised and awestruck, no matter how often we witness these events. We don’t attempt to control them or diminish their power. We don’t perceive them with fear of the new day’s beginning, or become overwhelmed with grief for the one that is ending. We pause and honor the beauty of the light coming and going. We remain present, if only for a moment. When we return to treating birth and death with the same degree of awe, the entire world will be transformed and we all will benefit from *dando a luz*—from bringing the light. 



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