

BIRTH

A homily by Sharon Langert given at Wildflower Church on Sunday

January 6, 2008

I used to be certain that I was in control of my life. Now I'm a mother. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have decided to become a mother if I knew how completely out of control I'd sometimes feel.

There's a whole industry out there aimed at deluding strong, independent women into thinking they can be a mother and still be in control. We have "What to Expect When You're Expecting" so nothing has to be unexpected. We have Bradley classes that teach us how to assert ourselves with the medical establishment to get the birth we want. Plus, I'm open to spirituality, so I even had the goddesses of mothering behind me. So I read and researched and practiced and studied and did prenatal yoga, and I was sure I knew everything I needed to know to be a mother.

Because I was "completely in control," I let myself pretend that we were the wildest-and-craziest of parents. This, by the way, was easier to do in Connecticut, where we were at the time, than it is in Austin. Anyway, at the ultrasound, when the doctor asked if we wanted to know the gender, we said no, not so much because we didn't want to know, but because it felt so much more wild-and-crazy to pretend like we didn't. But we took our grainy, black-and-white video home and began to pour over it, searching for any tell-tale signs, identifying hips and legs and scrutinizing what lay between.

Being the diligent problem-solvers that we are, we went to the internet, of course. We had seen three lines, and so could be certain, we were told, that we were having a girl. Praise be, because boys' names are slim-pickins out there, to be sure.

When labor started, we had charts, and diagrams, and lists to guide us, and hoo-boy, were we in control. But the goddesses of mothering looked down upon us, had a little chuckle amongst themselves, and got to work. A completely irregular labor that was impossible to predict dragged on for seventeen hours, until finally, our baby was born. Max took one look at the sludge-covered little creature that was emerging, and thought, Oh GOD, she got my NOSE, and boy, is she FUNNY-LOOKING!

Fortunately for Liam, Max's nose suited him just fine as soon as we figured out he was a boy. And the goddesses threw back their heads and roared with delight.

Those goddesses meant business, though, and got down to the dirty work of showing me who was—or at least who wasn't—boss. Liam came out blue as can be, having aspirated meconium. The nervous-looking people dressed in a brighter, official-looking blue waved him in my face, and whisked him away. It took them five hours to stabilize him, during which I moved in a surreal world in which I was a mother but would not have been able to identify my baby. I had followed my roadmap to the end of the natural childbirth journey, but when I got there, someone had moved the “Welcome to Motherhood” sign that my baby's sweet breath was supposed to be.

My first week of motherhood was filled with shattered expectations. When I left the hospital two days after giving birth, kicked out even though our baby had to stay the week, the car seat was empty. No baby lying next to me at night. An electric pump instead of my baby at my breast. Our first week of parenting was a grueling sequence of visits back and forth to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. This was the start of learning that the ONLY thing I should “Expect” with a child IS the unexpected.

From the beginning, Liam has defied understanding. Some specialists diagnose autism; others, raw genius. It’s so difficult to make him happy, or protect him from deep sadness, because the things that make him happy or sad make little sense to most people, even his parents. We buy him toys, and he sits for hours with his hymnal. We take him to the playground, and he’s miserable. His love of the hymnal is charming and sweet. But those of us who love Liam have had to really stretch our capacity to accept his passions for things like insisting he’s pregnant and wearing a ball under his shirt for days, or reciting stops and transfers and route numbers from the bus schedule. He follows no developmental timetable, no “What to Expect from Your Toddler” kind of thing.

I think most moms would acknowledge that children are humbling, that they are experts at showing us how little we know. For parents, families, even the whole community, labor and delivery is only just beginning as a new child bursts forth into the world. Just as painful contractions during childbirth are actually causing the womb to open up, so the intensity of the dance of the child’s spirit with ours causes amazing growth and development in all of us. For me, basic concepts that have cemented in my

mind—happiness, fun, discipline, misery, desperation—are all broken down, only to be rebuilt to include Liam’s incredibly unique perspective on these things. Daily, I am the Phoenix, crumbling in a pile of ashes, only to rise again to the glorious challenge that is mothering him. Daily, I continue to give birth...to myself: I am reborn with a beginner’s mind, a new woman, a better person.

When I had Jules—whom I caught in my own hands after an exhilarating labor—it was a real shift in this process. Jules helps me put the pieces of myself back together. He is relatively “typical,” and won’t teach himself to read well before the age of three, for example, or play obscure chords on the piano...or sit silently for an hour in church, for that matter. He loves other kids, and balls and cars and throwing things and climbing. He grounds me, centers me, gives me trust that I’m not living in some parallel universe. But it is Liam whose intense, passionate relationship with ME and ONLY ME, forces me to learn everything I never knew I needed to know about myself and the world. He is my guru, the midwife who helps me birth myself again and again.

When I was preparing this, I was going to mention something about Liam’s copy of “Singing the Living Tradition” being his most prized possession. But I wanted to be true, to be true to him, so I asked him what thing he loved most in the house. He said, “I think you know what I’m going to say-ay....! Yes, you do-oo!” I smiled, sure that I did, because that hymnal is ALWAYS in his hands. He sighed: “My sustain pedal for my keyboard. AND my bus schedule.” And I smiled again, kissed his forehead, and knew

that at any moment, what comes next—what comes out of a question, or a body, or a mother’s new self—is always a surprise that is completely out of my control.

MARRIAGE

**A homily given by Annice and Ramon Ellington at Wildflower Church on Sunday
January 6, 2008**

We’ve been asked to talk about Love. We have been married almost eighteen years now. Before I met him, I had been married all but two years of my adult life.

Before I met her, I had dodged marriage for all but two years of my adult life.

He brought a daughter to our family.

She brought two sons to our family. We are a blended family.

We have also both worked for many years in jobs helping the disabled and their families. These jobs have given us countless opportunities for witnessing love in action.

We don’t claim to be experts on the topic of Love but we both feel we are “seasoned veterans” who can talk about various aspects of love.

We call these the Ellington Eightfold Path to Love:

The first path begins with L. Learn about one another and learn about life together through shared interests and connection to the community around you. Charles Dickens wrote, “A loving heart is the truest wisdom” and Jean Toomer wrote, “We never know we are beings until we love. And then it is we know the powers and potentialities of human existence.”

The second path starts with A. Accept one another for the people that you are, don’t try to change each other. Sam Keen tells us, “You come to love not by finding the perfect person, but by seeing an imperfect person perfectly.”

The third path starts with U. Understand one another's wants and needs—this requires open, high-quality communication and attentiveness. According to Nicolas Sparks, "Love is more than three words mumbled before bedtime. Love is sustained by action, a pattern of devotion in the things we do for each other every day."

The fourth path begins with G. Give for the sake of the other. William Shakespeare wrote, "The more I give to thee, the more I have."

The fifth path begins with H. Help one another to become fully-realized human beings, acknowledging one another's interests and history. An anonymous quote tells us, "To love a person is to learn the song that is in their heart, and to sing it to them when they have forgotten."

The sixth path starts with T. Treasure one another for the unique relationship you share—don't compare to previous relationships/expectations. "Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage." - Lao Tzu

The seventh path begins with E. Enjoy the relationship through mindfulness and living in the present. According to Mark Twain, "Love is the irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired."

The eighth path begins with R. Respect each other at all times. "In the end we are all separate: our stories, no matter how similar, come to a fork and diverge. We are drawn to each other because of our similarities, but it is our differences we must learn to respect." Goethe

These "paths" spell out LAUGHTER. Laughter can be an expression of joy. Love brings us joy and should be shared. Mark Twain said "Grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of joy, you must have somebody to divide it with." Joanne Woodward,

Paul Newman's wife said, "Sexiness wears thin after a while and beauty fades, but to be married to a man who makes you laugh every day, ah, now that's a real treat." And Ralph Waldo Emerson told us, "To laugh often and love much...to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others, to give one's self...this is to have succeeded."

DEATH

A homily given by Barbara Dickens at Wildflower Church on Sunday January 6, 2008

I'm guessing that our minister chose someone who had about reached normal life expectancy to talk about death, assuming that anyone at age seventy five would be spending a lot of time thinking about it.

Actually, I've been thinking about death since early childhood. I grew up hearing preachers warn of the danger of dying, quite possibly that VERY night, without making peace with God. At the other extreme we sang exuberant songs about the glories of heaven. "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be" and "Just over in glory land we'll live eternally."

You just didn't want to die the wrong way.

As a child I thought of God as a loving father and prayed often but after a few years of hearing these dire warnings, I went to the "mourner's bench" in front of the pulpit at age twelve. I confessed my sin, which was telling my mother that I had singed my eyelashes when I built a campfire for the neighbor kids for roasting marshmallows, when really I had been smoking a weed we called "Indian tobacco". I didn't think to tell mom I hadn't inhaled.

As a young woman I would imagine life spans like both my grandmothers, of eighty five to ninety years. From time to time I would calculate how many years I probably had left. In my late twenties I wrote a college paper about trying to live so that at my death I would have no regrets about my behavior. Of course, by then I already had quite a few regrets.

In my forties I wrote in my journal, "Life is about half over now" and I wondered what I ought to be doing differently. I made a promise to myself to make the second half of my life different in some way I hadn't yet found.

Then one day, when I was fifty one, my boss called me into his office at work. There stood my pastor. He told me to sit down, and then said that my husband had just had a heart attack. Before I could ask any questions, he blurted out, "And he's dead". In that moment my life was changed. The future looked blank, totally black. Life as I had known it since I'd married at age nineteen was over and I had no idea what was ahead.

That night I dreamed that disembodied hands reached in my window by my bed to take my life. I woke up screaming "Help". I think it must have been a prayer.

After the memorial service my sons went back to Austin and my daughter to Tulsa. I tried to continue to go to work every day, because now it was only I paying the bills. I didn't know what else to do.

The first couple of months were bleak. Sure I had a job and a home, but never before had I been so aware that life is much more than economic security.

I was in this state of mind when a letter arrived from Belize, Central America, where my brother and sister-in-law were in the Peace Corps. They asked if I'd like to come and visit them. I brushed aside the facts that they lived in a hot, humid climate in

the jungle without electricity and the amenities it makes possible. Their bathroom was a latrine down the hill; they hauled water home from a large rain vat, and washed clothes and bathed down at the river.

I COULDN'T WAIT to get there! Those four years became one of the most fulfilling and fun times of my whole life. I felt reborn.

I've had other losses in my life that have also resulted in unexpected benefits. Besides the death of my marriage, the death of another life style was retiring. I resisted it several years longer than I needed to because I could not imagine what life would be like without the social work which had defined me for so many years. Finally waning energy nudged me into it and I discovered that I was perfectly capable of filling my now open schedule in interesting and meaningful ways. Wildflower Church has been the perfect setting for finding friendships and useful activities.

Someone whose name I've forgotten said that every great loss is like the plowing of a field, turning under the old in preparation for new growth. I've found it so.

Although I no longer have either the hope or the fear of heaven or hell, I still look ahead to my death, trying to imagine what, if anything lies beyond it. The only evidence to help me guess is the smaller deaths that have occurred throughout my life. These have presented themselves to me as sad emptiness but in nearly every case have become new paths to growth and new joys. I'm not eager to hurry to my destiny, but I can look toward it with hope and a peaceful heart.