During our first home birth, I can remember reaching a state I had never been in before. In spite of the many intense experiences I’d had in my life up to that time, this experience brought me to a new edge. I looked over to my husband, Tom, for assurance. I was entering into the transition stage of labor, the stage that necessitates letting go. My fear of the unknown made me clench onto control even harder. I blurted out, “I don’t know if I can do this!”

For Tom, the decision to birth at home was a logical conclusion that respected normal physiology. For me it was a desire to own that confidence, coupled with a fear of the hospital, a lack of trust in their interventions, and an intellectual pinch of downright rebellion against needing their system to accomplish a normal body function like birth. In theory I respected the body’s ability to function. In reality, unlike Tom, my upbringing and previous experiences were being challenged. For me, this first home birth was a paradigm shift.
In his usual matter-of-fact way, Tom said, “Of course you can do this. You’re in a woman’s body and that’s what they’re designed for. You’re doing just fine!”

I retorted, “How do you know I’m doing fine? You’ve never been to a birth before!”

In response, he put his hand on my shoulder, and looked me in the eyes. “Yeah,” he said, “but I know you, and you are being you, and that means you are doing just fine.”

Those reassuring words soothed my anxiety. A physiological state of ease ensued. My intellect loosened its tight grip to the intelligence of the heart. Labor progressed normally, and Justin was born shortly after.

Such resounding trust in normal, natural physiology does not always come easy, but it comes with experience. Tom had grown up in a family who trusted in the body’s ability to function. This was in stark contrast to my upbringing. I had undergone three major surgeries by the time I was 6 years old. The traumas of separation and estrangement that followed hammered home in me the belief that healing happened with medicine and surgery.

Together we had been introduced to the chiropractic principle that life expresses intelligence, and that our body’s own innate intelligence knew what the body needed at every given moment. Chiropractors recognize that the nervous system is the conduit for this intelligence, and that a nervous system free of interference leads to the expression of normal physiology. Chiropractic was the beginning of the biggest paradigm shift in my life—moving away from learned fears into inherent trust and respect.

So when we decided to have our unattended home births, in theory it seemed consistent with this philosophy. But as Joseph Chilton Pearce so nicely implies, theory is not real or worth talking about unless it has been experienced.
Healing Birth

Written by Jeanne Ohm, D.C.
Thursday, 01 September 2016 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 07:09

Back then I really knew very little about birth and did not realize the major impact birthing has on the future of human potential. My experiences of all six of our home births taught me it is all about the baby. My continuous observation of perinatal women has proven that the greatest, most effective evidence-based science is that of normal physiology. Thirtyfive years working with pregnant moms in preparation for birth has shown me that perinatal chiropractic care leads to safer, easier births for both mothers and babies. And most important, I now know that if we are to heal the world (and heal our species), we must first heal birth.

All About the Baby

Our pregnancy and birthing choices were made from the perspective that it’s all about the baby. We knew that the baby would be exposed to all of my chemical input, so I knew to avoid all toxic substances. Additionally, I knew that procedures like epidurals may appear to help the mother, but would have potential side effects for my baby—so they were not an option. When I was first offered ultrasound in my fourth pregnancy, my antennas immediately went up. There was no convincing information that said it wasn’t harmful, and for me to make an informed choice on this matter depended on that information. So I stuck with the tried-and-true, non-invasive fetoscope and measuring tape for all of my pregnancies. To “see” my baby, I simply got quiet, closed my eyes, and connected.

I was also very cognizant that this baby inside of me was aware of my emotional state, although this thinking was not promoted at the time. Without knowing the actual hormonal exchanges that were happening, I knew that this little one was a living, conscious being sharing all of my experiences. Talking with my baby in utero and avoiding stress were two ways of acknowledging his sensitivities. I had read Ina May Gaskin’s book, Spiritual Midwifery, and it was clear to me that a mother’s emotions in labor had a profound impact on its progress. I figured the same was true in pregnancy.

Normal Physiology is the Greatest Science

The science of chiropractic emphasizes that it’s crucial to respect normal physiology. This translated easily to pregnancy and birth. Of course the intelligence that Guyton’s Physiology refers to as “that mysterious something” knew just what my baby and I needed at any given moment. I optimized my body’s function with regular chiropractic adjustments. I ditched the due-date theory after my first pregnancy. Although I had feelings similar to all women at the end of pregnancy—“Are we there yet?”—I also knew that any interference to the baby’s timeline in coming out could negatively affect my birth and baby. Induction in any form, even the “natural” suggestions like castor oil, were a violation of normal physiology, and therefore a potential harm to my baby.
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Labor proceeded with me calling the shots—or, rather, me listening to my body’s cues. This was different for each of my six labors. My positions, and my need for nourishment, rest, or movement, were all personalized to each particular birth. There were no schedules to adhere to, no threatening policies, no prodding strangers to tolerate, and no negative energy. There was a caring family, close friends, and sometimes an amazing midwife. Always supportive, always confident, and all loving.

Until recently, there was not too much knowledge about the hormones of birth. Pioneers in the natural birthing world like Michel Odent, M.D., and Kerstin Uvnäs-Moberg, Ph.D., have introduced us to the powerful hormone, oxytocin, and how the medicalization of birth may be altering the expression of human potential, individually and as a species. In other words, the technocratic procedures that mothers are told will make birth safer actually impede its natural process. Rushing to the hospital, vaginal exams in labor, fasting, insensitive or disempowering phrases by hospital staff—all put mothers into a fear-based, sympathetic fight-or-flight mode, which is counterintuitive to the progression of labor. Add mandatory fetal monitoring, restrictive and forced positions, induction or augmentation of labor, and epidurals and other invasive chemicals, and we radically alter normal physiology and hormonal production. What is sacrificed? The release of oxytocin and a safer, easier birth for both mother and child.

Chiropractic in Pregnancy for Safer, Easier Births

Upon my introduction to chiropractic in 1976, I heard that women under chiropractic care had easier and faster births than most. When I became an instructor for the ICPA Diplomate program in 1999, teaching the module Perinatal Care, I wanted an explanation of what I, too, had found in practice with pregnant moms for almost 20 years. In those years I observed that there were three causes of neurological upset that lead to dystocia (difficult labor): physiological/ neuro-biomechanical causes, emotional causes, and technocratic/medical causes. I sought to discover the potential relationship between the chiropractic adjustment and the prevention of these three causes. Here is what I found:

Physiological and Neuro-Biomechanical Causes: Williams Obstetrics lists three components as causes for dystocia: power (inadequate nerve function); passage (unbalanced, misaligned pelvic bones); and passenger (suboptimal baby positioning). Simply put, this is how the adjustment relates to these three causes:

- Power: The chiropractic adjustment reduces interference to the nervous system allowing for
greater physiological function and performance.

**Passage**: The adjustment creates balance in the pelvic bones, muscles and ligaments.

**Passenger**: This balanced pelvis contributes to optimal baby positioning in birth.

**Emotional Causes**: Fear is the greatest enemy of a mother in labor. Understanding the autonomic nervous system (ANS), we realize that if we can establish a state of ease and overcome sympathetic override (fight-or-flight) in pregnancy and labor, the production and effects of oxytocin are maximized. Chiropractic adjustments affect the ANS via the vagus nerve. By impacting the ANS, we are building resilience to sympathetic override and strengthening the function of the ANS’s social branch. Additionally, the vagus nerve is responsible for oxytocin release. Care up to and during birth may have a significant effect in the release of this important hormone.

What’s more, when a pregnant mother is surrounded with the hope and ease offered by the chiropractic philosophy (“Life expresses intelligence”), her social vagus is further activated, and she approaches birth in a stable, assured, trusting manner.

**Technocratic Causes**: The typical technological birth comes from the premise that pregnancy and birth are a disorder to be monitored and controlled. Somehow we have allowed the mystique of technology to overcome our practical understanding of normal physiology. Technological intervention can be lifesaving at times. However, when every pregnancy and birth is approached from the fear based premise of what can go wrong, we create problems that do not even exist. It then becomes easy to justify needless and invasive interventions, which have been shown to lead to further intervention. Although a woman may be led to believe that these interventions are better for her and her baby, she is frequently unaware of the potential harm these interventions can create.

Chiropractors have been a steady support for informed, conscious choice for over 100 years.
Healing Birth

Their greatest desire is that parents make evidence-informed decisions on all of their family’s healthcare needs. This means reading all evidence of interventions, and not depending solely on the one-sided, popular, technocratic perspective. I have known many chiropractors who are more knowledgeable of peer reviewed literature on birth practices than many birth practitioners. And let’s remember that chiropractors deduce from the greatest evidence-informed practice there is: the science of normal physiology.

To Heal the Earth, We Must First Heal Birth

The virtue of humility appears to be devolving. If you burden yourself with watching the news, if you are on any social media pages, or if you are simply observant, you may notice the hostility and aberrant behaviors so prevalent today. Where is the love? Why is it so hard for us to show respect and consideration to each other, or even to ourselves?

As my esteemed colleague Chris Kent, D.C., says, “Everything we experience is processed through our nervous system. If our nervous system is not functioning to its optimal level, our perception of the world is distorted and our ability to respond appropriately is compromised. This not only affects our physical health, but also our emotional and psychological function as well.”

I propose that our nervous systems are being reprogrammed throughout pregnancy and especially at birth due to physiological, emotional, and technocratic causes. Modern lifestyle habits and technocratic birthing procedures have contributed to a deficit of our neurological function. The physical and emotional traumas to both the mother and baby in these widely accepted birthing practices have a direct effect on the healthy development of the infant’s social vagal branch. As stated before, this nerve is responsible for the release of oxytocin, the “hormone of love.” By depriving children of the proper development of this nerve function from birth, we are directly affecting the social well-being of generations to come. The consequences of this may impact the human potential in an immeasurable and insidious way.

Imagine during pregnancy, instead of relying on ultrasound to “see” our babies, we learn to be still and feel our babies’ presence as they communicate with us. Imagine gently talking with them, conscious that they hear our words and feel our attention. Now imagine this quiet communication evolving into a powerful trust so strong that ordinary “hunches” emerge as vivid signals pointing us directly to our best course of action in birth.
Now feel how wonderful it would be to experience encouragement, respect, and support in pregnancy while approaching labor. Imagine the nervous system being strengthened and building resilience to the sympathetic overload we are exposed to daily. As we approach the time for birth, we allow labor to initiate on its own. We choose our birthing place based on comfort and safety—parameters that we choose from confidence, not fear. Instead of an atmosphere of procedures or interventions, there is an ambiance of support and trust. The mother’s choice for movement or rest is respected. Since there are no artificial chemicals interfering with natural hormonal production, the body’s hormones are performing their amazing feats, and labor progresses just as it should.

When the baby’s head appears, no physical force is applied to the baby’s fragile neck and spine. There are no cuts to the mother’s perineum, and so both mom and baby are in a state of awe. They are given as much time as desired to look into each other’s eyes, activating the social vagus and priming it for its important lifelong role of loving, human expression. With no rush to whisk the baby away, to cut the cord, examine or weigh her, we take a birth pause, and in that moment silently celebrate a new, unique human life.

Then, when we are both ready, following each other’s cues, we bring our little treasure to our breast and together, from inside ourselves, with ease and assurance, we relax into the most comfortable position and continue the nurturing of our babies that happened so effortlessly in the womb. Mom is purring, baby is making those sweet suckling sighs. The vagus is communicating. Oxytocin is surging.

I will leave you with these wise words by Christiane Northrup, from the documentary Giving Birth:

The way babies are meant to be is with their mothers, skin to skin, between their breasts, the outer womb. They’ve just been in the inner womb for nine months, but we think somehow we have evolved technologically where we are beyond that, and so we lose instinctual wisdom.

Birth is a magical time of bringing a new human consciousness into the world. The baby’s brain is ripe for the first impressions of what it’s like to be on earth. How it’s done affects that baby for the rest of its life. A child needs to be greeted with gentleness, with calmness, with love, and with a sense of, “It’s OK, you can relax now. You’re here.”