

Orgasmic Birth: The Best-Kept Secret

Directed by Debra Pascali-Bonaro
 Seedsman Group, Inc.,
 Westlake Village, California, USA
www.orgasmicbirth.com
 85 min, DVD, \$35

Orgasmic Birth, visual storytelling at its best, is Debra Pascali-Bonaro's response to the crisis in birth today, with its increasing obstetric medicalization of labor and escalating cesarean section rates. It alternates nine birth stories with commentary by midwives, physicians, and educators. Participating mothers offered the filmmakers unusual access to their lives, believing strongly in the value of their personal experiences. Filmed in muted, golden tones in serene, darkened rooms, the movie counters the media's hysterical depictions of birth and the negative birth stories all too commonly heard these days.

Orgasmic Birth shows women laboring and giving birth in warm, supportive surroundings (save for one poignant counter-example). Engaged in the hard work and great joy of labor, they are free to express themselves through movements most harmonious to them. We hear the musical sounds coming from deep within them, or high and keening, which reveal a repertoire of birth songs familiar to midwives and home birth mothers. Each woman is held, soothed, and comforted, encouraged by partners and midwives as she welcomes and endures the intensity of contractions and enables the opening of body and mind to let the baby emerge into its first birth day. It is a miracle, each time.

The film's title is meant to be provocative. In the United States—a country obsessed with sex and concurrently puritanical about sexual matters—the very word “orgasmic” commands attention. By “naming” labor and birth differently from the usual terminology and extending the definition of sexuality to include women's birthing powers, Pascali-Bonaro expands awareness of what is possible and guides viewers into a compelling,

persuasive realm where they might not have expected to go. They see that birth *can* be a profoundly sensual, sexual, and spiritual experience; that oxytocin is most likely to flow and increase when women agree to *feel* their labors—a process that benefits mother and baby in so many ways before and after birth. Most of these women labor in an intimate environment conducive to letting go and surrendering, enabling them to transcend pain (or not to feel their contractions as pain) and, for some, to experience real sexual pleasure.

Birth is not romanticized; the viewer labors along with each woman. “I'm scared. . . something's going to break,” says one. Later, she reminisces, “I thought it would go on forever. . . . Nobody tells you that if you stand up you can have the baby in five minutes! You have to trust that people will accept you when you totally let go. I'm *so* proud of myself.” “I have fears too,” says another. “Will I have the strength?” Others express confidence: “Just picture this brave little soul. If he's ready, I'm ready.”

In “Birth by the Numbers,” an invaluable DVD “extra” interview, Eugene Declercq guides viewers through sobering statistics. He compares the U.S. neonatal, perinatal, and maternity mortality rates with those of other industrialized countries. Asking whether cesarean operations, invaluable in countries with inadequate medical care and in instances of crises, have reached a point in this country where they hurt rather than help when performed as often as they are, he suggests that “changes in practice” have led to the current persistent increase. (I can only wish he could have been as specific about the agents and nature of these “changes” as he was about the numbers he quoted.) Finally, acknowledging the birth reform movement that exists already, he lists the many ways in which citizens can join and become active in advocating for a more natural, safer way of giving birth.

Jutta Mason, a Canadian activist, wrote that “Women's culture, when it disentangles itself from the medical monoculture, is so rich, so full of variation and interesting detail. . . women (give) birth in ways totally unknown within hospitals” (1). She adds that when medicalization becomes dominant, these fascinating birth stories virtually go underground. *Orgasmic Birth* does not hesitate or equivocate in bringing these vital stories into the light, literally. Robbie Davis-Floyd, one of the film's commentators, points out that we need to tell and hear them—although often it is not considered all right or polite to do so: Might not women who have had planned or unplanned medical interventions feel inadequate, consider themselves to have failed?

Yet clearly the purpose of this film is not to *judge*, but to ensure that the knowledge of women's powers and wisdom remains as alive and viable as possible. It succeeds admirably and should be an essential part of

education for all those involved in caring for childbearing women. And why not show it (along with many of the new childbirth films coming out these days) to young women and men in the context of sexuality and life skills courses, as well as in the area of reproductive rights, to give them a way of approaching childbirth as an empowering event of life? Perhaps it will help build a constituency of mothers and practitioners large enough to tip the scales and create a re-visioning and re-structuring of maternity care.

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References

1. Mason J. The meaning of birth stories. *Birth Gazette* 1991; 6(3):14–19.