

The Spiritual Roles of a Midwife by Beth Anne Moonstone

Midwives take on many different clinical, energetic and spiritual roles both before and during birth. The sacred nature of our work requires that we recognize that some of the most important things we do are the least clinical.

The first of these roles is what I call **The Sacred Cup**. This is the awareness that our primary job as midwives is to hold the sacred cup while the transformation of birth happens within. We acknowledge that birth is not about us as midwives; rather it is about women, mothers and the creation of life. We are witnesses to a miracle with each birth we are blessed to attend. We are mindful, knowledgeable and loving observers who hold the space for birthing mothers.

The second role is that of **The Guide**. As guides we observe and can provide direction and movement when it is the appropriate time. Often to the mother this guidance is little more than reminding her of the knowledge and wisdom that her body and her instincts already know. Sometimes it is a change of position, lighting, mood, a song, a joke or simply a reminder of that women's inner strength. We can shift the space, place and people present to adjust with the movement and direction of labor and birth. This includes providing a safe space for birth and allowing that space to adapt to the mothers changing needs as she follows her instincts. Sometimes this means teaching partners, friends and family how to support, respect and revere a laboring woman and to be an example of trust in the process.

The next role we often take on is that of **The Well**. This is often a hard role to learn as a student or friend attending birth. As a midwife it is an essential role. In our role as The Well we have learned that birth is an emotional, spiritual, and physically challenging process. As women birth shows us our weakness, our doubt, our hurt, the depth of our love, and reveals our hidden inner strengths and wisdom. We learn to witness women who are releasing powerful raw emotions. Often witnessing someone in pain, or who is powerfully emotional is the hardest thing to do. At first our natural instinct is to "fix" it or make it better. Student midwives run for rescue remedy and fathers ask us to "do" something. We as midwives need to recognize that this process of emotional and physical release is a necessary step in the journey of birth and rather than intervene in it or analyze we simply acknowledge it. This may mean letting the mother express her anger, her fear, her crying or frustration. This process is often accompanied by vomiting, bowel movements, pacing around the house, labor slowing or the mother having a profound moment of doubt. In our role as The Well we see that this process of release is not something to be rescued from, rather it is something we must experience and move through in order to move on in the process. We allow our mothers to go to the well and do whatever and however much or little inner work they need to do with our presence, support and guidance.

The fourth role is that of **The Flame**. This is the role that in normal low risk birth we use the least yet we must respect and honor the deep knowledge and skill required to take on this role. It is the place of action. Learning when to take this role on (and when not to) is often the hardest part of becoming a midwife. Knowing when to take action, to give herbs, medicine, perform a clinical skill, turn a baby, intervene or make an intercession into the natural process and when not to requires a foundation of trust that birth is a natural process. That sounds simple but as any of you who can remember the first few births you attended know it is not. To know when to take action a midwife must have a strong academic and clinical background and must learn to apply it wisely. These means that you base your action on something clinical, heart tones, mothers behavior or vitals, something tangible. Obviously when we have a shoulder dystocia or hemorrhage it is time for our role as The Flame and to take action. However when labor is difficult or long it does not mean something is wrong. If the mother and baby are fine clinically than we should be wearing a different role. Most obstetricians think this is their only role and need to constantly "do" something. If you are spending all your time at normal births in the role of The Flame you are probably creating problems where there are none and should remind yourself of some of the other important roles you can take on as a midwife. I would likewise caution that when it is truly needed this role is vital. You can't consult a book while a baby is stuck or a mom is fainting. Even though this role is used the least students and new midwives need to have a genuine respect for it's importance. Apprenticeship and supervision are an opportunity for student midwives to grow into this role.

The fifth role is that of **The Ground**. As with The Guide, this role begins during prenatal care. The education, empowerment and foundation we build with women becomes an anchor for them during labor. We help them to ground and focus. During labor the midwives presence, physical support, and calm

reassurance can allow the mother to be open to the process of birth. Gentle reminders of what she has learned, read and told you can help her stay open and flowing during birth. Before and in early labor a midwife can provide clarity, physical support and an important resource for information. During labor and birth we are physical support, calm presence and we can remain a focused and grounded anchor so that the mother can follow her instincts and be open to whatever that will look like.

These roles overlap and often occur simultaneously. Each is an important part of our calling as midwives. The different role we take on are as much about what we do as they are about what we do not do at any given moment. Ultimately as midwives we return to the place of holding the sacred cup while magic happens within.

Beth Anne Moonstone is a Midwife, Childbirth Educator, Certified American AquaNatal Instructor, Children's Yoga Instructor, Reiki Master and director of the WomanCraft Midwifery Education Program. She is the mother of three beautiful children, all born at home with midwives. In addition to her work in midwifery, Beth is deeply involved in natural parenting and living, homeschooling, and community activism.