

Birth Story Nights: Honoring All Experiences from All Mothers

By Kate Stroud

The women sit in a circle. The lights are low. The energy in the room is that of calm, loving acceptance of all that will be shared within these four walls. Sometimes the room is filled with tears and sometimes there are fits of laughter. As the stories are shared throughout the evening, we all cannot help but be affected by them and see threads of other women's stories in our own experiences.

We honor all experiences from all mothers, young and old, single or partnered, lesbian or straight, of all classes and races, and all different ways of birthing.

Birth Story Nights are a place that mothers — all mothers — can come and share their journey through birth. We are open to listening to women recount all paths that they have had to walk to get where they are. Sometimes the stories are joyful and triumphant and sometimes the stories are filled with grief and disappointment. In this space we do not judge or try to solve; we listen and hold the space for a mother to speak and be heard.

Our default is to hear difficult stories without comment because too often women face a sort of inquisition when they tell the stories of difficult births. Often they are asked: Did you try this? Why did you go to the hospital so early? Why did you let them induce you so early? Why didn't you keep trying? Why didn't you pick a different provider?

Still other times, women come to the Birth Story Night hungry for feedback and validation and we will give it when asked. Often some of the greatest healing can come after telling a horrible story and hearing someone across the room speak quietly and say, "I remember when I felt like that" or "I am so sorry. Nobody deserves that."

We honor all experiences from all mothers, young and old, single or partnered, lesbian or straight, of all classes and races, and all different ways of birthing. The evenings are set up with guidelines shared at the beginning of the night, among them a request that the storyteller's privacy be respected and that the stories shared that night stay in the room and don't travel out into the greater community.

These evenings can be very helpful to women by creating a safe place for them to share as much or as little as they choose of their birth in a non-judgmental space. Women can also hear the journeys other women have had into motherhood, which is often beneficial to the listener in processing her own birth or planning future births.

We learn from these evenings of sharing that we should never make assumptions regarding how a mother emotionally processes her birth. A very straightforward, uncomplicated vaginal delivery, which the mother had wanted, still has the potential to be a traumatic experience. Maybe it didn't match her original expectations, was far more painful than she expected, or she felt lost, confused, or out of control. Conversely, a long labor with many interventions that ends in a caesarean section has the potential to be a positive experience for the mother, especially if she felt she was part of the decision making process and felt heard and respected through her birth. Each woman has her own way of experiencing and processing the events around her birth. It is important that others respect her experience and that she feels heard when speaking.

Often these words are spoken: "You and your baby are healthy and that is what is important." This empathetic comment is well intentioned but it can also make it seem as if simply coming out of the experience alive is a good outcome. Any mother who feels disappointed or traumatized by her birth or



Photo by Tyler Habrecht

Kate Stroud leads monthly Personal Renewal Groups for Mothers and hosts Birth Story Nights seasonally. The next one will be on March 15th. She has a massage therapy practice, teaches Birth Doula Trainings, and also offers private childbirth education classes.

upset about short-term or long-term impacts on her body can be made to feel like she is weak, whiny, or selfish. This is in part why we work on recognizing that a birth can have long lasting effects both negative and positive.

With the Birth Story Nights we create a safe space for a mother to express her feelings about her birth the way she experiences them. There are times that a mother just needs the space to be angry about her experience and is not looking for someone to help her feel better. The feelings that women have about their stories will sometimes evolve over time, too, and women might attend more than one Birth Story Night and share how time has changed her feelings about what has happened to her.

Birth Story Nights are not only for women who have a traumatic or negative story to tell. We also hold the space for mothers who want to tell their

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positive stories. Women who have an empowering, happy birth can feel bad about sharing their stories in a community where a lot of women have very different histories. Women with positive experiences also need space to share without feeling guilty; the Birth Story Nights allow for that, encouraging them to speak up and contribute to a rich and varied history. Together, our stories empower us, offering hope, healing, and community.

Kate Stroud, C.D. (DONA), C.C.E., M.T., is a mother of two. Along with her massage therapy practice, she teaches DONA Birth Doula Trainings, private childbirth education classes, and facilitates a Personal Renewal Group for Mothers once a month at her office in Ypsilanti. The next Birth Story Night will be held on Thursday, March 15, from 7:00-9:00 p.m. at Trillium Collective, 300 N. Huron, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197. For more information, call 734-395-6900 or email info@katestroud.com.