

The Last and Most Important UNTOLD Story
of the 20th century

*How Normal Childbirth Got Trapped
on the Wrong Side of History*

The perfect storm
that turned healthy women
into the patients of a surgical specialty
and normal childbirth into a surgical procedure

This is most profound change in childbirth practices
in the history of the human species

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Gibson, LM, CPM

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Statements based on scientific references and
publicly available documents which will be cited in the next draft

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Notes on Vocabulary

Linguistically, childbirth is a slippery slope as soon as the word ‘child’ is separated from the word ‘birth’. I specifically chose the word “childbirth” to encompass the whole biological process of laboring and giving birth as a continuum of biological activity that originates with the childbearing woman. As a physiological process, it is the mother who gives birth. This includes pregnancy and the entire physiological process of labor, including the birth of the baby. After the fact, the baby is said to have been born and the occasion is said to be the baby’s ‘birthday’.

The qualitative difference we have created in our minds and in our medical system between ‘labor’ and ‘birth’ is an artificial one of language rather than biology. Except for hospital architecture and obstetrical billing codes, there is no bright line between ‘labor’ and ‘birth’. In fact, labor is the on-going process of uterine contractions that dilates the cervix and helps (along with the mother’s abdominal muscles and her voluntary efforts) to push her baby out of her uterus, down into her pelvis, through her birth canal and out into the world.

Each contraction and push by the mother helps to advance her baby down through these phases of childbirth. Finally, there is that one last push, like all the others, but this time, something special happens -- the baby’s head slips over her perineum and the rest of its body follows. During these last few minutes, we say the mother is “giving birth” and after the baby is completely free of its mother’s body, we say the baby was born. But laboring and giving birth is a process that remains intrinsically intertwined.

However, in language we can manipulate our ideas about the last few minutes of labor by controlling the linguistic terms used to describe the culmination of normal labor – i.e., the birth. In the US, we have redirected our focus from terms that describe the mother as ‘giving birth’ and in its place, we substituted the idea of ‘the delivery’ as a ‘procedure’ performed by the birth attendant (instead of the mother) and controlled by institutional policy. When the act of giving birth is defined as a medical procedure, hospitals have a legal and economic right to refuse to perform the ‘procedure’ of vaginal birth.

Currently, the definition of childbirth as a ‘procedure’ is used to deny many women the fundamental right to give birth normally, that is, to have a spontaneous vaginal birth. The majority of American hospitals have a policy that forbids the ‘*procedure of vaginal delivery*’ when the mother-to-be has had a previous Cesarean, her baby is breech, she is expecting twins or the baby is thought to be bigger or smaller than average, overdue, etc. In these cases, hospital policy both permits and requires the obstetrician to perform the invasive surgical procedure of Cesarean section, sometimes under court order. The take-home message is that words surrounding childbirth are a big deal and it matters how they are defined and who does the defining.

There is no such standalone verb as “birthing”, unless you are quoting dialogue from the Civil War movie “Gone with the Wind”, when the maid tells Miss Scarlet that she “don’t know nothin’ ‘bout birthin’ no babies!” In real life, the active verb is “to give” and ‘birth’ is the object of that action. The mother is the energetic source, it is her efforts that produce the baby. Birth is what happened, passively, to the infant. Having been born myself at one time, I am grateful to my mother for all her hard work. Having given birth three times myself (preceded by painful fertility surgery), I remember all that hard work! Out of respect for all the women who gave birth gazillions of times over untold millions of years, I decline to diminish the mother’s central role and cheat her out of this accomplishment by using a linguistic short-cut that skips over her ‘giving’ and substitutes a bastardized passive verb instead. I encourage others to likewise remember and honor the verb: **To Give Birth.**