

THIS GREAT SOCIETY IS GOING STRAIGHT ISSUE 20 JUNE 2011: FAMILY



Pamela Biery
SAMSARA
 -Cycles of Continuing Birth-

Illustration by Leah Albertson

For twenty years now I have been driving past the intersection of Third and C Streets, looking for a parking spot close to the door. The big teak door with a custom bronze pull, the door which I've mastered opening with a briefcase, art boards and samples in one hand, the pull in the other. I'm always teetering, encumbered with full arms and loads of art materials to review—a broad scope of possibilities, veritable rainbows of options. On the other side of this prestigiously weighty door, at least for the last few years, has been Gabrielle—now pregnant and ready to be replaced by another vivacious, ambitious receptionist.

It's quite a process to watch, these young women, finding their way around the corporate world. From shy and tentative, they become increasingly assured until one day you find yourself quietly amazed at their inspiring competency. Some of the youngest now run whole departments, train others and forge ahead. I see them at the beginning, often single. Then there are the flowers on the desk, the telltale ring on their finger, the settled and contemplative look which is later replaced by a radiance and you suddenly notice they are no longer one, but two: that is to say, they are with child, anticipating the next chapter in their lives. It is life, the circle of life and it makes me glad to be so steadfastly settled in a single location, where I can watch the process unfold, like a flower opening in slow motion, glimpsed during my weekly conferences.

There are the specifics also that feed my own life, the way bearing witness taps my own memory, bringing me back to where I am. Watching Gabrielle blossom, I remember the sensation of being pregnant: the walrus walk, toed-out, growing and growing until you realize the life within you is going to use you to survive—however

it needs and you are just along for the ride. Maybe late in the seventh month or so, when the pressure on so many parts of your body is so constant and immediate, it seems you will burst. But you don't burst: instead, a new life explodes out of you like a diver springing off the high dive, making a gymnastic entrance into the harsh, cold air of life.

An amazing process. Still amazing. Always amazing. The cycle of life.

Amazing, too how my teenaged son pushes and prods and seeks out his own life as a young adult. Constant, irrational pressure for seemingly trivial events or minor freedoms. The insistence for individuation is strong, a primal sort of drive for life that manifests in bizarre, but predictably troubling, adolescent behavior. I must let go: he will do what he needs regardless of my wishes. But, not unlike those first false labour contractions, I must be steadfast and refuse to be hurried. He is not any more ready to be on his own than the twisting and turning fetus in the seventh month of gestation. He will survive and persevere to the next level of life, reborn as a young man.

Hindu doctrine describes the quest of the soul to seek expression in this lifetime. By answering to this desire, by honouring the soul's deepest purpose, it's supposed that we are reborn and freed from repetitive cycles of life: the cycle of Samsara. The theory speculates that the extent to which we satisfy the soul's desire, we gain our freedom. I wonder if, in the same way as the unborn child puts pressure on our physical body, the soul puts pressure on our spiritual body, manifesting as depression and illness when we disregard it. We seem asleep at times, to its intent and higher purpose, snoozing along into our own sad conclusion. It seems very important to listen to our inner life, to trust our intuition, even when illogical and perhaps unexplainable. To trust in the unseen pressure, to realize that something new is within, wanting to be born.

I am reminded of those months I spent in pregnancy, watching my body expand like a balloon blown up by an unseen maker. I have never felt so helpless, so honest and humble about the level of control we lack over our lives. My body had a mind of its own, or more accurately, was responding to a mind other than my own with a set of cues memorized from some ancient key to existence. Now, sometimes when I write, I feel this way. Helpless, as though it is futile to continue with my scrawl and equally futile to try to suppress the flow of some life that seems to want to be born. They are only words on a page. They seem alternating to threaten, satisfy and demand expression.

My son is blasting away at whatever door is closed before him, pounding like an angry Tarzan, or perhaps like the fetus with clenched, tiny fists that tested the circumference of its temporary home in the womb. Unreasoning, instinctive pressure pushing each of us forward. Forward into life. Instinct is different from intuition: Instinct is beyond rational thought; intuition can be dulled completely by our minds.

In a few months, a young woman who I have enjoyed collaborating with will be gone; instead a baby's photograph and a new face will greet, assist or usher me into the conference room. Ah, the cycle, the cycle of life. My son will be miles closer to completing another confounding year of high school and as for me, I'll be confused and Buddha-like as I sit and tap out the words that beckon to be expressed, not knowing quite where they lead, only determined to stay on the path my soul has chosen. The big, teak door with the bronze pull still opens with one hand for me at Third and C Streets. I am strong and can balance half the world with my other arm, preferring this to limiting the range of design samples for review. We are all

somewhere in the process of birthing our respective beings, seeking balance:
Samsara.

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Pamela Biery
Blossoms of Orange
 Illustration by Amanda Walton

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Flat and tanned, the pelvis bones protrude,
 a fragrant orange blossom could stand
 using her navel for a vase

in the white heat of a summer sun.

But at eight and a half months, the stomach
 is as taut as a Valencia Navel, round and firm.
 Where once the blossom of an orange
 might have stood, now a stem,
 just a slight protrusion on a snug, round surface.

Orange rinds
 with porous divots and layers of wrapping, unpeel easily
 once so uniform and glowing, now cast aside
 for the fruit revealed.

Yet, laying in the sun
 the pelvis bones still protrude,
 revealing an awkward space, neither full nor empty,
 like a small concave bowl
 of sweet marmalade.