

**Being Born**      A message delivered by the Rev. Angela Herrera and Olivia Herrera, BSN

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First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

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*For today's reading, scroll to the end.*

Angela: For the last several years, the ministers of this church have donated a sermon topic to the Social Justice Auction. That's the biggest fundraiser our Social Justice Council puts on. This year the council couldn't hold its usual dance and chile competition. But I'm really proud of them. They were creative and held a very successful auction mostly on Facebook, with one rowdy evening on Zoom for the sermons.

I was surprised when a group of bidders put their money together to win with a sermon topic of Spirituality and Birth. To my delight, they also asked if I would invite my daughter to join me in giving this message. Which I did. And she said yes. So, come on up, Olivia!

Hi, babe!

Olivia: Hi, mama!

A: Thanks for saying yes today.

O: How could I not? How special to share this time with you.

A: I think the last time we shared the pulpit was on Mother's Day when you were just a high school freshman.

O: That feels like a whole lifetime ago! In a lot of ways we've come full circle, from Mother's Day to a message together about spirituality and birth.

A: Your life has changed a lot since then. We're going to talk about that but before we do, let's address the burning question that I know is on everyone's mind: is Olivia the Owl named after you?

O: No. No she is not. I believe *that* Olivia is actually several years older than I am.

A: It's actually possible that *I* may have been a freshman in high school when that Olivia was born. Or hatched. Or whatever...

Okay, well I thought that rather than prepare a two-part sermon or something like that, it might be more interesting for us to kind of interview each other about this topic. Now, there's a reason the folks at the auction asked me to invite you here today, and not, say, your dad or your brother. Why don't we start with you saying a little bit about what you do?

O: Well after years of thinking, reflecting and manifesting I have the incredible privilege of witnessing and being a part of birth. I am a nurse and birth assistant at Dar a Luz Birth Center. It's a nonprofit birth center nestled in the north valley and it's run by the wisest and most intuitive midwives.

I dreamt of working there since I heard about it my first year of college. When I heard about it, I was working at a hospital but felt called to be in a birth center setting. I wanted to sit with birthing people and believe in them and cheer them on and hold space in a way that I hadn't seen a lot of hospitals do. The universe was drawing me in and telling me to leap! I was elated when they offered me a full-time position.

A lot of babies like to be born in the early morning and the 3am calls from the birth center send electricity through my body every time. The women I work with are incredible humans and they breathe light and love into this birth center and the people they serve.

A: What made you want to work with birth?

O: Well it definitely started when Mauricio was born. I was just 3 years old but watching you bring him earthside left me in awe at your wisdom and power. Since then I have been mesmerized by birthing people and their journey.

A: He was born at home. My labor started at dinner, and we knew it was probably going to last a while. We tried so hard to get you to sleep for a while but you stayed up the whole night until your brother was born the next day. And you were only three!!

O: I remember making a conscious decision about that. It's actually one of my earliest memories. I remember being put in the car by your doula and going for a drive and thinking I will cry and scream until she has to take me back. And she did. I was a determined little thing. But I didn't want to miss a single minute. I knew I wanted to be there when my very best friend was born.

A: I love the phrase you used a second ago, bringing your brother "earthside." The birth center where you work has a name that is another phrase for birth. Will you say more about that?

O: Dar a luz is a phrase that in Spanish means to give birth. Dar a luz directly translates "to give light". Or "bring to light" which is such a beautiful way of describing birth.

A: Bring to light sounds like a creation story. "The spirit of god was hovering over the waters, and god said let there be light." That's from the first lines of Genesis in the Bible.

When I think of spirituality and birth, the first thing I notice about this topic is its absence. You can find books geared toward expectant parents that incorporate spirituality, but when I turn to my usual books on spirituality and religion, there isn't much about birth in there. When birth is mentioned, it's usually a passing detail in a story about something else. I read a lot of poetry and literature, and it's rarely mentioned there either. Nor do you see it in art. Once you start to think about it, it seems really strange that such a huge thing is hardly ever mentioned or depicted.

O: Right? Not everyone will give birth, but every person who has ever lived was *born*.

A: So... what gives? Why do you think there's such a conspicuous absence?

O: I think sometimes it's too raw for a lot of people. When you get to witness a birth, you get pulled onto the edge of life and death and drawn right into a powerful and spiritual place. Being in a human body can make that feeling hard to process. It can leave you breathless and changed. Birth shatters and rebuilds.

But we all have this one thing in common. Being born. And the world pauses if only for a moment because you were born. The rest of our lives will look really different but our being born is not.

A: At its essence, birth is a great equalizer, just like death is.

O: It is in the sense that we all go through being born. Yet the differences that will show up in the rest of our lives are already present. While thinking about what I wanted to say today I thought I would google "why isn't birth depicted" and immediately it gave me ten horrifying news articles. Our relationship with birth in this country often involves fear. Think about the way movies and shows portray it. Often very medical. There's a lot of screaming and often a male doctor in these images.

Some of the fear talked about is warranted. Like the racial and ethnic disparities of care. I bet a lot of people here today didn't know that "Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native women are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women" (CDC). And the reasons these women die are often preventable but are missed or blatantly ignored and that's because of racism.

A: Our reading this morning was about the right to health for birthing women. It was about a birth I attended as a translator. The mother was afraid to go to the hospital, because the hospital had threatened to call immigration authorities on undocumented women. She found a wonderful midwife, yet the impact of poverty and racism on this woman's health and her baby's was there in the room. She couldn't escape it.

O: It was literally growing up the wall. We as healthcare workers need to do better because everyone deserves healthcare and a just and empowering birth. So, I would like to personally apologize for the ways that medicine and maybe birth have caused grief and trauma for any listeners today. Know that I am here to learn and to do better by you.

Of course science and modern medicine have changed birth in some really positive ways as well but at the core of it birth is just a part of our natural lives.

I remember seeing a Judy Chicago painting for the first time in nursing school. If you haven't seen her art work I invite you to take a look. I was struck by Judy Chicago's ability to capture the feeling of life and death, suffering and relief, joy and sorrow all in one piece of art. It was all exactly what I had seen in real life. Birth taking you to the edge and how life is strong but also fragile.

A: Your experience with that painting led us to a Judy Chicago exhibit at a museum in Taos. A couple of weeks later I preached a sermon about awe, and told the congregation about it. But for anyone who doesn't know can you say a little bit about who Judy Chicago is?

O: Judy Chicago is a feminist artist who has been gracing us with detailed and intricate art and literature for about half a century. Although she never gave birth to children, she gave life to art that centered birth which was not often done in the male dominated western art scene. She uses a lot of really amazing and interesting mediums like fabric, yarn and canvas too.

A: She noticed there wasn't much birth themed art, so she spent several years creating a collection called The Birth Project. Our visit to her exhibit was one of the most powerful spiritual experiences I've had in recent memory. I was especially struck by the largest piece. Do you know the one I'm talking about?

O: Yes. It was hand made by women from across the US and so lovingly crafted.

A: It is seven feet tall and eighteen feet wide. Similar in size to the mural in our church sanctuary. But instead of being made of wood or paint, it's crocheted, in the style of lace.

O: And instead of traditional lace patterns, this giant crocheted panel, done all in black, depicts birth. It portrays birth like a river coursing through a huge female form—she almost fills the whole panel—with fingers and toes that turn into rays. Creation energy moves toward, through, and from her.

A: I considered sharing a picture of that piece in worship this morning, but I'm mindful that because we aren't used to seeing birth depicted, and because this piece is just incredibly powerful, it can stir up some really intense feelings.

So what I'm going to do instead is share a link to it. I'll put it in the chat box. And folks can click on it now, or save it for later, or not click, as they wish.

*Here is the link, if you'd like to see the work of art we are describing:*  
<https://taos.org/judy-chicago-at-the-harwood/>

O: The piece moved me to tears as I took it in because it showed the strength and resilience of women and birthing people. And its resemblance to our fierce and strong mother earth.

A: I think another reason birth is so absent from western art and literature is that it doesn't square with patriarchy. How can men rule the world if they are confronted with their original vulnerability and the immense power of their birth mother?

In church, we talk about spirituality as having to do with the part of people that is not made up of parts. I'm curious to hear what being present with birth has taught you about that.

O: This topic in general can bring up a lot of feelings. As I speak about my experience in what I have witnessed I invite you to be present in your heart space and process some of those experiences and feelings that come up.

Being with birth I watch as mamas face this tsunami of unknown come before them and I watch them walk right into the wave. I watch them weep and worry and then trust and thrust themselves into warriors and ancestors before them. I see them waver on the edge and they ask if they can do this. Sometimes they tell me they can't. But I invite them to dig

deep because their bodies are temples and they have energy stored for occasions like these. I watch them as their mind, body and spirit blossoms into its highest self. Birth is truly a spiritual experience.

A: Before I was a minister, I worked as a doula for a while. I was present for many different kinds of births. At homes, at a birth center similar to Dar a Luz, at hospitals. Some were natural births, some involved epidurals, some were cesareans. Some went as planned and some did not. Many were joyful, but some also involved sadness or suffering or trauma. But no matter how a baby is born, the process is one that requires finding strength deep within and reveals the incredible human capacity for transformation and healing.

That's true for the person giving birth, but birth is a big deal for the person being born, too! So, here's my last question for you today: How do you see birth, spiritually, for the person being born?

O: I think the person being born also has quite the journey. Maybe they've travelled between galaxies and universes to be here. And then they have the work of turning from stardust to being. And then the long hard journey moving from water creature to land creature.

Labor and birth require a lot of communication between the birthing person and their baby. I always encourage them to talk to their baby and help them understand what they want and need from them so they can work symbiotically.

I always like to say to the babies when they are born tell me your story. Tell me how your journey has been. I know it is so hard to be born. And they love to tell us all about it and they often surprise us too. But I'm curious, what do you think the spiritual journey is like for these little people?

A: That's such a beautiful way to describe it. I also think of all the big transitions we make in our lives. From baby in arms, to toddler walking, from child to adult, from young adult to elder, from living to dying. Sometimes we get so scared and wonder if we'll know how to do it. I think being born is the first of these. The way we arrive in these lifetimes is our first lesson in how interdependent we are, and that we are made for these transitions and this growth.

Olivia, thank you for sharing your experience and wisdom with us today. And thank you to everyone who supports the social justice work of this church!

### Reading

*"Living It Up," from the meditation manual Reaching for the Sun, by Angela. Skinner House, 2011.*

They take advantage of us, he said. I worked forty years in a factory. Paid taxes. Followed the law. Why should they be living it up on welfare, food stamps?

I thought of the woman with the thick, dark hair, and the nine-months pregnant belly. *No voy al hospital*, she said. Undocumented. Uninsured.

I translated for the midwives but there wasn't much to say. She labored quietly on the bedspread, biting down on a rag. As the baby crowned, I noticed mold growing up the wall, spreading out from the window, moist and dark and poisonous. The curtains sagged around it and rested on the matted brown carpet. She wouldn't report it to the landlord. Didn't want to make any trouble.

*¡Lo hiciste!* I told her, when he was born. You had your baby! But she greeted him solemnly. He gazed at her with shining eyes, face made for his mother's milk.

Living it up? The factory worker had some other image in mind, I guess. I don't blame him. They were the most invisible people I had ever met.