



Bear Wisdom

Reconnecting with Mama and Papa Bear

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Childbearing, from the mysterious and miraculous ability to conceive and to give birth, on through the nourishing acts of child rearing, has suddenly become an explosive minefield of fear, insecurity and guilt. As a collective culture, we have somehow lost or abandoned any thread of belief in a woman's ability and power to naturally conceive and give birth. These once-tight threads of belief have been constantly and consistently shredded, leaving behind unrelenting fear and a gaping lack of trust.

The more we "know" externally, the less we trust internally, and as a result, we have lost our connection to our inner navigation source—our Mama and Papa Bear wisdom. This is the part of us that knows something down to the marrow of our bones, and lunges without any doubt. It's the part of us that owns our decisions and any subsequent actions. Some call this "intuitive knowing."

In her book *Mother Daughter Wisdom*, author Christiane Northrup, M.D., coins the phrase "mama bear wisdom" to powerfully describe this intuitive inner wisdom hardwired in all women when they become mothers. My addition of Papa Bear is to acknowledge the concurrent hardwiring present and available for dads.

This article aims to discuss where and how we lose our "in" sight and how we can trust in our Mama and Papa Bear wisdom during pregnancy and the birth process, and to share some simple, empowering tools and techniques in order to reclaim and reintegrate that wisdom back into our lives.

In my work with women and families, I have come to strongly believe that the antidote for all the free-floating fear and anxiety in our culture is to learn how to cultivate feelings of safety and trust. The simple yet powerful and amazingly adaptable tool I teach that does this is called grounding. (Try it out in the sidebar on page 24 before continuing.)

Mama Bear Wisdom During Pregnancy

While standing in line at the market a few months ago, I was sadly amused to read the cover lines on two mainstream pregnancy magazines. In each of them, there it was, in bold: Fear. "What You Secretly Fear"; "Your Top 10 Fears."

This atmosphere of fear starts affecting a woman from the moment she conceives. She can't relax any more: What if something goes wrong? She is bombarded with messages that elicit worry—and with that, the need for her to remain in control.

Every OB visit is now focused on what tests to consider for this visit and the next, instead of affirming the miracle of the growing baby. In the place of exploring a mom and dad's hopes and fears and validating their strengths, visits now focus on discussing what could possibly go wrong. In many OB practices, the pregnant mom's belly is no longer even touched; any assessment of her pregnancy growth is done by ultrasound. Very few parents really understand that the measurements obtained from ultrasound become less and less accurate as a pregnancy grows. A term ultrasound can be off by anywhere from 1 to 2 pounds in estimating a baby's weight.

Sadly, touching a mom's belly to determine a baby's position and size is becoming a lost art. When we touch a mom's belly, we are doing more than measuring and assessing her baby. We are transmitting these messages: *Isn't it amazing what your body is doing? Aren't you beautiful?* We affirm to her that she is doing a great job of nourishing and growing her baby.

This tactile interaction also enables the healthcare provider to learn so much about what this mom knows and feels about herself, her family and her baby.

What's a Parent to Do?

No series of tests, procedures or divinations can assure you that your baby will be normal and healthy, and continue to be normal and healthy. That is the truth. To believe otherwise pulls us away from the resources of the inner mama and papa onto the merry-go-round of test after test, inspiring more fear. It creates what Barbara Katzman Roth calls "the tentative pregnancy." Pregnant women have lost the time and permission to just relax and revel in the miracle and wonder of being pregnant.

The current work of cell biologist Bruce Lipton, Ph.D., has validated the old wives' tales about pregnant women passing along to their babies whatever they're exposed to



emotionally and physically during pregnancy. A woman's overall, long-term pregnancy experiences and emotions get translated to her baby via her hormones through the placenta. From these hormonal messages, babies determine their DNA expression. The DNA they choose will determine their bodies, genetic expressions and future hormonal wiring in order to prepare for the world their mother is showing them.

Now, to alleviate any immediate feelings of guilt, I wish to state that pregnancy is a time normally filled with emotional ups and downs. What's important to remember is that these determinations result from a consistent and persistent hormonal environment experienced over a period of time during the pregnancy. If a woman is holding a consistent low level of terror and fear during her pregnancy, that will get transmitted to her baby. Her baby will prepare for a world that is tentative, uncertain and unsafe. Conversely, if a mother is supported and validated with trust and confidence about her pregnancy, that will also be transmitted to her baby.

One of my favorite tenets of midwifery care is that we, as midwives, nurture the mother so that she is supported. Then she, in turn, has the resources to nourish and mother her unborn child.

(Take time again to breathe, ground yourself, and be aware of your feelings.)

Many practitioners present screening tests steeped in a fear-based motivation. Instead of offering an informed, unbiased choice, they sell yet another test from a place of fear.

Grounding: An Antidote to Fear

The first step in the process of connecting with your intuition (your inner knowing) is to ground. Grounding is a tool that places us in present time—the now, this moment—and thereby aids us in creating a safe container.

I like to think of grounding as the ultimate laundry chute, allowing me to easily and safely release any thoughts or feelings that no are longer needed.

Grounding enables us to create a pause in the fear/need-to-control cycle, and thereby helps us to cultivate a deep knowing and feeling of how to authentically create safety and trust.

Grounding only takes a moment. Once you understand how to use it, and feel its power, you will start integrating this tool into every facet of your life. I ground my car while driving, my date book in anticipation of a busy day, and the phone before I pick it up.

Grounding is a powerful tool to use in labor.

To ground, imagine your feet connecting to the stream of life force from the Earth. You can imagine connecting to the stream of life, nourishment and clarity from anywhere in the planet. You have two feet, so you can draw the energy up from two different areas.

As you inhale, imagine breathing this current up through your feet and legs, allowing it to settle at the base of your spine (your perineum). You can imagine drawing colors, symbols or concepts—clarity, peace, joy, nourishment—from the Earth, as well.

From this space, feel and imagine the energy swirling around in the center or core of your perineum.

From the center of this energy, imagine creating a grounding structure—tree roots, a waterfall, a tube, an anchor,

a slide—to grow out from the center until it has grown to 2 to 4 feet wide. As you exhale, be aware of this structure connecting back to the Earth.

As you breathe in, be aware of receiving this energy. And as you exhale, be aware of releasing anything that is safe and comfortable for your system to release, such as stress, fear or worry. You might find yourself feeling lighter or stronger and more rooted.

We naturally ground when we sit on the Earth, sit on or hold a rock, listen to running water, or even sit on a toilet.

After a while, many people notice that with the simple act of consciously taking a deep breath that they have automatically grounded themselves. As you continue reading, check in periodically to your grounding cord. Pay attention to how and what you are feeling.

Behind the scenes, influencing how strongly a practitioner may recommend certain testing, is their own fear of malpractice. This bias is most especially true in the realm of genetic screening. Clients may be strongly encouraged to partake in this testing in order to protect your healthcare provider from any future lawsuits.

When I am discussing any lab test or diagnostic procedure with a client, I apply the criteria I learned during certified nurse midwifery training. In turn, I urge my clients to start looking at any tests with the same questions:

- *Are the results of this test going to change the decision we are already making?*
- *If not, what are we going to do with this information?*
- *Will taking this test increase my overall fear, or diminish it?*
- *Are there any other ways I can get similar information with less intervention or risk?*
- *Bottom line: How does engaging in this test feel?*

Answer these questions, then decide if a test is worth your time, blood, money and worry. If you decide to engage in a test, ask yourself: How can I best connect with my body and my baby to create a feeling of trust and participation in this process?

How Did We Get Here?

Women have been convinced and thereby no longer trust that they can give birth without drugs, intervention and surgery.

We have been strongly influenced by the experts, who stand to profit from this fear, and in whom we have been raised to trust without question. Very few consumers realize that an OB/GYN is a trained surgeon. Fewer still have thought about how that affects how they view birth. Many M.D.s are trained to view birth as an emergency waiting to happen.

Given the current economic structure of maternity healthcare in our country, many healthcare providers, such as certified nurse midwives and family practice M.D.s, who trust and hold the birth process as normal, have been forced out of offering OB services. Reasons for this include chronic low reimbursement rates and rising malpractice rates. Normal pregnancy and birth are not money makers.

When one has only 10 minutes for an appointment, ordering an ultrasound may assuage fear in the short term. A 20- to 30-minute conversation might have done the same, but there is no time for that, and the cycle continues. The mother gets the message that what she knows or feels about her baby is less important than what the machines outside of her body say.

Another subtle yet powerful feedback system is in place. When a woman is diagnosed as "high risk," her provider is now able to bill for and receive increased reimbursement for the resultant increase in surveillance and tests. Therefore testing and interventions like ultrasounds, inductions, C-sections, instrument deliveries and NICU stays generate more revenue for both M.D.s and hospitals.

Questions to Ask Your Practitioner

1. What is your practitioner's intervention rate for the following interventions: C-section, induction, epidural, forceps, vacuum-assisted delivery, episiotomy?
2. How many people does your provider share calls with?
3. What are the intervention rates for the other practitioners who take calls and could be at your birth?
4. What are the intervention rates for the location where you'll be giving birth?

From the Coalition to Improve Maternity Services.
motherfriendly.org/resources/10Q/

The Physiological Impact of Fear

Most of us have heard about the fight-or-flight response our body engages in when it feels threatened. Our body's response to fear or feeling threatened elicits the release of cortisol, a stress hormone, from our kidneys. Cortisol, in turn, triggers our pancreas to release sugar to fuel our survival organs—our brain, lungs, our arms and legs—so we can react and move away from the threat. Non-essential muscles and organs, which include the kidneys and the uterus, receive less in blood flow. Reproduction and urinating are not important functions when our bodies perceive a dangerous situation. As a result, our blood pressure rises, blood flow to the uterus decreases, and blood sugar levels, which initially rise, soon plunge.

Long-term stress results in decreases in conception and baby size, and increases in pre-term birth, high blood pressure, gestational diabetes, intrauterine growth restriction, meconium staining and fetal death.

Fear creates a vicious cycle between healthcare providers and families. Fear motivates testing, which inspires more fear, which creates outcomes to justify the fear in the first place. So here we are in a collective culture that believes that conception, pregnancy and birth are fraught with struggle and risk, and are potential emergency situations requiring the highest level of medical training and vigilance to keep us safe.

(Again, take some time to breathe, ground yourself, and be aware of your feelings.)

Finding Resources You Can Trust

Once you have connected with your inner wisdom and with what it needs for your pregnancy and birth, be completely sure that the care provider you have chosen is in alignment with your needs.



I strongly believe that the purpose of prenatal care is not the physical testing and surveillance of the pregnancy, but rather, the development of an interactive, trusting relationship with the provider who will attend your birth. The tests and discussions about your care provide the vehicle in which you develop and cultivate a trusting relationship. For labor to unfold as naturally as possible, the laboring woman needs to feel safe. Believing that you will be able to convince your care provider about your needs in labor will not work. For labor to proceed, you need to be feeling, not thinking and negotiating.

Before you commit to an OB care provider, arrange a meet-and-greet appointment with them. (The sidebar on page 25 includes some important questions to ask.) If a practice doesn't offer such a service, inquire why not? It is never too late in your pregnancy to transfer your care to a provider and birth site that are better aligned with your needs. Having a baby is something we do only a few times in our lives. You are the consumer here. Spend the time to find the fit that feels right.

If your provider or birth site has high rates of intervention, do not believe you'll be the one to convince them to try a different approach. Take the time to find a provider and birth location that shares and supports your birth philosophy, even if it means traveling to the next town.

Do not expect that your doula or your birth partner will be able to advocate for your desires. If your provider is coming from a different philosophy, you are setting yourself up to feel disappointed and betrayed.

Take the time and the effort to find the people who trust birth and will support you and your family in your journey. Your family deserves to be treated with respect, love, safety and trust during this time.

(Are you still grounding? Be aware of your grounding and release any fear, anger or tension this last section might have elicited.)

Cultivating a Relationship With Wisdom

Many childbearing women adhere to the myth that knowledge is power, and it will keep them safe and in control. The birthing practices of the 50s and 60s, when women were completely anesthetized, interrupted and fractured the oral transmission of our cultural wisdom about pregnancy and birth. As a result, in the 60s and 70s, written information about natural childbearing arose out of the desire for families to regain this knowledge base. Yet written knowledge often does not acknowledge inner wisdom. Absolute right ways and wrong ways to approach something are accepted as truth. So the practice of looking outside of ourselves first for an answer and accepting an external expert's written statements may impart knowledge, but it may exist without the necessary wisdom. To navigate the ever-changing and complex world we live in, we need to learn to integrate and temper our knowledge base with our inner wisdom.



I experience this often with clients who use the Internet to allay their fears. Yes, they may get their questions answered, but in the process they expose themselves to frightening possibilities they were never aware of. Now they have new potential scenarios to worry about.

Conversely, I have worked with clients who have browsed the Internet while being connected to their inner wisdom and intuition. These clients find their answers, know when to stop researching, and find the experience to be empowering. When you go shopping for information, be sure to bring your wisdom radar, and check in with it as you research.

I have witnessed time and time again that when a mom and dad really connect with their inner knowing, they feel freedom and peace. Their decision itself is neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. What is important is the integration of the wisdom, the knowing/feeling component in how any action is carried forth. That is true empowerment: being in power.

Throughout this article we have discussed grounding, and periodically revisited that first step in accessing Mama and Papa Bear wisdom. The next step involves dialoging, connecting and interacting with our inner source of intuition and wisdom. As you develop this relationship, you will then learn to feel comfortable and trust its messages in everyday life, so when the big decisions come along, you can access your wisdom source with established trust.

The next exercise in the following sidebar will help you cultivate this dialogue and your relationship with your inner wisdom.

Connecting with Mama and Papa Bear Wisdom

Let's go inside to connect with your Mama and Papa Bear wisdom—the inner part of you who knows how to optimally navigate your personal path.

If the answers to these questions come from your head, that is most likely not your Mama or Papa Bear wisdom speaking with you. The language of intuitive knowing is not logical. The more you approach this with amusement, and have fun with it like a game, the easier the answers will flow. A fear message from your brain is not the authentic answer.

Our intuitive knowing often comes as a strong and persistent knowing: a feeling somewhere in your body, such as in your gut or your womb; a whisper or a strong sense; or feelings of warmth or cold.

Take your time with these questions. You might want to ask them

one at a time, or go through the entire list. Take time between questions to draw your understanding of your messages.

Start by grounding.

Be aware of your body and how it feels. Be aware of your breath.

You may want to slightly unfocus your eyes, or even close them and have someone read the questions to you.

Invite your Mama or Papa Bear wisdom to join in conversation. Say hello, and thank him or her for coming forward. Ask him or her:

What do you need?

What do you know or want to share with me?

Where do you reside?

What signal do you like to use to get my attention?

Is there a way that I can I quickly connect with you?

Do you have a name?

What conditions make it easier for you to connect with me?

What conditions help me to trust and hear you?

What gets in the way of the communication?

What can help to reestablish the connection?

How can I validate you?

Be patient with yourself. Some of the answers may come to you later, as your day unwinds, or in your dreams.

Complete this conversation as you would any other. Agree to another time when you will reconnect.

Then open your eyes and be aware of your surroundings.

Stretch and breathe.

TAKE THE TIME TO FIND A PROVIDER AND BIRTH LOCATION THAT SHARES AND SUPPORTS YOUR BIRTH PHILOSOPHY, EVEN IF IT MEANS TRAVELING TO THE NEXT TOWN.

As you read about all the tests and procedures, remember to balance the time the time you spend researching and learning with time spent reflecting on how it makes you feel. There is not a specific, perfect path to follow. The action you pursue is not as important as how this decision feels in your core. Your body has all the knowledge and resources to create and nourish a healthy baby. Our bodies are wired to do this.

We need to trust this. We also need to listen to our bodies when something does move out of the realm of normal, and our bodies or our babies are asking for some extra care. This information speaks from knowing that something is not right, not from fearing that something is wrong.


There is a place for intuition in OB care. When a woman says she feels that something isn't right with her baby, she is urged to come in to get it checked out.

In closing, remember that the secret key to all of this is to go deep inside of yourself, with all of your questioning, and embrace that part of you that loves yourself and your child so very deeply. From this place your answer has the opportunity to clearly unfold.

Remember that your child will always be your most powerful teacher, full of compassion, love and amusement.

Your child does not expect for you to be perfect. What he or she needs is for your choices to be coming from a place of connection to your inner knowing and their heart space.

There is no place for fear-based decisions. In any situation, you always have the choice to use one moment to reset yourself into a place of trust and safety, and from that, clarity.

From your wisdom you will create correct actions, as you act from your intuitive knowing and loving heart. All the time you need is the time it takes to take a deep breath. 



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