

["It's not what you look at that matters but what you see." (H. D. Thoreau)]

"Om bhur bhuvah svah tat savitur vaven yam

bhargo devasya dhimahi dhiyo yo nah prachodayat"

A first-time mother is laboring in the water birth tub at Bumi Sehat Birth Center in Bali, Indonesia. The lights are lowered. Her husband holds her and her family gathers around. A midwife pushes the floating flowers aside and sees the baby is crowning. As one, the family and the midwives with Ibu (Mother) Robin Lim begin singing this Hindu chant of welcome to the baby. There is a palpable feeling of joy, celebration and love in the room. It surrounds me too, a second-year nursing student volunteering for the summer. *So this is what birth can be like.*

Bumi Sehat = Healthy Earth Mother. Robin Lim CPM/founder, the other midwives and all at Bumi Sehat believe that access to quality healthcare and to kind, hygienic, culturally appropriate childbirth is a human right. By caring for the smallest citizens of Earth – babies at birth – they build peace one mother, one child, one family at a time.

Every day that summer I looked at families arriving at the clinic: usually children, father, mother in labor, sometimes grandparents. They often arrived on foot or on a scooter. Often they arrived tired and hungry. They were always welcomed with warmth, with food and rest and with joy at the imminent birth. The mother is received into the care of the midwives, and often Ibu Robin herself, with the family remaining at her side. I looked around the busy clinic. In the birthing area what I *saw* was the most respectful, calm, competent, gentle and woman-centered labor and birth experience ever. What I saw was the poorest of the poor being served, free of charge, in a way that honored their human dignity. And with love.

One day I arrive at the clinic and join the midwives assisting a woman whose baby is ready to be born. The family and all of us sing the baby into the world, however it is

immediately apparent that the infant is not starting to breathe. The oxygen mask is immediately applied but doesn't fit this tiny boy well enough to deliver the desperately needed oxygen to his brand new lungs. The fear of the mother and family is heavy in the air. I feel as though I can't breathe myself. Robin, as any of the midwives would have done, breathes life into the boy over and over until he is able to breathe on his own. Then comes the relief, the laughter and tears – and the singing resumes. I am looking at a tense medical situation which requires good judgment, skill and fast action. I *see* a child at his mother's breast, a life saved and a family tragedy averted.

Later that week I am helping in the clinic. No women are in labor but several are resting in the communal room for postpartum moms and babies. Robin asks me to assist the mothers with breastfeeding. I know very little about breastfeeding (although in four years I will become an international board certified lactation consultant). I am nervous as I approach a mother and baby. The baby is crying. I try to help but feel clumsy and unsure of myself. Robin quietly tells me a baby can't eat if she is crying. She teaches me to soothe the baby by placing one finger gently in the divot of the baby's upper lip and then opening baby's tiny palm and gently rubbing in a clockwise circle with my thumb. The baby calms and soon she is nursing. With the eyes of a nursing student I perceive a problem but am uncertain how to solve it. Through the eyes of deeply experienced and world-renowned midwife, I learn traditional techniques which are both practical and magical.

Another day, Robin awakens me in the wee hours of morning to provide labor support. After stumbling to the clinic in the dark, I crouch down low next to the tub as Robin has taught me to do. "We don't hover over the mother, we don't dominate. We acknowledge her as the source of power this day." Robin anticipates the birth of a large baby. She explains to the

birthing parents and to me the need to act quickly, and outside the tub, if the baby gets stuck. The head emerges and the shoulders resist. At the next contraction, Robin instructs the father and me to help the mother out of the tub. With Robin's gentle guidance the mother goes to her hands and knees. This position opens her pelvis and the baby is born seconds later. I am observing a birth emergency, shoulder dystocia, which can result in brain damage or death to the infant if not managed skillfully and immediately. What I *see* is a mother knowing her body and a knowledgeable midwife with instincts honed by experience. And then I see a baby girl in her mother's arms who, amidst singing, is being touched and admired by her sisters.

I have now been a nurse for seven years and have practiced in hospitals, out-of-hospital birth centers and with home birth midwives. I have several credentials and certifications related to women and infant care, labor, birth and breastfeeding. I am a second-semester student in a Certified Nurse Midwife MSN program. I especially love to work with people who are poor, or marginalized, or who encounter obstacles to receiving healthcare.

In the years since my summer at Bumi Sehat, I have never forgotten what I saw and learned there. In all my work settings I have found ways to bring those understandings into practice. I have always sought wise and experienced mentors along the way. I would like to believe that someday I could be that person for less experienced practitioners. It is the healing way of Bumi Sehat, Robin Lim and the Balinese people.