

Barbara Kay: Childbirth's new opportunity for narcissism

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A newborn baby is washed at a temporary shelter in the Philippines. But we want to see it come out!

Four words in the first sentence of an [article](#) on the sudden enthusiasm for “birth photography” caught my attention in a big way, after which I found it difficult to focus fully on what followed. Those four words were “your baby being born.” The words seem innocuous in themselves, but they happened to be preceded by the words “Hiring a professional photographer to take close-ups of....”

If the four words had been “your brand new baby,” I would have kept reading without the slightest pause for reflection. It was that whole *participial* thing – the *being* born thing – that stopped me dead in my tracks.

As it happens, sometimes unfortunately, I have a rather vivid imagination, so I had no difficulty picturing the scenario: sweaty, gasping, exhausted labouring mom, hovering anxious dad, and Doc, squatting down between the stirrups at the end of the delivery gurney, with gloved hands in the “catch” position, all very familiar from experience. But what’s this behind the doc? A total stranger! A professional photographer, with his camera aimed squarely at mom’s – how shall I say? oh help me Oprah, oh thanks – *vajayjay*.

Professional birthing photography is the hot new thing, it seems, at least in the U.S. where the International Association of Professional Birth Photographers in Austin, Texas has signed up 400 members, “primarily women.” (“Primarily?” But...?)

Okay, I am not a total prude. Partial, but that’s actually not a bad thing. (Fine, we’ll have that discussion another day.) What I am is a woman who gave birth to two children. And I am trying very hard to imagine why I would want to have an actual photograph, whether amateur, taken by my husband or a nurse, or a professional shot of my baby in the act of being born. Why would I? I hear my opposition saying that it’s because it’s the miracle of life and you want to capture it in the instant of it’s happening.

I have news for you. The *real* miracle of life takes place at the instant of conception.

Do you see where I am going here? I realize that we are already halfway there, what with the advent of “[foreskin awareness](#)” booths where people can admire unensured penises. But where is the logical end to all this bulldozing of former natural “privacy” barriers? Are couples who really want a record of every precious moment from conception to birth going to invite photographers into the marital bed? Don’t laugh. In our strange cultural moment, where boundary-free sexuality, narcissism and digital adventurism meet and greet at high velocity, it could happen.

The article indicates that some people are skeptical, but others find the idea exciting. A 28-year-old mom in Abbotsford, B.C., Vicki Middleton, said that “for my next baby I want all the graphic shots, the whole kit and caboodle. Nothing can ever top giving birth and I want to see it all. It’s just the coolest thing.”

There’s another way to “see it all,” low-tech but reliable. I know, because I “saw it all” when my children were born. It didn’t involve a lot of high-tech equipment or \$1,000 in fees. It involved a strategically placed mirror. It was indeed the “coolest thing,” but the coolest thing of all was that the experience remained a private event between my husband, my doctor and me.

I understand that in the gilded days of Versailles’s kings and queens, there was no such thing as a couple’s private life, and people used to trail in and out of bedrooms at any moment of the day or night. One would think that the idea of “privacy” would be a step in a progressive direction.

Well, as I seem to say a lot, and I suppose this is part of the territory of getting old, everything old is new again. Sometimes that’s a good thing, sometimes not such a good thing. Perspective is all.

bkay@videotron.ca

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Barbara Kay - Columnist