

MIND TO MIND

*Creative writing that explores the abstract side
of our profession and our lives*

Carol Wiley Cassella, M.D., Editor

“... And I Was Born”

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AAFTER supper in January 27, 1931, while my parents are at home listening to the only radio in the village, my mother starts to feel discomfort in her back. She goes to the radio, which is placed high on a shelf so that children will not reach it. She changes the dial, but there is only one station; so she tunes in again. She goes to the bathroom to wash her hands and face, but she just did that a few minutes ago. My father, watching her closely, asks, “What is the matter, Aziza?” She replies, “I may be in labor; I don’t know.” Soon the contractions become stronger and more frequent, and there is no doubt she is in labor. She asks my father to hurry and call her mother and Om-Mustafa, the old midwife of the village. Because there are no telephones, a maid runs out to call both—first Om-Mustafa, who has been in practice for 40 yr and attended the delivery of my mother. By this time my mother is getting anxious and wonders, “What if I deliver before Om-Mustafa arrives?” My grandmother and two aunts arrive, and a few minutes later Om-Mustafa arrives—my grandmother excited, joyful, and concerned; and Om-Mustafa cool, cheerful, and confident. Om-Mustafa is carrying with her all her instruments: silk strings and a pair of scissors in a small leather bag which she inherited from her mother, who was also a midwife. Om-Mustafa congratulates my parents although she knows that there is still a long way to go, but this brings a smile to my parents’ faces. Om-Mustafa asks about the “show” or whether any “water broke,” feels my mother’s abdomen for about 15 min, watches her face during and between con-

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This article is part of a chapter (4 pp.) in a book titled “Moments with the Pen” (261 pp.)¹ and was reproduced with permission from Dar El-Ketab El-Hadeeth, Cairo, Egypt. The entire book was presented at the American Society of Anesthesiologists Meeting, 2001, and won the first prize in literature. The events of this story are based on my mother’s recollection of my delivery in a village called Mashtool-El-Souk, 25 miles from Cairo, the capital of Egypt.

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tractions, and feels her hands and forehead. This is all the history and physical examination she does. She now can tell that my mother is in labor and not in shock.

The word spreads rapidly throughout the village that Mrs. Abouleish is in labor. Our neighbors rush in to help. Om-Karim, my mother's favorite neighbor enters the bedroom, which is the Emergency Room, Labor Suite, Delivery Room, Recovery Room, and the private room. Om-Karim gives my mother moral support and words of wisdom from her vast experience of only one child-birth! My grandmother is sitting behind my mother rubbing her back. Om-Mustafa is reading verses from the Quran, the holy book for Muslims, while putting her hand on the abdomen and feeling the contractions. My mother screams during one strong contraction. Om-Mustafa asks her to relax, have faith in God, and not disturb the angels by screaming too loudly. My mother relaxes, but the contractions become stronger and stronger. She bites on her blanket, but every now and then an involuntary scream is heard. My elder aunt boils water into which Om-Mustafa drops a silk thread and the scissors to be sterilized. My elder aunt is making a large cup of hot chicken soup to strengthen mother's contractions and a stuffed chicken to eat after the delivery. Two maids at the oven in the backyard are baking the national thin, large, round bread for the poor and guests. My father, very excited, orders the lamb to be readied for sacrifice once his child is born, giving half of it to the poor and the other half is cooked for relatives and friends who will be coming soon to share with him the joy of the occasion. My younger aunt is ironing white sheets to be used during and after the delivery.

It is now midnight when my mother's water breaks, and she is apprehensive but is reassured by Om-Mustafa that this is a good sign and that she is progressing well. My uncle and Abou-Karim, our neighbor, keep my father's company in the men's living room in the front yard, sipping strong Arabic coffee from small porcelain cups without handles. My father goes into the house every now and then and enters the bedroom. My parents' eyes meet and shine with love, faith, and hope, and my father speaks a few encouraging words: "Aziza, you are not alone. God is with you. We have been waiting for this precious day, and, God willing, everything will be all right."

At four o'clock in the morning the contractions become stronger and more frequent and my mother wants to push. But those contractions hurt and she wants to scream. Om-Mustafa firmly persuades her to push. "Dear, you can't scream and push at the same time. Push as hard as you can." My mother bears down, and, when Om-Mustafa announces the start of a contraction, the chorus of my grandmother, two aunts and Om-Karim reiterates like an echo, "Push down! Push Down!" My mother's legs are supported by her

two sisters, who form two gentle stirrups, while my grandmother supports her back. A head full of dark hair “crowns” and Om-Mustafa gets ready for the delivery. Now a baby is coming—a head, shoulders and buttocks. Everyone screams with joy. “It’s a boy! It’s a boy!” My mother says, “Thank God! Ibrahim wanted a boy although he never mentioned it.” All her pains seem far away and on her relaxed face a gentle smile appears.

My younger aunt rushes to congratulate my father, but he already has heard the news through the *sagroda*† by the women attending the delivery. Rose punch is served to all those in the house and the news is propagated throughout the village in a few minutes by *sagroda* from one house to another.

The umbilical cord is tied with the silk string and cut with the antique scissors which have cut, and probably are still cutting, hundreds of cords. Om-Mustafa carries me across the room to have my first bath with warm water and soap, only a few minutes after the delivery. I am then dressed in white, gently wrapped, and handed to my mother to see, hold and kiss. My father rushes into the room, looks into my mother’s eyes, and their eyes move towards me. He then steps forward, kisses my mother on the forehead, kisses me, and says, “Thanks to God and you, Aziza. We got a boy!” To a father in our village a firstborn boy is all the pride and joy he can have. He thanks Om-Mustafa and the ladies in the room and leaves to receive congratulations from all the men of the village. My mother looks at her first baby with love, tenderness, and affection, hugs him, brings him as close to her as possible with her right arm around him, and kisses him. She looks at my grandmother and says, “Mother, I can’t believe I became a mother. I have a boy and he is mine!” My grandmother says, with a soft voice full of faith, “Yes, Aziza, it’s all true. Thank God.”

January 28, 2011. I too echo my great-grandmother’s blessing. Thank God all went well that day 80 yr ago. In looking on those 80 yr, I am truly amazed at the advances in technology, science, and medicine. But as this story points out, spiritual and psychological support can also be powerful medicine. The challenge for physicians today is to figure out a way to meld the science of medicine with the art of healing to provide the best and safest care.

Reference

1. Abouleish EI. *Moments with the Pen*. Dar Al-Kitab Al-Hadeeth Publishing, Cairo, Egypt, 2000

† The *sagroda* is a sound Egyptian women make on joyful occasions by vibrating the tongue while taking a deep breath and exhaling.