



Dilation

By nan nassef

[Prepared in loving service to Lolly de Jonge on the occasion of the MCAN Leadership Face to Face: Advancing Maternity Care in Alberta – Edmonton, September 20, 2014]

I would like to begin by honouring the Confederacy of Treaty Six Nations in acknowledging that this event is taking place on unceded territory. I ask that the ancestor guardians of this land bless us to the service of birthing families in Alberta and the lands beyond.

Dilation.

As with birth, for some, this performance will be better with your eyes closed, and for some: open. Some people will need to look at me, and some people will need to look away. Some people will need to be seen and some people will want to remain hidden. Some people will want to sit or to stand or to stretch or to inhabit the space in a particular way. For some this will be easy and for some this will be hard. And for some it will be all, some, or none of the above. Honour what comes up for you. I ask only that you shut off your phones and any other distractions and stick with me in the room until the end.

I thank you, kindly, for your trust.

Dilation. Noun. Referring to the act of dilating and the state of being dilated.

In this way, dilation is both the process and outcome of being dilated. Process and outcome. Journey and destination.

I was invited here today to open the room. To open us to our sense of history. To open us to whatever manifestations of healing we need. To open us to our sense of shared purposed. To open us to access our collaborative power.

To open us.

To open.

Open.

Both adjective and verb. Description and action. Action-past, action-occurring, and action-potential. Past, present, future.

As an adjective, open: allows access, passage or view through an empty space. Open is also something or someone out in the open, exposed to the air or to view; it is not covered. And so our collective purpose. To be open, and to open maternity care in Alberta a little further. To uncover birth-past, birth-occurring, and birth-potential.

As a verb, open refers to something – someone – who moves or adjusts so as to leave a space, allowing access and view.

A verb expressed in the infinitive is To Be. To be open is to unfold or be unfolded.

To be open is to:

Spread.

Out.

And so, when Lolly extended this opportunity to open the MCAN Leadership's face-to-face gathering, to witness and honour the room, and those in it, in the dilation necessary to bring forth: hard labour, and difficult conversation; to witness and honour the room, and those in it, in the dilation necessary to align our individual and collective minds in the act of opening – providing access, passage, exposure, view, uncovering, unfolding – I was deeply moved.

And then, when I sat and thought about it, the writer-performer in me was greatly challenged.

Thankfully the doula in me has learned something about holding space for dilation.

I ask that you take a moment to inhale with me. Now.

Pause.

And exhale.

Inhale. Pause. Exhale.

Yes! That's it. That's just the way. Keep breathing.

In, through the nose and out through the mouth.

Pause at the top of your next inhalation and acknowledge the beautiful paradox of your existence – the sweetness (and saltiness, and bitterness) of life that moves ever forward into what comes after.

. . . and exhale.

Inhale, and acknowledge that everything said in this space today is both journey and destination.

. . . and exhale.

Every idea, hope, wish and intention expressed and generated today exists within a conversation about birth-life-death-dignity-compassion-expression that is already unfolding. Dip into the stream of that conversation.

. . . and exhale.

Exhale your unique expressions of our shared goals for birth in Alberta.

Inhale our collective desire for birth in Alberta to be characterized by freedom. The freedom for all women in Alberta to give birth: Where we want.

How we want, and

With whom we want.

Now. Exhale surrender to the fallibility of our best intentions.

To this, Beckett says: "No matter. / Try again. / Fail again. / Fail better." We are doing the best we can.

Inhale the strength and spirit of our foremothers in this work, and exhale any burden of responsibility you may feel in relation to any agreements or promises you made to them. You are doing the very best you can. We are all doing everything we can.

That's it . . . just like that. That's just the way. You know the way. Let go. That's it. Surrender.

Breathe.

This work is steeped in the pressure of something ever just about to emerge. Every gain in the politics of birth freedom elevates us to the top of higher and higher peaks in the rocky, mountainous pilgrimage of possibility.

You're climbing high.

Look how far we've come.

The view up here is remarkable. It is breathtaking. And? From up here, we can see the need to journey so much further.

Oh, but we have so much further to go!

Exhale. Concentrate on the force and power of your outward breath. Yes. That's it. Focus, now.

When it comes to birthwork, we are always and ever in transition.

Always and ever in the grit and crux of bringing forth. Of emerging.

Exhale. Concentrate on the force and power of your outward breath. Yes. That's it. Focus, now.

In the very long and often prodromal labour of this work, consider your engagement. Consider the parts of this work you breathe easily through and the parts of this work that you resist. Consider the sensation of challenge at its centre and again at its edges.

Yes, that's it. Bring curiosity to your experience of this work.

And in this very long and often prodromal work, I invite you to celebrate the wet and slippery emergence of every baby: the perception-change babies, the legal victory babies, the made-it-through-another-tough-meeting babies, the why-won't-she-just-do-it-my-way babies, and the held-a-hand-out-to-just-one-mother babies. Yes! That's it. Celebrate the emergence of every baby. Now.

And now.

And now.

Celebrate the gains in the political landscape of birth that appear to arrive as a state of natural progression and celebrate the ones we had to roll up our sleeves, plunge our hands in, and retrieve with great care, even as we are exacting maximum pressure and maximum force.

Yes. That's it.

This weekend – as with mothers and grandmothers, as with midwives and surgeons, as with doulas and supportive partners – I invite you to witness and celebrate emergence.

I caution you to resist confusing emergence with urgency. Do not make of your work a distressed emergency. Look not only upon how you wish things were different, here in birth, in the province of Alberta, and here within and between yourselves in this room; but cast your eyes and heart of compassion on the glorious, generative excesses of the present moment.

We have so much. We do so much. We are so much.

Fill your lungs with the wonder of all you are and all you have to offer, right now. Your lives are busy and complicated, and, yet, you are here. You made this time and space for yourself and each other. You are emerging into this day together. I celebrate you!

Fill your lungs with the wonder of all you are and have to offer. And then, with great focus and determination, exhale your offerings.

Know that you are and have and do enough.
You are enough.

As you breathe in the collective dreams we have and hold for birth in our province, I want you to imagine filling a red balloon with the helium of hope. Breathe out now. Slowly. And with the breath, give a gentle, exploratory push to your part in our shared dream. Imagine yourself pushing that red balloon forth into the world and with love and courage, releasing the string. Do not own this dream. Serve it. Admire it. Let it go. Dip back into the space where dreams become balloons and blow up a new one.

And release. Yes. That's it.

Now, on this next inhale, plant your feet and gather all the energy and strength and courage you can. We will use a few breath cycles to gather.

Energy.
Strength.
Courage.

That's it. Good and strong. Now. I want you to close your eyes, if they are not already, and I want you to imagine a mother in active labour, here in Alberta, this very moment. Can you see her?

With permission, imagine the sweat on her skin. Imagine the work of her body, and the work of her baby. Imagine the tangle of her emotions, the clarity of her focus and determination. Imagine the arrangement and rearrangement of her relationships. Imagine the

expansions and contractions, the surges of her journey on this day, and on an exhale, imagine sending the energy and strength and courage you gathered to her.

Then gather more and send it again.

Send it to her in rest. Send it to her in work. She is laboring, here in Alberta, right now. Send her the energy you've just gathered as she journeys on this day, bringing everything she has and more in the emergence of her baby.

I ask now that you send blessings or best wishes to the beings who emerge in our province today – in all forms, in all states. Send blessings to the beings who are gestating. Send blessings to the beings who stay with us and those who cannot. That's it!

Gather even more energy. Gather more and more and more. See how much you can gather, when you need it?

Approximately one hundred forty seven mothers gave birth in Alberta yesterday, and approximately one hundred forty seven are doing the same today and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow . . .

See the need for your work? Yesterday and today and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?

Dip into the vast and boundless pool of energy you drew from just now, and gather a little more for yourself. There. You have all you need. That's it. Keep breathing. That's just the way. You've got this.

You have got this.

I can see now, that you are good and open. Ready to participate in the journey and destination of your work. And so I will take my leave as you set to the task at hand.

Thank you for the great honour of witnessing you in dilation this morning. Blessings upon your service to emergence this morning and every morning here-after. Blessings upon the all the babies who will be born here today.

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nan nassef is a former high school teacher, former birth doula, former business-owner, former childbirth educator, former activist, former perfectionist, formerly under the impression that she had control. Now she mostly works on putting one foot in front of the other and hopes, one day, to do right by her kids. nan is currently working on an Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and waits to see what will come next.