

Birthing

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

No birth was ever celebrated enough. The miracle and mystery of life is too much for us to take in. The Christian community sets aside 12 days to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but it is never long enough. A few years ago, on the seventh day of Christmas, I got in on my first birthing, my first firsthand experience of this holy mystery.

It came when my daughter-in-law invited me to be present at the birth of her third child. She knew how disappointed I was in never having been permitted to witness the birth of my own three children. But in the years when my wife was giving birth to our children, fathers were banished to outer darkness (where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth). So what I had missed with my own children, by her generosity I experienced with this grandchild.

Nowhere I have ever been and nothing I have ever done in God's creation rivals what I experienced in that birthing room. The setting was austere--antiseptic and functional--but the life, the sheer life exploding out of the womb that night, transformed it into a place of revelation. My son received the baby into his hands as she came into the world. "Welcome, Sadie Lynn!"

I have climbed mountain peaks that gave me views of glaciated mountains in wave after wave of ranges, but none of those breathtaking vistas was comparable to seeing that baby enter the world. I have heard the most delicate and exquisite birdsong and some of the best musicians in the world, but no sounds rivaled hearing the cries of that baby.

I was a latecomer to an experience that is common to most fathers today and common to the human race as a whole. Does anyone ever get used to this? I was totally captured by the wonder of life, the miracle of life, the mystery of life, the glory of life.

The day after the birth I was in the grocery store getting some vegetables and grains for the family. There were several mothers shopping up and down the aisles with young children in tow, and many of the moms were snarling and snapping at their

overlively, curiosity-filled, energy-splattering kids. I wanted to grab the mothers, embrace them, tell them, "Do you realize what you have done? You have given birth to a child, a *child*--a miracle, a wonder, a glory! You are a madonna! Why aren't you in awe and on your knees with the magi, with the shepherds?" Luckily, I restrained myself; "madonna" would not have had the same meaning for them as it had for me.

I wake up each morning to a world I did not make. How did it get here? How did I get here? I open my eyes and see that "old bowling ball the sun" careen over the horizon. I wiggle my toes. A mockingbird takes off and improvises on themes set down by robins, vireos and wrens, and I marvel at the intricacies. The smell of frying bacon works its way into my nostrils, and I begin anticipating buttered toast, scrambled eggs with tarragon, and coffee freshly brewed from Javanese beans.

There is so much here--around, below, inside, outside. Even with the help of scientists and poets, I can account for very little of it. I notice one thing, then another. I explore the neighborhood. I try one street, then another. I venture across the tracks. I look through telescopes and into microscopes, curious and fascinated by this endless proliferation of unadulterated Isness--color and shape and texture and sound.

After a while I get used to it and quit noticing. I get narrowed down into something small and constricted. Somewhere along the way this exponential expansion of awareness, this wide-eyed looking around, this untaught delight in what is here reverses itself: the world contracts; I am reduced to a life of routine through which I sleepwalk.

But not for long. Someone or something always shows up to wake me up: a fox's sleek beauty, a sharp pain, a pastor's sermon, a fresh metaphor, an artist's vision, a slap in the face, scent from a crushed violet and, overwhelmingly, birth--the birth of Sadie Lynn. I am again awake, alert, in wonder. How did this happen? And why this? Why anything at all? Why not nothing at all?

Is wonder-induced gratitude the most fundamental of human responses, the emotion most congruent with life? Johnny Bergman was a young man in my congregation. He and his wife were enthusiastic participants, but then the weeds of worldly care choked their young faith. They acquired children; they became suddenly wealthy and their lives filled up with boats and cars, house building and social engagements. They were in worship less and less frequently and then not at all. After a two-year

absence, on a bright winter Epiphany Sunday, Johnny was there again. Surprised to see him, I said, "Johnny! What brought you to worship today?" He said, "I woke this morning feeling so good, so blessed, so alive--so created--I just had to say thank you, and this is the only place I could think of to say it adequately. I wanted to say it to Jesus."

Karl Barth goes into immense detail on the creation of life (he wrote four fat volumes on it) and then condensed it all into a single sentence that substantiates what Johnny Bergman said on that Epiphany Sunday: "We have established that from every angle Jesus Christ is the key to the secret of creation." Any birth--Sadie Lynn!--can return me to the defining context of Jesus' birth and the wonder and holy mystery of any and every life. There is more gospel in all those "begats" in the scriptures than I ever dreamed.