

Big Sky Unitarian Universalist sermon  
February 15, 2009

A lovely book about pregnancy called *Gentle Birth Choices* begins with the author's vision statement and hope for society: *Eventually, children will be treated as the most precious resource on our planet. My prayer is that we all work together to restore authenticity to birth, to respect pregnant and birthing women by giving them choices and to revere all children for the enlightened, joyful souls that they came here to be.*

Thank you for the privilege of being your guest this morning.

Your faith community may be new to me, but there are at least two of your members I am proud to say I know. Obviously, I know Kellie from my work at Florence Crittenton. I love her infectious smile and her passion for our young mothers and babies.

And I know Pad McCracken. Pad visits once a month, on a Monday evening, to lead a special in-house book discussion group for the girls. Sometimes teen moms can be a tough audience, especially at night with household chores looming over them plus bedtime needs for their babies. Pad brings an infectious enthusiasm for books. He is patient and he is gentle. But, equally important, Pad offers these young girls a model of a kind, respectful male. Most of his book club participants have not known many men who fit that description.

Kellie's title for my remarks this morning, *I was there to hear your bornin' cry*, connects both with the content (this will be all about mamas and babies) and also the song we'll sing later in the service. A subtitle for what I'll share with you, though, might be "It really is about kangaroos." I'll get back to the kangaroos in a minute.

First, though, just a brief description of this wonderful place where Kellie and I work.

FCH is a very old institution – serving very young clients – pregnant and parenting teens. Today FC specializes in therapeutic residential services for young women who are not only becoming parents, but often also face serious personal challenges.

A 15 year old girl, addicted to drugs, who has lived in poverty, been abused, possibly homeless – and is now also pregnant – has an almost overwhelming set of needs. At FC this young woman will benefit from therapeutic interventions: drug and alcohol recovery therapy, individual and family counseling, anger management help and a long list of other resources.

These are all familiar treatment options for young people living in residential therapeutic settings. But, obviously, there is one major distinction, for a teen at FC. These young women are, or will soon become, mothers. So, above all else, we are going to do everything possible to ensure healthy pregnancies. And "healthy pregnancy" means much more than just taking prenatal vitamins.

We need to use these precious prenatal months to wrap a huge blanket around these girls – a kind of *kangaroo pouch of care and security* – and hope that, when her baby is born, she will have begun to see herself as capable of making healthy choices for the two of them. And whether she decides to parent or to make an adoption plan, our goal is that this young woman will have found her “pregnancy predicament” to be an opportunity for profound change.

One of my favorite ways we provide the training wheels for these changes is through a weekly group called Loving Your Baby from the Inside Out – you can see the kangaroo connection, can't you. The research is clear -- babies waiting to be born simply need to be *intensely loved during pregnancy*. Mothers can and need to bond to their babies long before they first hold them in their arms.

They learn how important it is for them to visualize and connect with their **unborn** babies. We ask them to read their favorite children's story, sing a lullaby and *talk to* this little person who, at birth, will already be able to recognize his or her mother's familiar voice.

And if we can help a pregnant teen understand how critical it is to connect with her unborn child, there is a much higher likelihood that she will automatically assume the mother kangaroo identity in those important early days after birth.

Human infants are born with very different needs from tiny kangaroos. Externally, our babies are a pretty intact package. Kangaroos need months in the pouch to mature to the point of looking like their parents. But human babies are born with brains that need time in those early weeks to develop fundamental nerve pathways. This process appears to be enhanced by something as simple as skin to skin contact for the baby – even in the medical community, it's called “kangaroo care.”

So, for these teen moms who been encouraged to connect with baby during pregnancy, there is that equally critical next step: having a healthy labor and delivery. Their LYB group focuses intensely on the goal of providing baby with a gentle, safe transition from its internal pouch to the new external model – mother's arms. This kind of transition usually is much more likely with a well informed, confident birthing mother.

Over the past two years, as we have developed our LYB curriculum, we have identified some core values for this work:

\* We hope each young woman will become knowledgeable about her **right** to receive respectful, supportive medical care and to understand **her obligation** to take this pregnancy and birth seriously.

\* And despite national and state statistics, we're convinced that pregnant teens can have healthy full-term pregnancies and, with information and support, are very capable of having a labor and birth with few, if any, medical interventions.

\* And we hope that, when each of these young mothers goes into labor and delivers her baby, she will be remembered at St. Peter's Hospital as a knowledgeable, self confident and articulate advocate for herself and her infant.

Quick note here about measurable outcomes: Since beginning our prenatal education group, there have been no pre-term deliveries, only one FCH mother has chosen to have a scheduled c-section delivery, there have been no induced deliveries without medical indication and the breast feeding initiation rate over the past year has stayed at 100%.

Recently one of our residents gave birth to a healthy baby boy. She was supported by the hospital staff in her request to have her son in her arms immediately after his delivery. Caden had been born after a long labor and by midnight he and his mommy were, of course, still together and doing beautifully. One of the nurses checking in on them asked this new mother if it might be more convenient for her, since she'd been in labor much of the night before, to have the baby spend some time in the nursery.

Her answer was polite but clear: "Thank you, but I'm not here for my convenience – I'm here to be his mommy. I'm pretty sure that we both will rest better if we're together."

Caden's mother might not have remembered learning that newborns kept skin to skin have less fluctuation of their body temperatures than if they are wrapped up in a bassinet. And she didn't need to remember hearing that research also shows better cardio-respiratory stability outcomes and shorter lengths of time spent crying for newborns provided kangaroo care – safe on mommy's chest...

This baby's 16 year old mother simply understood the importance of her child's need to be close to her. She knew they needed each other.

Those marsupial mamas really are a great model. They're pretty committed to this idea of meeting baby's every need. Once that little pouch is occupied, a baby kangaroo stays right there for a number of months.

And as a teen mother experiences this connection to her child – even though she herself probably was not the beneficiary of healthy bonding and attachment within her family, she might begin to see herself very differently.

A few months ago a 15 year old mother of a three week old baby boy returned to FC after a weekend home visit – the first since she'd given birth. These early home visits sometimes make me a little nervous. As any of you who are parents know, taking baby home to grandparents for that initial introduction can be scary. Will they tell me I'm doing everything wrong? Will they want to take over?

So I checked in with Sarah that first day back and asked her to tell me about her weekend. She said things had gone pretty well. “Was there anyone who seemed to really be proud of you for choosing to breastfeed?” I asked.

Sarah answered, “Yes, my grandma. She’s actually very proud of me. And so is my great grandma. And it really makes me feel good.” And then she went on to say, “I’ve done so many things that surprised my grandma in a bad way and I’ve disappointed her. This time I wanted to do something that I knew would surprise her -- in a good way.”

We like to think that, at least in part, the gentle protection and nurture Sarah received with us during her pregnancy, and the information she learned about what babies need both before and after their birth, has contributed to her commitment now to being a strong advocate for herself and her son.

Congregations like yours understand the wisdom of those kangaroos and their biological mandate to protect and nurture. You do that within your faith by affirming the value of all persons.

Our hope at FC is that these young women may be embraced by this same kind of trust in their potential and acknowledgement that they and their babies will be welcomed -- “and revered, for the enlightened, joyful souls they came here to be.”

### **About our Guest Speaker:**

#### ***Breastfeeding Specialist - Jane Bucks***

*Jane Bucks is a Breastfeeding Specialist, Direct Care Staff, and Amazing Asset at Florence Crittenton Home, here in Helena. Jane has had a wealth of experience working with young mothers and babies throughout her career not to mention parenting her own six children and almost two dozen little ones that she and her family have fostered while adoption proceedings were being finalized. Jane has over twenty years experience with breastfeeding advocacy through her work with La Leche League and is a Certified Lactation Counselor. What feeds Jane's soul? Family (including five wonderful grandchildren), needy dogs, politics, strong coffee, Irish music, fresh Montana air and laughter.*