

Elisabeth Bing Is a Treasure: Personal Reflections on a Life in Birth

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ABSTRACT

Celebrating Elisabeth Bing's 100th birthday is an honor and a joy. Elisabeth's life is an inspiration to all who continue her mission of birth and women's advocacy. Dr. Mary Jo Podgurski strives to capture the indomitable spirit of the founder of American Society for Psychoprophylaxis in Obstetrics (ASPO)/Lamaze (now Lamaze International) through a personal reflection. Elisabeth Bing lived with valor. She is a role model to women everywhere, the mother of childbirth education, and a woman of great courage and wisdom. Thank you, Elisabeth, for the huge gift of your life.

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Elisabeth Bing, physiotherapist, childbirth educator, and cofounder of the American Society for Psychoprophylaxis in Obstetrics (ASPO)/Lamaze (now Lamaze International) is well known to most childbirth educators throughout the world. She is a true pioneer in the education of parents for pregnancy and birth. Her classic book, *Six Practical Lessons for an Easier Childbirth*, guided countless parents and childbirth educators alike in the use of the Lamaze method for labor and birth. Elisabeth is beloved by all those who have had the opportunity to meet her or work with her. She has created a legacy that will continue for decades to come. This issue of *The Journal of Perinatal Education* is dedicated to Elisabeth Bing in honor of her 100th birthday.

Elisabeth Bing is a treasure. She is so much more than words can articulate. Capturing her indomitable spirit is challenging. How many adjectives may I use to convey her essence? Creative. Inspiring.

Courageous. Wise. Intelligent. Innovative. Quizzical. Insightful. Committed. Resilient. Determined. She is a writer/author, master educator, woman's advocate, speaker, and mother. Elisabeth is all this and more. To me, she is also a dear friend.

As a young nurse and childbirth educator, I viewed Elisabeth as an icon—an educational mentor to so many childbirth educators walking the journey she began when she cofounded childbirth education in America with Marjorie Karmel. I hurried to her presentations, taking notes feverishly lest I miss her messages. Women knew their own bodies. Childbirth was normal and natural. The medicalization of the birth experience diminished women's roles. Her more subtle messages were imprinted on

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me as well. Her example gave me a role model of an independent woman unafraid to embrace motherhood later in life while continuing her mission.

During my first pregnancy, I read and reread her *Six Practical Lessons for an Easier Childbirth* so many times that the book needed to be replaced when pages began to fall out. Was Elisabeth part of my motivation to seek Lamaze certification? Absolutely! As a young childbirth educator, her books were displayed with reverence in my lending library; in more than 30 years of teaching, the only volume I needed to repeatedly replace was her *Making Love During Pregnancy*. Parents conveniently “forgot” to return it! She was decades ahead of her time. My work with adolescents and early childbearing led me to a career as a sexuality educator, but it was Elisabeth’s pioneering work linking sexuality and pregnancy that first raised my awareness of women’s bodies and lives.

I was honored to know Elisabeth personally when I entered leadership in ASPO/Lamaze as part of the newly elected 1994 Board of Directors. She invited me to her suite at the national conference in Chicago, asking to “get to know me.” Over the next 2 hr, she asked questions with a kind but firm tone. It was obvious to me that I was being vetted. Ever vigilant, Elisabeth wanted to understand my philosophy and my motivation. I can’t recall details of the conversation, but I was left with three strong perceptions: Elisabeth was growing older but she was sharp, discerning, and ready to defend the organization she birthed in the 1960s; Elisabeth’s leadership was unaffected by the passage of time; and Elisabeth was a consummate teacher. She was also someone with whom I immediately felt a connection. I knew I could learn much from her. Honored by the priceless gift of her time, I welcomed her advice. By the time I assumed the presidency of what became Lamaze International in 1997, I was spending time with her not only as a mentee but also as a friend. Traveling to New York City and staying in her spare bedroom

with “the little bathroom” became one of my most enjoyable activities.

Elisabeth welcomed my daughter Lisa on many of those trips. She flew to my little town in Pennsylvania for Lisa’s high school graduation in 1999 and stood in place of my mom, Lisa’s grandmother, who died in 1996. She beamed with pride during Lisa’s valedictory speech and never failed to ask of her progress when we spoke. She even welcomed one of my peer educators, Janell Mallory, when she accompanied me to New York. I spoke on teen pregnancy at a New York City conference and Janell helped me present; we slept at Elisabeth’s apartment and Janell absorbed her wisdom firsthand. She refers to Elisabeth to this day as “the wise white-haired lady.” When my daughter Amy returned to New York City after her national tour as a stage manager, she rented a room from Elisabeth; Amy, too, became Lamaze certified. Elisabeth became part of our family.

I learned so much from Elisabeth. I heard the story of her family’s departure from Hitler’s Germany and viewed pictures of their home there. We had the experience of beautiful childhoods in common because we were both raised by loving parents. Her words helped me imagine her early life as she talked of a “lovely” childhood filled with boating on the lake, pageants, bicycle rides, and skating. I began to see the foundation of her strength when she shared tales of her parents, her education in Europe, her survival of the London blitz, and her passion for creating a path to birthing normally in a culture that denied women choices in childbirth. She described her job as a young physical therapist in England. Assigned to exercise bedridden postpartum women, she knew “there must be a better way.” Grantly Dick-Read’s *Childbirth Without Fear* inspired her.

How blessed American women were when Elisabeth chose the United States as her home! She met Marjorie Karmel, the author of *Thank You, Dr. Lamaze*, in 1958. Together, they dreamed of teaching the Lamaze method of childbirth to as many women as possible. They formed ASPO/Lamaze (now Lamaze International) in 1960, creating a not-for-profit organization composed of parents, childbirth educators, health-care providers, and other health professionals to make Lamaze available to all women and to set professional standards for Lamaze childbirth educators. In many ways, Elisabeth was considered a radical in those early days. The idea of women assuming control over their births and their own bodies was alien to medical culture. Although she

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persevered after Karmel's death from breast cancer, her friend's death affected her; I only realized how much when I received the same diagnosis in 2005 and Elisabeth's concern and support for me were instantaneous and warm.

Elisabeth Bing truly has lived a life dedicated to women and birth. Her 2000 memoir, *My Life in Birth*, explores not only her motivation for her life's work but also her hope for the future. I will always remember the hot Memorial Day weekend when she entrusted me with that manuscript. Lisa and I had spent an amazing 3 days with Elisabeth, eating at her favorite deli, taking in Broadway plays, walking in the park, exploring the museums, and petting her cat. As we prepared to leave for our flight, I asked her if she would bless us by writing her memoirs. Her life story, I told her, would be a great gift. Without a word, she disappeared into her bedroom and emerged in moments with a densely typed 5-inch pile of paper. "Here you are," she said. "Do what you want with it."

There was no time to take the manuscript to a copier. There was no electronic backup file. This was, so far as I knew, the only copy of the document. I took it, trembling inside. On the flight home, I turned to my daughter. "If this plane goes down, honey," I said, "we'll lose this important book." Lisa laughed, assuring me we'd lose more than the manuscript, but the responsibility of caring for Elisabeth's words overshadowed any other concern. My first action when we landed was to make a copy!

Perhaps the greatest testimony of this amazing woman's life is reflected in her reaction to the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001. I called her on September 11, concerned for her well-being, and received a firm "I'm just fine." I presented at a New York City workshop the second week of October 2011 and stayed with Elisabeth. Alone, enjoying tea and toast with jam in her apartment kitchen, I asked her how the attacks felt to her. "It's life," she told me confidently. "One deals with life." She went on to describe her reactions to London bombings during World War II. At first, she shared, she'd gone to the bomb shelters with others when the air raid sirens pierced the night. Soon she decided to stay in her flat, regardless of personal terror or imminent destruction. She would go on with life, she said, continuing whatever she was doing when the bombs fell. To surrender to fear would only empower those who sought to destroy the city. She would die, she said, as she lived. What an amazing testimony of courage!

Elisabeth Bing lived with valor. She is a role model to women everywhere, the mother of child-birth education, and my personal hero. Thank you, Elisabeth, for the huge gift of your life.

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