

# Midwife to Midwife

## Are You Practicing “Real” Midwifery?

Have you ever had the experience of training for a sport, wanting desperately to be part of the game, and then standing on the sidelines feeling shame when you were not picked for the team? Have you had the experience of being made to feel inferior?

Have you ever heard the term “midwife” used to describe the work being done by a midwife who works in a high-volume, high-tech, tertiary setting? Have you heard the term “crunchy” used to describe the work being done by a home-birth or out-of-hospital-birth midwife? Or how about this one: “She’s not a real midwife anymore” when describing a midwife who is at home with her babies, working in research, teaching residents, teaching nursing students, working in administration or the corporate world, or a midwife who is retired.

Over the years, I’ve heard all of these words of judgment carelessly pronounced by midwife friends and colleagues about other midwives. I recently started wondering why we allow ourselves to be party to creating this competitive feeling of division in those who are equally qualified and have chosen to participate in midwifery through different pathways.

I started thinking, “Who is practicing real midwifery? What is a real midwife? Are you a ‘real’ midwife? Am I a real midwife?” I think the answer to this quandary requires the consideration of only two components: training and calling.

All certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) and certified midwives (CMs) are taught the same core competencies and must pass the same rigorous examination process. We all begin our CNM/CM

careers with an education base that trains us in the skills necessary to provide care within what is often referred to as the “circle of safety.” Where, when, and how we choose to practice those base skills is an individual decision. We are fortunate that we have many choices regarding how we bring midwifery expertise to women and families. New doors and opportunities are opening and being opened every day by visionary midwives, smart consumers, and corporate money makers.

The second and even more important component of being a real midwife is something I heard Sister Angela Murdock say 20 years ago. She said, “Midwifery is a calling. If you do not believe that you were called, you should get out of midwifery.” A calling does not stop when you walk out of your workplace and pass through another door. A calling is who you are inside. You take it into every aspect of your life. You don’t stop being a midwife because of the setting you are in. Every midwife who is called to the profession of midwifery is a “real” midwife and a gifted individual.

Last month, my best friend, who is also a midwife, asked me to come sit vigil with her over her father as he lay dying. We sat together at his bedside all night. We listened to each breath, sometimes wanting to breathe for him. We watched his body language and rhythm for unspoken cues to guide us in ways to offer comfort—a sip of water, a cold cloth, repositioning his body, a pillow under his arm, another blanket. No words were needed, but when we did speak, our words were soft, caring, and reassuring. He was in his own world, on his own

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path, and we were there to walk beside him as he transitioned on his life’s journey.

Does this sound familiar? My friend and I both agreed that what we had the privilege of providing to her sweet dad was the gift of our calling—midwifery care.

Helen Varney Burst’s timeless article published in the *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery* in 1990 said, “We do ourselves and each other a disservice when anyone insists that what they do is ‘real’ midwifery, thereby implying that what anyone else does is some lesser practice.” Helen went on to say, “We must recognize that, as individuals, each of us differs in what we choose to do and that it is acceptable to differ.”

Fostering attitudes and making statements that limit who we are by putting forth a constrained mode does a disservice to each of us as midwives. When we do this, we deny both our professional identity and our calling.

So, let’s rejoice in one another by recognizing, respecting, and supporting our diversity. Do not apologize for where you bestow the blessings of your calling. Do not judge others who share your calling. We are all real midwives and everyone benefits from having a real midwife walk beside them on their life’s journey. **Q**

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**The Department of Professional Practice and Health Policy welcomes Tina Johnson as the new director. Read Tina’s bio on page 18.**