

To give birth to a stillborn baby a talk I held in 2006

There are four people in the delivery room, a physician, a midwife, a woman and her husband. The labour progress very fast, after that the delivery was induced. The woman is now pushing - it is her firstborn baby.

At half past eleven that day, after 35 gestational weeks, a baby girl is born. She is small, has dark hair and she is totally silent.

The husband is standing next to the woman, with his arm around her shoulders. They both lean forward to see their daughter - their tears flow together.

While they cry, the baby is taken out of the room.

Later on the couple ask to be alone with the child for a few moments. The midwife comes in with the baby on a plastic tray, covered with a sheet. But the midwife does not leave the room.

This happened the 16 of June in 1981. I was 24 years old then, and it was my daughter who was stillborn. We named her Ellen, today she would have been 24 years old if she had lived.

I wanted to hold my baby but I did not dare to do that. I did caressed my baby's cheek but at the same time I was frightened. The whole time I was aware of my midwife's disapproval; her back, faced us, as she pretended to clean the hand-basin in the room, at the same time glancing at what we were doing. My husband counted our baby's fingers and toes, we were pleased that she was well formed and so beautiful. When the midwife took our daughter away, she wiped my hand with a cloth soaked in disinfectant. She reinforced my feelings of having done something wrong. I did not see my daughter again. I have no photo, neither any tokens of remembrance of her.

Ellen was born just between two different paradigms of care. In the late 1970:s and beginning of the 1980:s care shifted from a approach which discouraged mothers and fathers with stillborn babies from any contact with the child - to the care that we have today; supporting parents to meet and say farewell to their baby.

You can see the difference in Lottas story. Her son was stillborn only a couple of years after my daughter was born. Let me take you to Lotta's son; Erik's funeral.

Lottas family and some of her best friends attended the funeral, all of them dressed in light coloured clothes, as she had asked them to. Together they listened to the chiming of the bell before they entered the church.

They all gathered around the tiny white coffin so beautifully decorated with wild flowers and burning candles around it. The priest read a few poems, sad but yet hopeful. Lottas best friend, Erik's godmother, then read her own poem: To Erik.

Like a little rosebud
That never quite bloomed,
That bowed its head
Before spring came to an end.
Just like the summer that
Never broke into bloom,
Of the suns warm rays,
We never learned to know.

You were never privileged to open your eyes
To see the things that delights us so.
Something made you turn back the way.
You heartened to some voice that called: come!
But perhaps there was something here on earth
That your eyes were not supposed to see,
and we stand here empty with the realisation
That life is forever unpredictable.

The priest read another poem and some selected scriptures and made the sign of the cross over the coffin. The cantor ended the church ceremony with the favourite song of Erik's father and Lotta, gave memories of the summer they first met.

To the strains of this lovely melody, Lottas's father, Erik's grandfather, carried the little coffin all the way to the burial site, an act of love that Lotta will never forget.

Once they arrived at the grave, they laid down flowers and Lotta sang a lullaby to Erik, the same lullaby that she sang to him when he was still in her womb and very much alive.

Now, in retrospect, Lotta says that it all seems so self-explanatory. But it was not so then, least of all to her. When the doctor told her that her baby had died, Lotta - shouted in her state of chock - take IT away. Suddenly the child was no longer a baby, but *an it*. Her doctor guided, yes even pushed her, to a point where she was able to realise how important it is to hold the baby, name it and retrieve memories.

Nor, did she understand the importance of having a photo. When the midwife asked her after the delivery if she wanted a picture of Erik, she said no. A couple of days later, however, she regretted it. Fortunately, it was still possible to get a photo.

Lotta also recalled how it was the first time she met the chaplain at the hospital. When she came to see her on the ward a couple of days after the delivery, Lotta was both surprised and angry. Angry because the chaplains God had taken her baby. Lotta asked the chaplain what evil her God had thought Erik had done, or was SHE perhaps the one being punished? The chaplain answered: "I believe God is just as sorry as you are."

The chaplain also made Lotta realise that she should not rush to pick a tombstone. The summer and autumn after the burial, she often walked around the cemetery to observe what others had done. She saw many different types of graves.

During a visit to a province in the south of Sweden she suddenly caught sight of a little white cross on a child's grave and decided: Erik should have one like that.

Now many years later, Lottas' s feelings of sadness still exist, but are something she has learned to live with. But Erik brought not only sadness. He is also a source of joy; he was her firstborn child and gave her so many bright memories and happy hours for almost nine months.

She sometimes goes up to the cemetery - that feels good, gives her strength and a kind of peace and quiet.

Erik was longed for, welcomed and sorely missed.

Today we support parents to meet and say farewell to their stillborn babies and caregivers treat a stillborn child as a child. Psychological support has been refined in a way that helps parents cope with the trauma. Also, the medical possibilities to help the parents have improved. A couple of decades ago there were no methods to diagnose a baby's death in utero nor were there drugs to start the delivery. Having months to wait, two maybe three months to wait before induction of the delivery was not unusual some decades ago. Let us listen to an 80 year's old retired doctor who e-mailed her story to me:

"In the beginning of the 1950:s, I was pregnant three times, every time the pregnant ended in a stillborn baby. The first time I was in the fifth month, I become suspicious that something could be wrong with the baby. My husband and I were at the countryside and we consulted the doctor at the local hospital for a check-up. The doctor said that the foetus probably was dead. We got home and I consulted my doctor at our home hospital and he said that everything was all right with the baby. I think that he lied to me, although he was a professor in obstetrics and gynaecology. I was moving from hope to fear but at least the truth was totally clear, the baby was dead. I went to the hospital again and got an examination, after that I had to wait almost 2 months before the delivery started. That was an awful time.

The second and third time, I lost my babies after eight month long pregnancies. On both occasions, the death came like lightening from a clear sky. I had felt very well during the pregnancies and until the very end, I was hoping that this time everything would go fine, but suddenly I could not feel any foetal movements. I was not allowed to see my children after the deliveries; I suppose they were thrown away like garbage. Today I hope no parents or dead children are treated in this way.

My firstborn daughter has three younger siblings; Isabelle 23 years old, Nils 20 and my youngest, Martina is 13 years old. Ellen was stillborn after an 8 month long pregnancy. I know that life goes on also after the tragedy of loosing a child and I also know that you can have a good life too, but there is a lot of pain, sorrow before you can cope with it, and no matter how many children you have in the future you will always have one less.

So, this conference is important, if we, with future research, can learn more about the causes stillbirth and maybe reduce the number of children who die, then we can reduce a lot of pain. If the tragedy is there, then we also know that there is a lot we can do for the parents to help them to meet and mourn for the child, a child they never will forget.