Ina May Gaskin (1940– )

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Gaskin was born in 1940 and raised on farms, where she was surrounded by children at a young age. Her mother taught home economics, and her father was a farmer but later became a salesman. Gaskin's brother died in a gun accident when he was fifteen. In an interview, Gaskin said she taught her compassion and the importance of giving after the loss of a loved one. Gaskin attended Marshalltown High School in Marshalltown, Iowa.

After graduating from high school in 1959, Gaskin studied English at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. In 1959, she married Michael Kelley, though they later divorced in the 1970s. A year after graduating in 1962 with her degree in English, Gaskin returned to the Peace Corps and taught English in Malaysia for the next two years. In 1967, she obtained her Master of Arts degree in English from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. After Gaskin’s graduation, she and Kelley had a daughter named Sydney in the late 1960s. According to Gaskin, the experience of delivering her first child led her to a desire to find a way to give birth. Gaskin further explained that during the birth of her first child, her physicians gave her anesthesia without her consent and used forceps to pull her child out of her vagina. That was a practice that Gaskin disagreed with due to the fact that forceps, which are sharp long instruments, could either cause injury to a woman’s vagina or urinary tract, or could result in injuries to the infant’s skull or face.

In 1968, while living in San Francisco, California, Gaskin and her first husband Kelley went to hear several lectures by Stephen Gaskin, a lecturer at San Francisco State College in San Francisco, California. In his lectures, he presented Monday Night Class, his thoughts on religion and morality, Gaskin and her first husband Kelley, along with Stephen Gaskin and his wife, began what Gaskin called a four-marriage, with the four of them having intimate, spouse-like relationships with each other. After Stephen’s audience grew, he went on the road to promote his message of spiritual exploration on a lecture tour. Gaskin, now in her second pregnancy, along with some of his other collaborators, joined him. The group travelled in school buses and caravans.

According to Gaskin in her book Spiritual Midwifery, in 1970 while she was on the road during the lecture tour, she realized that the women would need to give birth with only the guidance of the other women on the tour. She states that the group felt they would be unable to afford to give each woman a birth at a hospital, and they were looking for a way to give birth the way they wanted, which meant without unnecessary interventions. In the late 1970s, it was becoming more common for women to receive an epidural injection, which reduced her pain during labor. It was also common for women to be separated from their infant after birth due to healthcare providers monitoring the infant’s heartbeat. However, according to Gaskin, some women wanted to be able to give birth inside of a hospital without the intervention. Additionally, there were no birthing paddocks or birthing centers. Ina May’s Guide to Childbirth, a medical reference textbook, was published in 1979, Spiritual Midwifery is a book that contains a compilation of women’s birth stories on the farm and information about midwifery care. Gaskin’s work, Ina May’s Guide to Childbirth, was published in 2003 and gives information about how to give birth without technological intervention. In her 2009 publication, Gaskin’s work, titled Birth Matters, was published in 2003 and gives information about pregnancy-related causes in the US since 1982, highlighting the national statistics of maternal deaths and honoring the women who died. Gaskin states on the project’s website that the Safe Motherhood Project was created to draw attention to the current maternal death rates in the US as well as, what she calls, the gross underreporting of maternal deaths. The low-intervention method does not require the use of an episiotomy, surgical cutting of the opening of the vagina, or a cesarean section, which delivers the infant by cutting through the wall of a woman’s abdomen. The use of the technique among in both hospital and home births has resulted in decreased rates of protracted labors, which are abnormally slow labors, as well as a decreased number of routine episiotomies, and better survival rates in breech and twin births.

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Ina May Gaskin is a certified professional midwife, or CPM, in the US during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. She worked at the Farm Midwifery Center in Summertown, Tennessee, a center well known for its low rates of intervention, which contributed to low rates of maternal and fetal mortality. One technique Gaskin used when assisting women with delivery helped resolve a complication called shoulder dystocia, which is when a part of the infant's body is delivered, but the rest of the body is stuck in the birth canal. Her work served as an example for midwives and obstetricians, physicians who specialize in a woman's reproductive system, childbirth, and pregnancy, to use a low-intervention approach without medication or a cesarean section. Through her work in developing different birthing techniques, Gaskin provided women with alternative methods to deliver infants without the need for hospitals, medication, or surgical intervention, even in the case of complicated births.

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- Childbirth at home
- childbirth in literature
- Natural childbirth
- Midwifery
- Home Childbirth

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- People

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