

# The Color of Goldenrod

by Janice Marsh-Prelesnik

The phone rings at 6:30 am. The all-too-familiar adrenaline rush crashes through my body with more force than usual. I am fully awake and fully alert as I sweetly answer the phone, "Good morning." I'm always amazed at the calmness in my voice when my heightened senses are acutely aware of my surroundings and my body is ready to spring into action.

"Hi, Aunt Jan, this is Michelle."

Oh, my gosh. It is my niece. She is like my own daughter, as I helped raise her when she was young. I remember her sweet soul the day she was born. I fell madly in love with her then and I have remained deeply bonded and connected with her ever since.

My favorite part of midwifery is the deep connection that I feel with the women I serve. Ironically, that part of midwifery also proves to be the most challenging for me. This deep connection, while spiritually satisfying, is hard on me physically. It is as if I simply feel too much. Adrenaline that stays unused in my body settles in my joints and leaves me achy and exhausted. I tire more easily now and worry that I might not be fully present to make important decisions. After all, I'm the one who says to everyone, "You can't take care of others if you can't take care of yourself." Given this, I had second thoughts about being Michelle's primary midwife; I thought the wiser course might be for me to provide labor support and have another midwife as primary.

"Aunt Jan, I'm not in labor, but I am worried because I have a bright yellow discharge. I've never seen that color come out of my vagina before."

The date was July 3, 2002, and at 6:30 am already promising to be another blistering, hot day—near 100°. This is quite unusual weather for Michigan. The heat was leaving everyone stressed and out-of-sorts. I expected this precious baby to arrive around the middle to the end of July and was glad to hear Michelle wasn't in labor, as she doesn't have air conditioning and the weather was just too hot to do anything.

Michelle was worried; I could hear it in her voice. So like a detective, I went to work asking as many questions as I could think of.

Exactly what shade of yellow is the discharge?

Goldenrod.

Have you had a gush of water?

No, I just got up to urinate and I saw this discharge on the toilet paper.

Is the discharge dripping out?

No, the color was on the toilet paper.

Are you sure it isn't concentrated urine?

No, it is coming from my vagina.

Do your labia or vagina burn or itch?

No, neither of those, the tissue feels normal.

What does the discharge smell like?

It smells like vaginal smell; it smells like a normal smell.

And so on and so forth...

I thought she might have a trichomoniasis or bacterial vaginosis infection even though the discharge had no unusual odor and she was not experiencing itching or discomfort. I asked her to save the toilet paper but her partner unknowingly flushed it down the toilet. By early afternoon the discharge had ended.

Michelle was still bothered and, frankly, I was too. What could have caused this discharge? The thought that it was meconium did cross my mind. Michelle decided to have her family doctor perform some tests just to make sure that she didn't have an infection.



The tests came back negative. We both felt more at ease but a nagging uneasiness was still in the air. Maybe the heat was just getting to both of us. The baby responded well and seemed content in his womb home.

The days and weeks went by and finally on July 30, Michelle was in labor. I was nervous while driving to the birth—I had a bothersome feeling. I couldn't really decipher what I was feeling. Was it the added dimension of attending a family member? My niece said she was afraid, but she didn't know what she was afraid of.

The labor was on-again, off-again labor. We coaxed the baby to be born—"Come on baby, come on out."

After several hours of mild to moderate contractions my niece went to urinate and found the same colored discharge again. Again, darkness hovered over us. Even though I had just listened to the baby's heart tones a few minutes earlier (the heart tones up to this point had been excellent), I listened again only to hear a deceleration with a very slow rebound. We listened with a doppler—and we all heard it. We knew then. We knew this baby was speaking loud and clear.

"I am in trouble in here. Get me out!"

We transported Michelle to the small community hospital where her family doctor met us. By that time the water had released and showed us fresh meconium. The baby's heart tones were back to normal and stayed there. The doctor mentioned that we had no reason to be alarmed as many babies who have passed meconium are born vigorous and healthy. I told the doctor that I was well aware of this but I knew that this baby was not doing fine. The doctor asked me what I thought she should do. I knew the baby needed to be born by cesarean and the sooner the better. The yellow discharge Michelle had seen nearly four weeks earlier was clearly meconium that had leaked through the membranes. The contractions had picked up in intensity while we decided what to do. Then the baby's heart rate decelerated again. It stayed down for several seconds with a very slow rebound once again.

They did a cesarean within a few minutes, revealing a very floppy baby. Immediately the baby was bagged, as his lungs were unable to inflate on their own. This small hospital was not equipped to care for such a sick baby and as we waited for the ambulance to arrive to take him to the NICU he developed a pneumothorax. Bad was going to worse. I felt very sick.

He had passed meconium quite a long time before his birth. His whole body was stained yellow. Even his corneas were

stained yellow. Before the ambulance took him, he was placed on Michelle's belly. I will never forget that moment. That little guy opened up his eyes for the first time and looked right into his mother's eyes. We knew then that he would be all right.

He spent four-and-a-half weeks in the NICU where he was put on a respirator that sent small puffs of air into his lungs. The neonatologist guessed that the meconium, which had irritated his lungs, had been there for weeks. As soon as the lung tissue regenerated, in about four weeks, he would be able to breathe on his own. This proved to be true. Today this baby is four years old and is as happy and healthy as can be.

I repeatedly reviewed what I could have done differently. What if we had known that the meconium could seep through membranes? This was a sign—a sign that we listened to but did not understand. Had we known that it was meconium, what would we have changed? Would I have referred Michelle to a medical practice? Or would I have monitored the baby more closely?

I'll always wonder why this happened. He wasn't tangled in his cord. I wonder if the intense heat could have caused stress in the baby. Can babies pass meconium for reasons other than stress? Could the baby's meconium possibly have been more acidic than normal meconium? Could the baby have had food sensitivities that caused him to pass meconium? His mother has dairy intolerance that leads to diarrhea; could the same thing happen to an unborn baby? In so many stories one never knows the reason for the situation. Maybe the story unfolds exactly as it should.

Not knowing the answer is frustrating, but I have faith that everything happens for a reason. I have faith in the intense intuitive messages I am given. I have faith in the strength of mothers and babies. I am grateful for midwifery knowledge and ways of knowing. And I am eternally grateful for the ability of the human body to repair itself.

I can ask myself, "Why?" and I can answer myself, "Just because." Being a midwife is just complicated. I will never look at the color of goldenrod in the same way again.



Since 1981 Janice Marsh-Prelesnik has worked as a homebirth midwife, herbalist and massage therapist. In the summer Janice can be found in organic gardens preparing herbs for her herbal line Granny Janny Herbs. Janice is also the author of *The Roots of Natural Mothering*. You can reach Janice at [www.creativebirthingarts.com](http://www.creativebirthingarts.com).



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