

MY, YOU'RE LARGE

Something there is about a pregnant woman that invites intrusions physical and mental from friends and strangers alike.

By: Kerrie Houston

With the onset of my pregnancy came nonstop poking, prodding, and probing—not by my physician, but by my peers. Friends and acquaintances have become predators, assaulting me with persistent personal questions and person-best procreation horror stories.

The questions pile up in memory, a chorus of the concerned and curious: “Is this cause for celebration?” “Were you trying?” “Will you breast-feed?” “You’re so teeny—will they let you have it vaginally?” “Who’s the father?” “Did you even *want* to have children?”

There must be something about a woman in her weakened—or empowered—state that seems an open invitation into the deepest regions of her most private thoughts. Friends call at all hours to ask questions about my health, my state of mind, my morals. Questions that under any other circumstances they would regard as none of their business.

One friend seized upon my announcement as an opportunity to discuss, of all things, abortion. “Are you against abortion?” she asked. Before I could answer, she assured me that she was. “But if there’s a chance you’ll have a retarded child, then I’m all for it,” she continued. “Although, I’ve had a miscarriage, I’d rather carry a baby full-term.”

Strangers think nothing of walking up and touching a pregnant woman’s body.

The other day, a young partner at my husband's law firm—a man I've met only once—saw me in a department store and unabashedly threw his arms around me. Still holding me, he blurted out, "Congratulations, Mrs. Houston!" *Still* holding on, he threw in his two cents worth about the amount of time my husband spends at home. "John is doing a fine job for us. But I'll make sure he starts coming home at a decent hour." I eased myself out of his grip.

I no sooner adjusted to this line of attack than well-intentioned assaults came from what a pregnancy pamphlet I read calls "bridge-table obstetricians." The pamphlet offered some tactical advice by suggesting that I "welcome the common sense of well-informed friends, and turn a deaf ear to frightening stories." But that proved impossible. Everything I heard seemed

to fall into the latter category.

One neighbor greeted the news of my pregnancy by telling me how she cries herself to sleep whenever she thinks of her pre-childbirth body. She mournfully showed me pictures of what she used to look like, pleadingly saying, "See.... See here....I used to have nice boobs..." I didn't now if it would be worse to agree or to disagree. This line of attack was continued by another friend, who said, "I can't imagine *you* pregnant." Determined to leave me with visions of a body bloated and ruined by pregnancy, she added, "I've heard that some women go back to being skinny. But I certainly don't know of any."

But those paled in comparison with the pregnancy-and-delivery horror stories. Two months into my pregnancy, I've heard it all: episiotomies, leaking breasts, cracked

nipples, women who hear an unknown baby cry in the supermarket and literally spill a breastful of milk on the floor, and a volume of stories too graphic for publication.

What fate awaits me at the end of my term? Will I hear from my obstetrician, as a friend of mine heard from hers, "Wow! What a pelvis!" Will I undergo hideous character changes during delivery, threatening, as friends have done, to kill my husband if he comes near me? Will I get the nurse who told my sister's husband to pinch her nipples to start contractions? Will I reach out in rage during labor, like a neighbor of mine did, grab the nurse's wrist, and bite it hard enough to break her watch?

The most frightening story was told on national TV by Oprah Winfrey's best friend. Her husband joyously videotaped his child's birth, along with the woman's

unexpected bowel movement.

Finally I decided that this horror-story behavior must be peculiar to women. They are, after all, more prone to sharing personal secrets, to discussing intimacies, to talking, than men are. Men, the occasional groper aside, are more discreet. What I had in the past taken for insensitivity and lack of imagination in men now began to look wonderful, enviable by comparison with the way my female friends were behaving. So when I answered the phone the other night, I was relieved to hear the voice of a male friend. At last, I thought, someone I can tell about my pregnancy without having to undergo yet another intimate cross-examination. So, I told him. "Must have been that four-day weekend," he said.

I was more or less appalled at all the intrusions until I saw the first ultrasound

image of my baby-to-be. A profound change came over me after that. A few days later, I heard of a medic who delivered a woman's baby in her driveway, then left before the arrival of the afterbirth. I found myself filled with compassion for the woman rather than derision at the storyteller. And I realized that all the stories and questions that I had taken for attempts at filling me with fear were instead expressions of joy and sympathy.