
Just a Woman

Elizabeth H. Day, CD(DONA), LCCE

ABSTRACT

A Lamaze childbirth educator explores her own transformative experience giving birth to her second child.

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I lay my head wearily on my pillow after a long day of work and time with my family. My husband, Robin, and I stayed up late that night watching the Republican Party candidates' debates and a Chicago Cubs baseball game he had recorded earlier. I was two days past my due date, and I should have been more conscious of my need for rest. But I felt healthy and energetic, strong and prepared.

I was a former marathoner. I practiced yoga through the last two trimesters of my pregnancy. I had recently completed my Lamaze certification, read book after book about birth, and focused on being in total control of my birth experience. We hired a midwife and planned for a home birth where I made sure that everything around me and everyone who attended me would facilitate the organic, even orgasmic experience I had learned was possible. I envisioned myself giving birth effortlessly and perfectly.

The wind blew outside as I settled my huge, pregnant body into a comfortable position in bed. I had just found the perfect spot when waves of pain circled around my belly. Honestly, I thought it was gas. Slowly, I rolled myself out of bed and waddled to the bathroom. There on the toilet, I experienced a fairly strong contraction. I pressed my hands into my belly, marveling at how hard it was. I returned

to bed and told Robin about the contraction I had just had. I followed it up by assuring him that he needn't worry—the contraction was just stimulated by the gas pain.

I turned over in bed to find the perfect comfort spot once more. I had just found it when another strong contraction gripped my body. I breathed slowly and quietly through the intensity. Robin heard my breathing change. "Another one?" he whispered. "Yeah," I groaned. "Should we call the midwife?" he asked.

I lay still for a moment, scanning my body, trying to assess whether this could possibly be the labor I was waiting for. I refused to let myself get all worked up over a couple of hard contractions. As a doula and now as a Lamaze educator, hadn't I counseled enough pregnant women against that? "It's probably nothing," I said. "If I have five more of these, we'll call Janessa."

The third wave came only minutes later, strong and hard. When a fourth wave followed closely behind, I knew. "Okay," I conceded. "It's time. Let's call Janessa."

In an instant, Robin was out of bed, all the lights were on, and the weariness and sleepiness of the night had vanished. It was 12:45 in the morning and we knew there would be no sleep for us tonight.

I was deep in the rhythms of labor. I acknowledged the midwife's presence, but said little else as the pain took my words away.

I returned to the bathroom and sat on the toilet as the contractions increased. Robin reached Janessa and assured her that it was time to hurry. As he talked with her, I began to smell a familiar scent. It was musky, sweet, earthy, and warm. Unmistakable. I called out, "Tell Janessa I smell like birth!"

Robin called my mother and Lena, our friend and photographer. All the while, he was hurrying about, fixing a piece of raisin toast for me, filling the Jacuzzi tub, pressing on my lower back during contractions, and pulling out everything in the birth kit in case he had to catch a baby. I was unaware of the clock, but I knew the contractions were close. I had very little time to rest between the waves of pressure and pain that seized my entire abdomen.

It wasn't long before I was on my hands and knees, rocking in a tub of warm water. Carrie, the midwife's apprentice, arrived first. I had taken to her from the first time I met her, and we had become good friends. Her calm, gentle presence cheered me right away. I looked up and smiled. "Zero to sixty in two-point-five—I told you I was fast." (My first baby, Jonathan, was born in just four hours.)

By the time Janessa arrived, I was deep in the rhythms of labor. I acknowledged her presence, but said little else as the pain took my words away.

I tried laboring on the birth ball for a while. Robin continued to press his hands into the small of my back as I rocked back and forth, breathing and chanting to myself, "I love you baby. I love you. Open, open." Soon I was praying softly, "Heavenly Father, help me."

I looked up at the reflection in the window behind the tub and saw my mother and my oldest sister, Christy, enter the room behind me. I was so glad they had come. Both experienced birthers, they would bring the extra strength I needed. "Hi, Mama," I said, speaking to her reflection, but not turning around. I couldn't. The intensity of the labor was increasing by the minute, and a feeling of panic and even dread had begun to creep into my head.

I returned to the tub, unaware of all the people in the room—where they were, or what they were doing. Someone turned off the overhead light. Someone lit several candles. Someone pressed on my

back, giving Robin a break. Someone gave me a towel on which to rest my arms and head. Someone held my hand. I do know that it was Christy who started the music.

She had compiled several hours of classical music for me, but it was the first piece that saved me. It was a soft, simple, violin solo with piano accompaniment—Arvo Pärt's "Spiegel im Spiegel." This is translated "Mirror in Mirror." As the piece began, it was as if each note held my body in a tender embrace. My heart swelled and tears filled my eyes. My shoulders shook as I let myself break down and cry. It was as if the music was acknowledging and honoring my pain, telling me that it was alright to be overwhelmed. Soon, my sobs turned to calm silence, and I felt a new strength and serenity flow through me.

I rested my head on my arms, closed my eyes, and breathed as I focused inward. In absolute silence, I allowed my body to do its sacred work and I listened to its messages to me. I felt my cervix opening. I let my body release. I sank into the warm water and began to relinquish my desire to control the pain. I allowed myself to just be in the pain as wave after wave washed over me.

As the piece of music ended and a new one began, I lost my focus. "No, no. Not that one." Christy skipped ahead to another. It wasn't right either. I couldn't tolerate any other music. Everything else was too complex and distracting. I only had enough room in my consciousness for one slow note at a time. So Christy put "Spiegel im Spiegel" on repeat, and I listened to it over and over again.

Finally, I knew that something was changing. I asked Janessa to check my cervix. With some difficulty, I lifted my body out of the water and she quickly assessed my dilation. "You're a good eight to nine centimeters," she whispered. Everyone in the room smiled and cooed, "Good job, Beth! Wonderful!" My mother gave me a big thumbs-up.

Suddenly, I needed to get to the toilet, but it was almost impossible for me to lift myself out of the tub. The warm water had muted my pain and, now, as my belly left the buoyancy of the water, the pain became sharp and merciless. I had to hurry, because there was no time between contractions to rest.

I transitioned on the toilet. All I remember is that it was awful. I cried out for Robin, throwing my arms around his neck as he dug his fists into my back. I cried and grunted, moaned and swore. Every few minutes, I involuntarily bore down. I knew I was ready to push.

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Frantically, I moved to the bed. Janessa confirmed that I was complete. But as I pushed, instead of focus, I felt panic and confusion. It was as if I had no idea how, when, or where to push. Nothing felt good. Nothing helped. Nothing made sense. I just wanted it all to be over.

I moved from one position to another, trying to find something that worked. Hands and knees. Leaning over a birth ball. Rocking back on my heels and leaning against Robin. Squatting on the bed. Squatting next to the bed. What had happened to all my training? Where was my instinct? “Janessa, help me!” I sobbed. “I don’t know how to push!”

Janessa placed two fingers inside me. “Do you feel that? Push against my fingers.” I pushed and pushed, exhausted and weak. I needed leverage. I turned towards the bed, kneeling as I would for evening prayers. Carrie knelt on the other side of the bed and played tug of war with me, using a rope with handles at either end like a ski tow. I pushed hard and pulled hard, shaking with the effort.

Then, I felt the unmistakable burning—the “ring of fire” that marked the crowning of my baby’s head. In a rush of energy and adrenalin, I pushed *hard*, desperately trying to get that head out. Behind me, Janessa and Robin were surprised by the head popping out where they had seen nothing but a little hair before. Janessa quickly reached out to catch the baby as I gave one more enormous push to release the shoulders. The baby slipped easily out. I was finished! It was over! I sobbed with relief.

“What is it?” I asked as I turned to look at my baby, still behind me. “Jonathan has a new baby brother!” Robin exclaimed. “It’s a boy!”

“What? Really? It’s a boy?” I was shocked. We had been so sure this one was going to be a girl.



My mother, my sister, and my midwife’s apprentice provided much needed strength and reassurance as I pushed my baby into the world. (Photo by Lena Marshall)

Luckily, we had chosen a name for a boy just a few weeks earlier, just in case. Robin wrapped our little Aaron Michael in a towel and handed him to me. I knelt there and clutched him in my arms, shaking and sobbing with joy and relief. Robin and I kissed each other and stared at this new life we had created together. It was an eternal moment, suspended in time, reflecting back and forth within itself forever—like a mirror in a mirror.

As I settled into bed, holding Aaron close to my breast, it began to rain. A loud clap of thunder shook the house and sheets of water pelted the windows. We laughed. “Now when we tell Aaron’s birth story, we can start with the words, ‘It was a dark and stormy night.’ ”

The next two weeks were very difficult for me. In addition to a multitude of postpartum discomforts, which included intense afterpains, a second-degree tear, constipation, hemorrhoids, engorgement, sore nipples, and an insane rash, I struggled with the memory of Aaron’s birth. I had felt so sure that my knowledge and training as a childbirth educator and a doula, and the strength and focus I developed in my yoga practice would make me invincible in labor. I had envisioned myself being in total control—even enjoying the ecstasy of labor and birth.

Aaron’s birth, by all external factors, had gone perfectly. But I had not been able to control my inner experience. Had I somehow failed? For several weeks, I cried every time I thought about Aaron’s birth. It was hard! It was so very hard! I was scared. I was overwhelmed. I even remember feeling like I wanted to give up and run away. It shook me right down to my roots.

Slowly, however, I began to resolve and reframe what had happened, and I came to a humbling realization about myself and about all women. When I was in labor, I was no longer a childbirth educator. I was no longer a doula. I was no longer a marathoner or a yogi. I was stripped of everything—my credentials, my pride, my ego, even my clothes. When I was in labor, I was just a woman.

Just like every other woman in labor, I needed a hand to hold. I needed a supportive caregiver, a loving husband, and sensitive, strong women surrounding me and holding me up. I needed someone to tell me I was doing everything just right. I learned that birth isn’t about ego. It’s about surrender—and

I learned that birth isn’t about ego. It’s about surrender—and I did that.

I did that. I'm grateful that it happened just the way it did, and I don't wish for anything different. I can now say I'm proud to be "just a woman."

ELIZABETH DAY is a mother of two, a certified doula with DONA International, and a Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educator living in Bentonville, Arkansas. She is also a passionate advocate for normal birth and serves as a chapter co-leader of BirthNetwork National in her community of Northwest Arkansas.

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