Eloen Graces Us: Two Perspectives of a Home Birth

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ABSTRACT

In continuing *The Journal of Perinatal Education's* mission to promote normal birth, this issue's "Celebrate Birth!" column features mother and daughter, Nancy Ferguson and Shelley Beebee, who share two complementary perspectives of the magic and mystery surrounding the home birth of Eloen, Nancy's granddaughter and Shelley's daughter.

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GRANDMOTHER'S (NANCY'S) PERSPECTIVE OF ELOEN'S HOME BIRTH

Happy News

My daughter, Shelley, and her husband, David, had been trying to get pregnant for over 2 years and were getting pretty discouraged. Then, what is always a miracle at last happened for them. On our 33rd wedding anniversary in May 2006, my husband, Stan, and I learned that we'd meet our first grandchild in early December. The laughter and tears that accompanied that announcement are unforgettable and can still be summoned into the present moment with little effort. Our cups were overflowing. In a clichéd and somewhat manic expression of grandmotherly happiness, I went straight to the mall to buy tiny outfits and a stuffed animal that looked just like my cat, Maggie.

Shelley and David invited me to stay with them in early December to await the baby's birth and help

out in the first weeks. I can't underscore enough how honored and thrilled I felt. And a tad anxious that I'd be in the way, or that I would just not be all Shelley needed me to be.

Also, Shelley was having the baby at home with midwives. I was supportive, but wondered if I would have a tough time watching my girl in labor, or if I'd become fearful about her not being in a hospital and somehow interject that into her experience. Because my labor with her had lasted 17 hours, I worried that Shelley's might be as long. Could I watch her go through that?

I had given birth "naturally" to both my daughters at a hospital. The labors were long and hard and, in spite of having taken Lamaze classes and being committed to a drug-free birth, I did not really feel successful; rather, I felt as if I had merely endured, flat on my back and in pain. I knew Shelley was much more prepared, better read, and far more

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in touch with her body and the life inside her than I had been. But could anybody *really* be ready for labor and childbirth?

A Special Presence in the Room

I flew from Texas to California on December 2 and the wait began. One week later, on the 9th, Shelley woke up feeling uncomfortable and “different.” I had my suspicions and made a run to the grocery store for a few things we might need. I assumed that, as with me, labor would start gradually. We’d time Shelley’s contractions, visit, snack, and eventually decide to ask the midwives to come. Wrong!

While I puttered in the kitchen, nervous and excited, David was back in the bedroom with Shelley convincing her that she was in hard labor and insisting on calling the midwives. Before I knew what was happening, Cindy and Kathy arrived through the front door; then I walked into the bedroom just in time to see Shelley’s water break. Labor was in full swing.

I had three jobs preassigned to me: Keep the house straight, fix something we could all eat whenever eating was an option, and photograph/video the labor and birth. I was so grateful for those jobs! Shelley had a wonderful, fully present partner in David, and the midwives exuded competence and kindness. Had I not had my own part to play, I think hand-wringing might have been my activity of choice.

Shelley had been almost fully effaced before her contractions even began, and she was now 8 centimeters dilated. Naked, she moved from her bed to the birthing tub, which David had filled with warm water. For the next 2 hours, she labored in that tub. The water relaxed her, and she entered into each contraction with calm, consciousness, and clear intention, often accompanied by deep, purposeful moans. I was clicking and recording and occasionally dashing into the kitchen to stir something. But what kept running through my mind was, “Oh. *This* is what labor is supposed to be.” I had birthed

two children, but I didn’t know. Shelley was magnificent—focused, peaceful, determined. Had I not had cameras and casseroles to master, I would have simply wept at her beauty and courage.

Shelley was fully dilated now, and Cindy and Kathy asked her to start pushing. With the same awareness and power, she now pushed with each contraction. She pushed with animal fierceness, then talked softly to the baby between contractions, asking respectfully that he/she come out and meet Mom and Dad. (I haven’t mentioned that Shelley and David opted not to know the sex of their baby—they wanted old-fashioned surprise.)

It was decided at one point that the bed might facilitate pushing, so Shelley, David, and the midwives gently, efficiently, changed locations. The next hour was hardest. Shelley pushed mightily, and we all seemed somehow aligned with the cadence of her contractions. She was the center of our small universe, and we resonated with both her spirit and her exhaustion.

Finally we began to see a little head peek out with each push; but, time after time, it would recede. The anticipation was thrilling, but as much as I longed to see that baby, I longed most for labor to be over for Shelley. It was then that I had one of those out-of-body experiences and could see this moment through a broader lens. I thought of my mother and grandmother, both long dead, laboring to bring their own babies, then my babies, and now this baby, into the world, and I felt their presence in that room. The love that already existed in the universe for the child being born was staggering. The room seemed awash in it.

Eventually, Cindy asked me for the baby’s hat. I fumbled for it, guessing birth must be imminent if we needed that hat! Not immediately, but soon, a head emerged, with a tiny hand pressed against one cheek. A few more gritty, desperate pushes, and the baby was born and laid on Shelley’s chest. It happened in such a rush, we still didn’t know the gender, but a quick look on Kathy’s part provided the news: We had a girl.

A Rich, New Hope

Although I had birthed two of my own, I’d never really “witnessed” birth before, not like this. It was stunning. These two souls had made a child. My daughter had birthed her daughter with breathtaking grace and bravery, and I was there to see it. I haven’t yet found adequate words to encompass that experience.

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There was a lot of activity still going on, of course. The placenta had to be pushed out, a few tears stitched up. There was a lot of bleeding, and the midwives gave Shelley a shot to slow it down. David cut the cord, Shelley put her daughter to breast, a long secret name was revealed, calls were made to Grandpa and Auntie Brooke, and a chicken casserole was devoured.

That evening, I was cleaning up the kitchen when David called me to come back to their room. He wanted to help Shelley to the bathroom to get cleaned up and comfortable. Would I hold Eloen while he did so?

The room was dimly lit and rain was falling beyond its walls as I sat down to receive my swaddled grandchild into my arms for the first time. We gazed at each other, and it seemed as though we were both contemplating the magic and mystery of this day. She was new to the planet, but her history and future mingled, rich with the hope a new life brings. The moment felt eternal, and my heart knew that it was eternally ours.

MOTHER'S (SHELLEY'S) PERSPECTIVE OF ELOEN'S HOME BIRTH

Early Signals

Eloen moved through my body like a rush of energy and grace. It was not the slow and languishing labor I had been led to believe a first-time mother would experience. My birthing ball went unused. No need to put on my calm birth music or nest around the house between contractions. That walk around my neighborhood to speed up my labor would have been rainy anyway, as well as completely unnecessary, as we would find out.

I rose in the morning, late, after a good night's sleep, and sauntered (because that is what full-term pregnant women do) into the living room. My mom was here. She had already begun her day only a short while before. We greeted and hugged. She looked me over like a watched pot. When would her grandbaby arrive? She'd been here 1 week, practically an eternity in her mind. I liked just hanging out with her. The midwives, Cindy and Kathy, thought our baby might come early because of my body's signals: I was already 3 cm dilated and 80% effaced at 36 weeks. But I was in no hurry. I fully expected to be 2 weeks overdue. At 3 days past my due date, I thought it might be at least another week, and I enjoyed every second of my pregnancy. I knew this little one would arrive eventually. And she did.

I made breakfast, checked my e-mail, went to the bathroom, took a shower. But then I wanted to go to the bathroom again. And again. And again. Without outcome. I'll just say it: I thought I was constipated. Painfully constipated. Constipated in a throbbing, rhythmic sort of way. I called my husband, David, into the bathroom. We called the midwives. Could I take a suppository? I am in a lot of pain and my bowels won't work. David started to wonder if I was in labor. But it didn't feel like labor. But then, I had never been in labor, so I wasn't exactly an expert on such things.

The midwives were hanging out together, with their children, at a festival of some sort. They said I could take a suppository, but if it moved my bowels, it might stimulate labor. They asked David privately if he thought I might be in labor already. At this point, I was having hot flashes with the pain. . . of my constipation. No, I was not in labor. I needed to move my bowels and alleviate this lower back pain. I wanted the suppository. David left for the store. I stayed on the toilet. David had begun to keep a log of my pain to see if there was a pattern. Every 3 minutes, I moaned for 90 seconds. You get the picture.

When David returned from the store, I lugged my big, naked body over to the bed, gently inserted the suppository, and waited for 15 minutes, continuing the rhythmic, equally-spaced-apart pain. . . of my constipation. And then I went to our toilet. Nothing. Just more waves of pain. David showed me the clipboard with the record of my contractions. He said he wanted to call the midwives. I said fine, but this would be so embarrassing if I was not in labor. Or if I was in very early labor.

Shelley and Eloen rest together, postbirth—a tender portrait of a mother-and-child reunion. (Photo credit: Nancy Ferguson)

You know those women on TV who are convinced that a baby will burst forth at any second only to find out they are just barely 1 cm dilated. No, I was not going to be one of those women. I had always planned to call in the midwives at the latest stage. I thought I would labor more efficiently if left alone.

The midwives had expected the second call. They were on their way. An hour later, they arrived, and Kathy checked my cervix while I was on all fours on my bed. She thought it was around 5 cm, but then my water broke. The water poured and poured out of me. The midwives rushed to put absorbent pads under me and kept replacing them while the water continued to pour. It seemed like a gallon. I actually felt relieved of some of my pain. The bag of waters had been causing pressure. After I stopped dripping, the midwife rechecked my cervix and said I was now 8 cm dilated. In preparation, David had already begun filling the birth tub. It was situated just a few feet from our bed, near the glass sliding doors. It rained and stormed outside.

Life Moving Through Life

This was it. This was the day. My baby would be born. A stormy Saturday in December 2006. My excitement was only mediated by the task I had before me of bringing this baby forth. Even knowing I was at 8 cm, I still thought it could be many, many hours before I would finally meet my long-awaited baby. The midwives began moving around the room, almost silently, working together to set up the birthing tools, get into their birthing attire, and prepare a space. David put on the plastic sheet, handing over our supplies and keeping an eye on the birth tub. I labored. I moaned. My prenatal yoga class had taught us to make sound to move through the pain. We called it “vocal toning.” It came quite naturally. It was deep, diaphragmatic, guttural. The wave of sound undoubtedly would have mirrored any monitor at a hospital, if I had been hooked up to such a thing. I was woman. I was animal. I was life moving through life.

Throughout my pregnancy, I had declined the use of Doppler to hear my baby’s heartbeat, preferring instead to use the fetoscope. It was a quiet beating, but persistent. I treasured the sound. Less intervention, more natural. This was always my

guide. This was why I had chosen a home birth. I wanted my child to enter this world feeling unrushed, respected, and received into loving arms, with dimmed lights, gentleness, and grace. No machines, no protocols.

Today was the only day I gave permission to use Doppler. It was a different sound, but still steady and reassuring. I didn’t need it though, to know she was there. I could feel her. I could sense her embracing aliveness without proof of a heartbeat. The procedure was for the midwives’ sakes, so that no unnecessary decisions would be made about the birth, because they could not find a heartbeat quickly.

When the time came, my husband and Cindy helped me to climb into the tub. It felt amazing! What relief! I could do this! I felt for the first time as though I was having a break between contractions. I actually looked around my bedroom and looked at everyone—something I hadn’t really done before then. I smiled. Today we would greet our child. My husband looked at me. We were both calm, smiling. I labored on.

When I felt a contraction come on, my silent mantra was, “Open, open, open.” I didn’t want to clench and contract in fear. I wanted the contractions to be fruitful, holy openings. I wanted my body to open, my mind to open, and my spirit to open to this experience. I knew this might be the only time I ever labored and birthed, and I didn’t want to miss it. I didn’t want to detach or disconnect to avoid the pain, but I also didn’t want to miss the transcendence of it all. . .to miss whatever communion was taking place between my daughter and me and between all the women who came before us.

The contractions or rushes intensified. Time was lost entirely. I was only vaguely and intermittently aware of the midwives, my husband, my mother. They were all there supporting me, but in many ways I was on my own. Left to work internally through this energy and labor.

The midwives checked me again—10 cm. I could push when I felt like it. I was still in the tub. I pushed. . .silently, with my face exploding with strain and work. I remembered from the many birthing books and stories I had read through the years how screaming and yelling while pushing could divert some of your energy from effective pushing. I quieted. It hurt.

After pushing for awhile (how long, I don’t know), I asked, or it was suggested to me, that I could get out of the tub and continue to push on

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the bed. It was up to me. I decided to make the move, with lots of assistance. We moved between contractions. This is when more sound began to come out of me at the end of each contraction. I roared. I could feel my baby's body twisting through mine, moving lower, stretching my flesh. The midwives and my husband were all able to feel her head. Then they could see her head. Then I could touch her head, but still she was not out. I pushed and pushed. David and Cindy supported me, holding my legs while I curled into myself, trying to move my daughter's body through my own. Voices of confidence and encouragement would penetrate my consciousness. My husband. My mother. My midwives. My own.

I reached that inevitable peak when I thought I could not do it. I was convinced my body was failing me, my strength was waning, my resolve unsteady. The voices buoyed me on—insisted that I would, that I could. In fact, I had no choice. I belated and shook. Tears and sweat and juices and love poured from every part of me. She was coming.

Our Daughter Arrives

Eloen's head erupted from my body—a tremendous relief. Her left arm was up by her head. I continued pushing her out. It is true what they say: You almost immediately forget the laboring process when you get to meet your child. It was moments before I even knew she was a she. She let out a battle cry. She was strong, she was big, she was here!

She lay on my belly because her cord was not long enough to bring her up to my chest. In what seemed like forever, but was actually only 3 minutes, I finished pushing out the placenta, and the midwives moved her up to my chest. I held my daughter. We touched her, and we stared at and loved her.

I bled. I continued to bleed. The midwives instructed David to hold our baby while I focused on making the bleeding stop. There was urgency in the air. There was fast action. For a brief moment, I thought my time with my daughter was going to end before it had really begun. I was willing my body to stop bleeding. The midwives worked in their fast, efficient way. Instructing me, guiding me. One shot of Pitocin. A second shot of Pitocin. All was well.

Our daughter was returned to my arms. She made us family. We were mother, father. We were in love. . .and elated. . .and tired. . .and sated. We were in the strange place between life before and life forever after. And she was perfect. And it was time to rest.

Eloen Grace had arrived.

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