Charlie's Birth Story: Two Unique Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In this column feature, a father and a mother each share their unique point of view of their son's birth.

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Do you have a birth story that illustrates the power of normal childbirth and encourages women to give birth with confidence? We invite you to submit your story for possible publication in The Journal of Perinatal Education. Please send your story or query to Judith Lothian, Associate Editor (Jalothian@aol.com). Also, check out the "Giving Birth with Confidence Blog" and "Normal Birth Forum" links at Lamaze International's Web site (www.lamaze.org).

BRIAN: DAD'S PERSPECTIVE

I suppose it's axiomatic to describe childbirth as a surreal experience. The whole process is surreal, really—from the happy shock of conception to the first ultrasound, first heartbeat, first bulge, first kick and, finally, to the day we get to meet our baby. Certainly not your normal 9 months. A side effect of this whole process—or, perhaps more accurately, the *length* of the process—was that the idea of being a daddy was somehow stuck as a “future” event in my head.

So on May 28, 2008, I knew Charlie was supposed to be coming the next day, his due date, but I did not expect it to happen. I was just sure that we were going to meander through life for another week or two before labor actually began. All that changed when my wife, Jordan, made a seemingly innocuous comment about having some “cramping” before going to bed that night. I didn't recall Jordan ever complaining about cramping before, and it took my normally Neanderthal brain about 4½ seconds to conclude that I was going to be a daddy in the very near future.

An hour later, we had confirmation, as the cramping quickly became increasingly frequent

contractions. Jordan had not had any pre-labor contractions, so this was our first shot at the dog-and-pony show of getting the pregnant lady to the hospital. Surprisingly, everything went just fine. I called my mom, a nurse, and she walked us through what was happening with Jordan's body and what we should be looking out for. Jordan was in some minor discomfort but handling it like a champ (it doesn't hurt that she has the pain threshold of a medieval monk). While we waited for the contractions to reach the “to-the-hospital” threshold, I took a shower and quickly packed a bag. I wouldn't really say I was nervous or concerned at this point, just focused on making sure we had what we needed to get to the hospital. Well, that's not exactly true—I was actually very nervous but able to focus on the task at hand. Then Jordan told me that her water broke. Bam, we were in the car and on the way to the hospital.

We got to the hospital sometime after midnight, and Jor was still doing great. We took some final belly pictures beside the car in the parking lot and made our way through the largely deserted labyrinth of the hospital's labor-and-delivery department. The nurses were great and quickly had

Jordan resting comfortably in a private room. We were adorned with wristbands and identification tags. The midwife was en route to the hospital, and our families were making their way to our home in Houston, Texas. Jordan was going to have a natural childbirth, so our charge now was just to wait for Charlie to make his way into the world. At this point, I was hoping for a quick, painless birth and lots of smiles and patting each other on the back in the morning. I was wrong.

I was off a bit on the timing. For some reason, I had it in my head that a birth should take between 3 and 5 hours, or somewhere in that range. As apparently everybody else but me is aware, first-time births routinely take 12 or 16 hours or more. I learned this little factoid sometime in the wee hours when I sensed things were not progressing on my schedule. Worse, the real labor contractions had started to pick up in both frequency and severity. It's tough to see your wife in apparent (but not actual) distress and know that there is nothing you can do for her. Still, Jor's the champ, and she powered through with a (diminishing) smile on her face. By 3:30 a.m., the smile was gone, and the situation—from my naive eyes, at least—seemed dire. Luckily, women are equipped to deal with this stage of labor, and Jordan's own body (remember, no drugs) provided her with the painkillers she needed. She seemed to enter into a trance-like state, as if she had just exited the "happy tent" at the Woodstock music festival. Good for her.

Around 4:00 a.m., Jordan's best friend, Maggie, and my mom, Debby, arrived. Both have extensive professional experience in childbirth. I was putting on a brave face while, inwardly, I was terrified; in contrast, they were unperturbed. It is at this point that I have trouble recalling the exact events that took place. The fatigue and adrenaline took a toll on whatever part of my brain that is tasked with long-term storage. I do know that Maggie and my mom did an absolutely wonderful job with Jordan. They repeated, ad nauseam, encouraging and comforting words as they walked Jordan from the bed to the bath, and back, and to wherever else she felt comfortable for a few minutes. Later in the morning, the contractions continued their assaults, and we started getting some significant dilation. The midwife arrived to help Jordan give birth to Charlie in the room, and she, too, was wonderful. Things were starting to look up.

By 11:00 a.m., it looked like the end was in sight. Jordan was in pain (she appeared to be in death

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throes) but later said it wasn't nearly as bad as it looked. Everybody was tired but really happy to meet Charlie. The very end, to put it nicely, was not a thing of poetic beauty. Labor had been going on for well over 12 hours. There was sweat, there were screams, there was cutting, and there was blood. But all of that was forgotten when Charlie's head popped out and I got my first look at my son. The feeling of seeing your child for the first time is, as many have said, indescribable. If you've been there, you know. Unfortunately for me, that moment was momentarily interrupted when I noticed that Charlie was born with an extremely pointy head. He was a conehead. Another gaffe on my part, as the nurses—who apparently deal regularly with fathers who are as knowledgeable as I am—quickly told me that Charlie was fine and that his head would soon take a normal shape. It did. Charlie had some initial problems getting situated and, as a precaution, the nurses whisked him out of the room. I followed and, after about 5 minutes, was finally able to hold him for the first time.

I figured Jordan would be in a coma for at least 2 days as soon as that kid popped out. Again, I was wrong. As soon as labor was over, she became her normal, chipper self, as if the last 14-plus hours never happened. And, something I'll never forget, I don't think I've ever seen Jordan quite as happy as when I laid Charlie on her chest for the first time.

JORDAN: MOM'S PERSPECTIVE

Being a mother always seemed to be a perfectly natural calling to me. As a little girl, I would stuff a pillow under my shirt and pretend I was expecting, and then, lo and behold, I would be the proud mother of a Cabbage Patch Kid. As a teenager, I started babysitting, and I absolutely loved it enough to continue through college. I could not wait to grow up and have children of my own.

My husband, Brian, and I have known each other since we were 15 years old. We briefly dated in high school, and then started dating again in college at The University of Texas at Austin. After college, we moved to Houston, where I started a job at a consulting firm and Brian went to law school. After Brian graduated from law school, we married. We knew we would have children "some day," but it always seemed so far off in the future.

In the Fall 2007 issue of The Journal of Perinatal Education (JPE; Vol. 16, No. 4), Jennifer Block's guest editorial, "Are Women Really Asking For It?" addresses the need for childbirth educators and doulas to alert women about the risk of experiencing interventions during birth. Block's guest editorial is available at JPE's online site (www.ingentaconnect.com/content/lamaze/jpe). Lamaze International members can access the site and download a free copy of Block's guest editorial (and all other JPE articles) by logging in to the "Members Only" link on the Lamaze Web site (www.lamaze.org).

Brian and Jordan Amis leaving the hospital with Charlie, 3 days old.

After turning 30 years old, we started wondering, "You know, maybe we should start to think about having kids. . . ." After a few months of that, we decided to go off birth control and "see what happens." After all, it took months and, in some cases, years for several of our friends to get pregnant. We were fortunate—the month we started "trying," I became pregnant (and four home pregnancy tests confirmed it). I will never forget the look on Brian's face when he read that first pregnancy test. It still gives me chills to think about it. I could not believe it. . . we were going to have a baby! I was finally going to be a mother!

I am a Type A personality—I love lists, I love organization, I love things to be neat and orderly (I believe everything has a place), I cannot stand clutter, I like plans, and I like things to go according to that plan. When I found out there was a blood test that could tell you the sex of your baby at 12 weeks, we signed up, and we knew at 12 weeks we were going to have a baby boy! Now, we could start thinking about names, the nursery, and all the things we needed to do to get ready for our son.

As part of this planning, I also needed to consider the prenatal care and what type of environment in which I wanted to give birth. I decided to switch from my OB/GYN to an OB/Midwife practice. I can honestly say I would have never thought to do this if it were not for my mother-in-law, Debby, and one of my best friends, Maggie. Debby is a childbirth educator and a doula; Maggie is also a childbirth educator and worked at a midwife center in Colorado. After becoming pregnant, I really started reading about childbirth. Jennifer Block's book, *Pushed: The Painful Truth About Childbirth and Modern Maternity Care*, made me think long and hard about what type of birth experience I wanted. It made me think about intervention, and I knew I

wanted as little intervention as possible. When I was 8 weeks pregnant, Brian and I saw the documentary film *The Business of Being Born*, produced by Ricki Lake and directed by Abby Epstein. This also reinforced my desire to try to give birth naturally, and with midwives.

The minute we met with the midwives, I knew their practice was for me. Our first appointment was an hour and a half long. We even got to see the little nugget on an ultrasound. There is nothing like hearing your baby's heartbeat for the first time.

I was so lucky—I had the perfect pregnancy: no morning sickness, I felt great, I ran until I was 5 months pregnant, and then, when that got uncomfortable, I walked. I went to yoga class throughout my entire pregnancy, and I kept on reading. I read testimonials about natural birth; I read about doing yoga while in labor. I was ready!

For some reason, I thought our son would come late. We went to the midwives on Tuesday, May 27 (I was 39 weeks and 5 days pregnant), and I found out I was 1 cm dilated. This was the first time I had "been checked." My mom had told me that for each of her pregnancies, whenever health-care professionals checked her, she went into labor within a day or so. Most of my friends had been checked around 36 weeks, which started contractions for some of them. This was part of the "intervention" I wanted to avoid. The standard practice of our midwives included not checking an expectant mother until her due date.

Sure enough, things started moving. I lost my mucus plug on Wednesday, May 28, around 1:30 in the afternoon. I knew it could be a couple of hours or still a couple of weeks until I went into labor, so I did not think too much about it at the time. That evening, I talked to an old friend on the phone, and after I hung up, I told Brian I felt weird. I decided to take a bath, and he came to check on me. I told him it felt like I was having menstrual cramps.

Oh My Goodness! Were These Contractions?

We started getting so excited. Brian called my parents and his parents. We told them I was having contractions, but they were still far apart. Our plan was to try to get as much sleep as possible. We got into bed, but the contractions started coming harder and shorter. At midnight, my water broke! This was the real deal. I was Strep B positive, so we knew we had to go straight to the hospital so they could administer the antibiotics (I am allergic to

penicillin, so care providers would have to administer a different drug).

Brian and I realized the baby was going to be born on his due date: May 29! I sent text messages to some close friends and family on the way to the hospital. I also called my sister, Jill, who lives in North Carolina—she started crying, and said she would get on the first plane she could. We checked into the hospital around 1:00 in the morning, and one of the midwives, Theodorah (or Theo), met us there. The contractions were manageable, and I was all smiles. Then, they started coming a little closer together and getting a little stronger. I had to actually concentrate and breathe through each contraction. When they really started coming, Theodorah asked if I wanted to get in the bathtub. This was wonderful. I sat in the tub, and the jets felt good. I was very aware of everything going on around me, but the contractions had my full attention. Debby and Maggie both arrived around 4:00 a.m. They had driven in from Dallas as soon as they heard that my water broke. They were my doulas, and they knew just what to do.

I cannot stress enough the power of having women support you during labor and birth. Brian was incredible, but this was our first birth experience. He thought I was dying (there was a lot of moaning during the contractions), and Maggie, Debby, and Theo kept saying I was doing great. Hearing that over and over was so important for me. It kept giving me confidence, even though it was really getting tough. I needed to hear I was doing great, that I could do this, that I *was* doing it.

After the tub, I labored on the toilet for a long time. This makes me laugh now, but it is so true that your body will tell you what to do. For some reason, it just felt comfortable to be on the toilet. The contractions were really tough. I remember starting to whine, my voice getting higher, and Maggie, Debby, and Theo would all say, “Go low.” Trying to concentrate and moan low helped me focus on each contraction.

We had a shift change at the hospital—my midwife, Theo, went off, and Debbie (not to be confused with my mother-in-law, Debby) came on. There are four midwives in the practice, and I was comfortable with them all.

Around 9:00 a.m., I went into transition, and I was absolutely exhausted. I had been laboring all night. I labored from 9:00–11:00 a.m. on the bed, on my side, and this was the hardest. My sister arrived. She had jumped on a 6:00 a.m. flight out of

Charlie, 6 months old.

North Carolina and took a cab to the hospital when she landed in Houston. I was so happy to see her, but I could not talk. I was throwing up and felt really nauseous. It was taking everything I had to get through each contraction. My mom arrived around 11:00 a.m., and I remember saying “Mommy” when she came in the room. My mom just rubbed my back and, although everything in my body hurt, my mother’s touch was calming for me. I think it was really hard for my mom and sister to see me in pain.

Around noon, I was finally ready to push, but I was so tired. I wanted this baby O-U-T. I pushed every which way you could think of. One of the huge benefits of going natural is that you can move any way you want, and I was moving all over the place. You are not restricted to lying on your back. I pushed, and I pushed, and I pushed, but I could not get the baby out. He started to get distressed, so they monitored his heartbeat by putting a needle in his head. Brian could see his hair. I remember Brian saying, “He’s right there, he’s right there, just push him out.” It was so hard. I could not even feel the contractions at the end. I remember telling Debbie (the midwife) to tell me when a contraction

It really was so surreal—I still cannot believe how great I felt after Charlie was born.

was coming. She was so calm—she would tell me to hold off on pushing to give the baby a “break.” Finally, she said she was going to give me an episiotomy. I did not care—I was ready for the baby to come out. They knew the cord was around the baby’s neck, and because I was having trouble pushing him out, they paged one of the OBs in the practice in case I needed to have a forceps birth or a c-section. The OB came into the room and asked how we were doing. Debbie told her I was going to push the baby out on the next contraction, and sure enough, I did! How amazing—my son entered this world with his father and both grandmothers right there with him.

It was absolutely incredible—one second I was in pain, and the next second I felt great. Charles Benton Amis had arrived at 1:34 p.m.! He had a rough start—his chest was retracting, so the nurses started working on him. I could not hold him right away or start breastfeeding, but Brian gave me updates. He told me Charlie had a full head of dark hair. No one could believe how big he was. We all thought he was going to be small, but Charlie was 7 pounds, 11 ounces.

It really was so surreal—I still cannot believe how great I felt after Charlie was born. Debbie felt terrible about the episiotomy. She told me it was only the third time she had had to cut in 3 years. I kept telling her how amazing she was. I had given birth naturally, without any pain medication! If it were not for Debbie, Theo, Debby, Maggie, my mom, my sister, and Brian, I know I would have had a c-section. Debbie let Charlie take his time, and he came when he was ready. In the end, Charlie did have to spend 48 hours in the NICU, but he was absolutely fine. The doctors were being cautious, given the retractions, along with the fact that I was Strep B positive and not able to have penicillin. I told them not to give Charlie any formula. I was determined he would be a breastmilk-only baby. Brian went with Charlie to the NICU, and they sent me to recovery.

I showered, and they wheeled me to the NICU. Brian and I laugh about that because that was the only time I was in the wheelchair. I was up and mov-

ing, and Brian even asked where I wanted to go for dinner. I had to remind him I was still a patient and had just given birth 3 hours earlier—I would not be going out to dinner! But, that is what was so wonderful about giving birth naturally—you just feel great afterwards. I only pushed as hard as I needed to.

The nurses in the NICU let our whole family spend time with Charlie. Both sets of grandparents got to hold him, my sister got to hold him, and my brother came in from Austin and was able to hold him. The next morning, they let me breastfeed Charlie, and he took to it like a champ. I am proud to say that he has never had a drop of formula and that we have been successfully breastfeeding for almost 9 months.

People ask me all the time why I wanted to give birth naturally. I am not the “type” you would expect to go with natural childbirth. As I mentioned, I like schedules and plans, so you would expect someone like me to want to be induced on a certain day, so I could have everything ready. This is why I wanted to share my birth story— if someone like me can give birth naturally, then anyone can! You just have to prepare for it and take the necessary steps to succeed. I went to midwives, I went to yoga and exercised, I had doulas, I read to build up my confidence, I trusted my body, and I reminded myself that this is what my body was meant to do! It was hard, but it was the most incredible and special moment of my life. I would do it all again in a heartbeat (and plan to do so!).

Charlie is now almost 9 months old. I went back to work part-time when he was 4½ months old. I pump twice a day on the days I work. Charlie is a giggle box, and his favorite new trick is pulling himself up to standing. He gives you a big smile and looks so proud of himself every time he does it.

And, I am now a mother—it truly is everything I dreamed it would be, and more. My heart melts every time I look at Charlie.

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