Waiting to Descend

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ABSTRACT

A second-time mother uses a combination of comfort measures and hypnosis for childbirth to achieve a medication-free birth. In the hospital, her use of hypnosis and the posterior position of her cervix made it appear that she was not dilated. After she was fully dilated, pushing took several hours. Throughout the birth, the mother remained calm and did not experience pain, thanks to her practice with prenatal yoga and the Hypnobabies method of childbirth.

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SEPTEMBER 28, 2009 – TEN DAYS “OVERDUE”

I was awoken around 4:30 a.m. by a true pressure wave (i.e., contraction).^{*} It definitely felt different from the Braxton Hicks contractions I had been having for weeks. I went to the bathroom and then tried to return to sleep, but I didn’t really have any success. Around 5:30 a.m., I went downstairs and started brewing a new pitcher of red raspberry leaf tea. Carl, my husband, knew something was up at that point—I’m *never* up that early. I instructed him on how to complete making the tea, and I went back upstairs, where I listened to a Hypnobabies CD soundtrack. I still wasn’t really sure if this was it. And honestly, I didn’t want it to be. It was Yom Kippur, one of the few days my Jewish doctor would be unavailable for my baby’s birth. He and I had built a strong rapport, and he is a committed advocate of natural childbirth. If at all possible, I did not want to give birth with another attending physician.

^{*}*Author’s note.* During pregnancy, I studied the Hypnobabies® approach to childbirth (see www.hypnobabies.com), so my story of Xavier’s birth includes numerous references to its methods, techniques, and terminology.

As much as I was eager to see my new baby, I really didn’t want to give birth before sunset.

By 6:30 a.m., I knew I wasn’t going to make it to my job, so I called out and took a wait-and-see attitude about the waves. They hadn’t ever stopped coming, but they were tolerable and seemed to have no set pattern.

Carl and I dropped off our daughter, Katherine, at daycare and proceeded to the hospital for my scheduled biophysical profile test. We had the car packed with everything for the hospital stay, just as we had for the past several appointments. The test showed plenty of amniotic fluid and that our baby was moving well—and that I was having pressure waves every 5 minutes. Again, the pressure waves were entirely tolerable. During the test, I practiced using the “peace” and “relax” cues, but I didn’t turn my light switch off, because I had to press a button every time the baby moved. The nurse noted my contractions, but sent us on our way.

Carl planned to return to work, and I encouraged him to do so. My waves were still irregular and not strong, so I wanted him to continue on a normal

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schedule. Instead, we called my parents and invited them to come to our house to keep me company (or to keep an eye on me) while Carl was at work. The rest of the day was spent running errands, making busy work, and hanging around the house. Waves came as frequently as every 5 minutes or were as spread out as every 30 minutes. Still, I never felt the need to listen to more Hypnobabies' CD soundtracks on my MP3 player or go into hypnosis. Carl and Katherine returned home, and my dad went home to avoid the afternoon traffic. We discussed whether my mom should go home, but I wanted her to stay. I was becoming more convinced that this was the real thing, and I didn't want to send her home only to call her back a few hours later. Luckily, she had packed to spend the night.

Sunset Approaches

I had been attending prenatal yoga classes every Monday night since I was 20 weeks pregnant. I was still feeling fairly comfortable during the pressure waves, but I wanted to keep myself distracted, so I decided to go to class. I could tell things were progressing—I needed to get up and walk when waves came and I had to breathe through them a bit. The most unexpected feeling was the pressure/strain in my hip flexors and upper thighs. We had dinner (Katherine scolded me for not asking to be excused from the table when I got up to walk through waves), and Mom took me to yoga class. The instructor and class participants were shocked to see me in class again at 41 weeks pregnant, and they were even more shocked when I reported that I was in early labor. As class progressed, the waves became stronger, and I constantly had to get up and change position or walk. Around 6:15 p.m., I started to record the waves; they were definitely coming closer together. I went to the bathroom and lost part of my mucus plug. At 7:00 p.m., the waves started coming every 4 minutes and were definitely becoming longer, stronger, and closer together. But they were still tolerable, and I wasn't officially in hypnosis via Hypnobabies' finger-drop technique. By 7:20 p.m., I knew things were progressing, so Mom and I left the yoga class and headed home. Not incidentally, sunset was at 7:22 that night—Xavier had waited until Yom Kippur was over!

Once home, I left a message on my doctor's phone stating that the contractions were coming closer together and I thought I'd be seeing him later that night. Carl, meanwhile, was putting Katherine

to bed. I kissed her good night and explained that my mom would be spending the night and that Daddy and I were going to the hospital. She took it very well and went to sleep easily. I decided to take a shower, and Carl suddenly became very anxious to get going. I was still having pressure waves every 3–4 minutes, but I definitely felt "only pressure" and that they were "like a big, warm hug" (cues from my Hypnobabies training). So, I moved slowly through the showering, dressing, and getting-out-the-door process. I was fine, but Carl was in a rush! He had even called the labor and delivery unit at the hospital to let them know we were coming and to try to save "the good room" (i.e., one of the larger rooms with a shower and tub) for us, since we were aiming for a natural childbirth.

I had been nervous about the car ride, but it was fine. I put on my MP3-player headphones, listened to "Easy First Stage" soundtrack on the Hypnobabies CD, and officially entered hypnosis with my finger drop. My switch was off for the car ride and all was well. Upon arriving at the hospital, we asked for a wheelchair...not for me, but for all the stuff we brought with us! I put my switch in center and we walked up to the labor and delivery unit. We arrived around 8:15 p.m. I walked slowly and performed lots of hip swaying as we went upstairs, and I had my headphones on the whole time. We were able to park our stuff in "the good room," but soon after, we were sent over to triage. The nurse said, "I know you think you're in labor, but we just want to triage you and check to make sure. Sometimes, people aren't as far along as they think." For some reason, I had the foresight to keep my tennis shoes on after I had changed into a gown in the triage area.

The hospital staff asked the screening questions and tried to take a reading with the electronic fetal monitor. I didn't make this easy for them: I insisted on sitting on the birth ball next to the bed, and I kept "turning off" during pressure waves. As with Katherine's birthing, the monitors didn't pick up my contractions well, and the hospital staff wasn't happy with the strip. But Xavier's heart rate looked good, so they removed the monitor. By this time, the family medicine resident had arrived and was ready to check me, so I had to get up onto the bed. *Not* fun. He checked my cervix and had trouble finding it because it was still really far posterior. He said I was 1 cm dilated, and he would talk to my doctor about what they wanted me to do. "In most cases like this," he said, "we let you walk for 2 hours

Lamaze International offers a Prenatal Yoga Workshop for childbirth educators and yoga instructors. The workshop integrates evidence-based information about healthy birth practices that empower women to prepare for birth with yoga. For more information, visit the Lamaze Web site (www.lamaze.org).

and, if you haven't made any progress, your doctor is fine with letting you return home." I was surprised that I was only 1 cm, but went with it—I guess my bubble of peace was pretty strong. So, I asked for a second gown for my backside (why didn't they automatically offer it?), and we set off. It was 9:00 or 9:30 p.m. by then, and we planned to reconvene in triage at 11:00 p.m.

Walking the halls was interesting. I was still having waves every few minutes, and they were very strong. I kept the headphones on as my MP3 player went through my Hypnobabies playlist. I was using the hypnosis well by then and leaning on Carl during waves in the hall. He did his part well by physically supporting me, offering me tea, and sending me to the bathroom when we passed one. On the cardiac floor, we really alarmed some people when it looked like I collapsed onto Carl during a wave. He firmly had to tell them not to call for anyone and that I was fine.

After about 45 minutes, we returned to the triage unit because I had started to leak with every pressure wave. They were getting very strong, but still felt like intense pressure to me. My "peace" cue was really helping. I asked for mesh panties and a pad to minimize the leakage. After that, we stuck around the labor and delivery unit. For the remainder of our "walking time," I sat on the birth ball or, while on the bed, lay across the ball on my hands and knees (thanks to my yoga instructor for that position!). We also wandered in the short hallway outside the triage unit. Near the end of our walking time, I released a huge gush of fluid. However, when I changed my pad (for the record, I didn't like experiencing waves on the toilet), I noticed the fluid was definitely urine.

At least two other women were in the triage area. One kept complaining about the pain of her contractions. The other woman, like me, was "overdue," and was in triage just to be checked. The hospital staff talked about inducing her and/or scheduling a cesarean surgery. I'm happy that I was able to tune out these two women and their situations—I guess my bubble of peace was working well!

After 11:30 p.m. rolled around, the family medicine doctor returned. By that time, I was side-lying in bed, and the waves were intense and frequent (although we never timed them after we arrived at the hospital). I had to vocalize and breathe through each wave. I noticed that I really needed Carl's support to get through the waves, and I needed to be in

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a supported position when they hit. The few times I didn't have these two factors, I started to lose it and started to feel pain. Otherwise, it was just strong pressure. Anyway, the family medicine resident checked me—my cervix was still really far posterior and hard to find, and I was 1 cm dilated. The resident talked about sending us home.

I think I blocked out a lot of the next half hour or so. I just knew that the waves were strong and frequent, and I couldn't believe the doctor was going to send us home. The resident decided to get an obstetrician's consult to run another biophysical profile to check my amniotic fluid levels. The obstetrician resident had to run the ultrasound between pressure waves—no easy task—and determined my fluid level was about a 4. I told her that the study earlier in the day had my levels at a 12 or 14, and we discussed the rush of fluid that had happened earlier. The family medicine resident then asked the obstetrician resident to check me. Thank goodness—at this point, the waves were strong and frequent, and I had gotten the shakes. In my head, I screamed at the resident, "Can't you tell I'm in transition? I've got the classic symptoms—shakes and strong, frequent contractions!" Carl was also about ready to berate the hospital staff—he could feel how intense the waves were when he supported me, and he knew there was no way I was only 1 cm. Externally, we both remained remarkably calm. The obstetrician resident instructed me to put my fists under my sacrum to make my cervix more accessible. The result: I was 8 cm and really soft! No more talk of sending me home. . . it was time to go to "the good room."

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I have no idea about the exact timing of things from that point on. Shortly after we arrived in the birthing room, my doctor arrived. I wish I could have heard the conversation between him and the resident. My doctor instructed me to get up on the bed, and he removed my shoes (yes, they had been on the whole time). I was checked again: amniotic sac intact, 10 cm dilated, fully effaced. Zero station. The baby had never dropped, and I was going to

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have to push him down. We talked about mother-directed pushing, and my doctor was willing to let me do whatever I wanted. The nurse was fantastic at placing my heplock between pressure waves, while I sat on the birth ball. The anesthesiologist also had to evaluate my airway in between waves. We finally got my fan set up, which made things more comfortable for me (someone even remarked on how well prepared we were). The benefit of having a family practice doctor: He was in the room with us for the remainder of the birthing, and we had a stable number of people in the room with no one else rushing in and out.

The family practice doctor broke my water, and I spent the next few hours pushing. I employed the following positions while pushing: kneeling on my hands and knees; sitting on the birth ball; side-lying (hated it); leaning over the ball; and using a sort of squatting stool (which worked really well for a while). The hospital staff tried to keep monitors on me, but it didn't work—finally, someone must have been assigned to manually hold the heart rate monitor to my belly. Luckily, the baby's heart rate was fine during the entire birthing. At some point, my headphones came off and we used the MP3 player out loud, so the whole room got to hear the various soundtracks. My doctor remarked how they were almost hypnotizing him! The waves were more spaced out, and there were pleasant conversations between them. The best position for me was sitting upright on the birth ball and rocking my hips—our doctor even mentioned that he had seen five or six women try to use the ball, but I was the only one he had seen who made it work. It must have been all the practice at my job in the gym the previous week, when I was constantly on the Swiss ball as my physical therapy patients exercised!

It must have been around 3:00 a.m. when my doctor discussed closed-glottis (i.e., classical breath-holding) pushing and recommended I try it. He suspected the baby would be out quickly if I did. At that point, I was tired and willing to give it a try, so purple pushing it was. I made a lot of noise and pushed hard, and that's when I lost my hypnosis. I definitely felt "the ring of fire" and started saying things like "just get it out!" In keeping with my prenatal yoga

exercises, I tried to keep my abdominal muscles tight between pushes, and I tried to keep my vocalizations in a low tone rather than a high pitch. It was definitely hard work, and it was the only time I felt pain during the birth.

Xavier James arrived at 4:08 a.m. He was 8 lbs, 1.5 oz, and 21.5 inches long. The cord was wrapped around his neck twice, but that wasn't a problem—it was a long cord that was easily unwrapped. He was immediately placed on my chest, and the doctor waited until the cord stopped pulsing before clamping. Xavier started nursing almost immediately and stayed a slippery mess on me for a while before the hospital staff took him across the room for the first examination. Xavier stayed with us for almost 2.5 hours before he was transported to the hospital nursery for his full evaluation. I sustained a large tear, which required about 1 hour of stitching to repair.

As it turns out, there were three reasons why pushing was so hard for me: (a) Xavier started out so high up; (b) he took an "unusual" path through my pelvis, as evidenced by the position of his cone-head; and (c) he had a "compound presentation" where his right hand came out at the same time as his head. My pelvis could handle all of that, but my perineum could not. The placenta was delivered without Pitocin some 25 minutes after Xavier's birth.

The Hypnobabies approach to labor and birth definitely worked for me—even as someone who always fell asleep to the CD soundtracks and didn't get as many finger-drop practices in as recommended. I used the "peace" cue heavily, and my light switch and bubble of peace worked well. I don't think I ever went to my "special place." In retrospect, I would have done more perineal massage during the third trimester. I don't know if/how pushing could have gone more easily—it was definitely harder for me than the dilation. Yoga was also very helpful—I swayed my hips, changed positions frequently, vocalized, and focused.

And I still want to know how far I was really dilated when we arrived at the hospital. . .

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