Transitions: The Birth of Flora Arden

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ABSTRACT

In this column, a young mother shares the story of her second home birth. Like the birth of her first baby, her daughter Flora's birth was supported by the presence of a midwife and doula, the peace and quiet of her own home, and the love of her husband and family. Birth is described as transforming and a powerful transition for women. She describes the births of both her children as being "forever emblazoned on my heart as the sweetest and strongest days of my small life." Paralleling this story of birth is the story of her mother-in-law as she faces brain cancer and seizes the power of that life transition.

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PROLOGUE

Here I am, 5 months after the coming of my lovely girl, sitting at a kitchen table in Boston. I have finally begun to write her birth story—to tell the sweet tale of that clear June night when our Flora came to me in the water. Here I am, at a new table, in a new town, in the middle of another transition. Flora's story contains another story, as most stories do, and I find it impossible to write one without the other.

When I began walking the path of motherhood for the first time, it became clear early on that we mothers are the first and ultimate examples to our children of everything. We are an example of how to live and, often, we are an example of how to die. As I write this, I hear my dear mother-in-law, Tina, snoring away upstairs, making her usual nighttime hullabaloo. She has terminal brain cancer—a glioblastoma—and my husband, Josh, and I have just moved ourselves, our two small children, and our two small dogs to Boston to live with her, care for her, and enjoy every minute of her we have left. It was Flora's birth (perfectly timed 9 days past her due date) that was the catalyst for Tina's trip to Iowa; she arrived 24 hours later. However, a few

days into our babymoon, we realized something was wrong with Tina. A trip to the emergency room confirmed the worst: an aggressive brain tumor—caught early—but with little hope for a cure.

THE BEGINNING

The home water birth of my first child was the single most transformative and empowering event of my life thus far, and Joshua and I couldn't imagine not making the same choices for the birth of our second baby. Noah was born at home in New York City with an incredible midwife, Miriam Schwarzschild, and doula, Debbie Aglietti, by our side in 2008. We also had my mother, my sister, a photographer, and a reporter from *The New York Times* by our side! It was an amazingly gentle and profound experience, and the circle of women (and Josh) who surrounded me during those hours in our tiny Queens apartment will be forever cherished.

By fall of 2009, we had relocated to Blue Grass, Iowa, where my parents live (I grew up in nearby Buffalo), for Josh to start a second career as a nurse. In 2010, when Noah was nearly 2 years old, we were ready

to try for another baby. I attended the ICEA/Lamaze Mega Conference in Milwaukee and suspected while there that I might be pregnant. My intuition whispered the baby was a little girl, although I knew we would want the sex to remain unknown until the birth. A few days later, my pregnancy was confirmed, and we were thrilled.

AWAITING FLORA

During both of my pregnancies, I was open to seeing either a certified nurse–midwife (CNM) or a certified professional midwife, but the latter is not currently licensed/legal in Iowa (boo!) and couldn't transfer with us to the hospital in the unlikely event we needed intervention during the birth. Before I was pregnant, I had a well-woman visit with Kathy McCormick Deol, an experienced CNM in Iowa City (about 45 minutes away) with a home birth practice; in fact, Kathy was the only CNM within a 3-hour radius of our home who attended home births in our area. We fell in love with Kathy and her compassionate assistant, Monica Brasile, and knew we would love to have them care for us during this pregnancy. It is such a wonderful thing to have a home birth midwife. For both of my pregnancies, our midwives spent 1–2 hours at *each* prenatal appointment with us, most often coming to our home. We were supported physically, emotionally, and spiritually and had complete trust and confidence in our midwives—and they in us. I can't imagine going through a pregnancy or birth without that level of engagement from all parties. Choice of provider and place of birth are critical decisions an expectant family makes, and we have struck gold both times on all accounts.

My pregnancy proceeded normally and beautifully, and I once again marveled at every minute change in my body and baby. I enjoyed pondering and experiencing the differences between a first and second pregnancy—both physically and emotionally—and I was surprised at the emotional journeywork that comes with expanding one's heartspace to accommodate a second child. I was teaching music in an elementary school during my pregnancy, and when the end of May rolled around, I took the last couple of weeks off work to prepare physically and spiritually for my baby's birth.

My mother and sister had a Blessing Way for me during that time, and, once again, a sacred circle of special women surrounded me and blessed me with their presence. During the ceremony, they each presented me with a special bead and a poem, blessing, or prayer, and we threaded them together to make a birth bead necklace. I planned to wear it during my upcoming labor to

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remind me of all the women who had come before me and stood behind and within me.

I remember one of the first things Kathy said to me in an early prenatal appointment was that I would probably give birth in the middle of the night. She said that many second-time mothers give birth in the middle of the night after their firstborn is safe and sound asleep. A home birth is usually a family event, and if he chose to, I wanted my 2-and-a-half-year-old son to have the experience of being a part of his sibling's birth. I would try to have my baby during the day, I thought to myself.

WELCOMING FLORA

On Wednesday evening, June 22, Josh and I went out for a “last hurrah” dinner together. On his way to meet me at the restaurant, Josh got in a fender bender in my mother's car. After a lovely dinner, he followed me home, and I noticed smoke pouring from under his hood in my rearview mirror. We stopped, called a tow truck, and waited forever. We ended up getting home at nearly 11:00 p.m. Josh and I joked that this event would put me into labor for sure. We went to sleep, but I was awakened around 1:00 a.m. with some stomach cramps and intestinal discomfort. I thought I had food poisoning from our lovely dinner! I went back to bed and woke off and on with what felt like mild contractions until about 5:00 a.m. I couldn't sleep anymore, so I got up at 6:00 a.m. and started nesting. I walked the dogs, cleaned the kitchen, put in a few loads of laundry, made coffee and fruit salad for the birth team, and noted I was having surges every 10 minutes or so. I gave Kathy the heads-up that something was happening, and she told me to go about my day as usual and to keep her posted. About 8:30 a.m., I lay down for a nap. When I awoke, I took a warm shower while Josh brought our dogs over to my mom and dad's house. I spent the afternoon listening to music and reading books with Noah, shedding a tear or two over our last moments together as a family of three.

My sister Amanda and her husband Ben were travelling in Europe during this time, and they Skyped me from Prague that afternoon. My sister enjoyed watching me breathe through rushes and kept me laughing as she “faux panicked” that I was in labor and told me, “Quick, Sissy, call an ambulance!” I thought about Ina May Gaskin's “Sphincter

Law,” and how laughing was helping keep me open and relaxed. My contractions sped up during our Skype session to about 7 minutes apart.

Later in the afternoon, my mom took Noah to play at her house for a couple of hours, and Josh set up the birth tub while I donned my birth beads, rested, made cookies, and checked e-mail and Facebook for what I knew would be the last time in quite a while. I talked on the phone with my best friend, Betsy Woods, who also happens to be an amazing doula. She lives in San Diego but happened to be visiting her family in Chicago, about 3 hours away. She said she was getting in the car and coming to my birth. I was so happy the timing was perfect for her to be with us. (At this point, I was 8 days past my due date—I marveled that this baby knew just when to be born.)

Josh and I went for a walk around the neighborhood, and a few summer raindrops fell on us as I made peace with the rushes—they were stronger now, but still only 7–10 minutes apart and not lasting a full minute. I still had plenty of energy, but I was starting to wonder why this second labor wasn’t quicker. I had had a long labor with Noah and had pushed for several hours, so I was hoping for a quicker labor and shorter pushing phase with this baby.

At 5:00 p.m., my mother brought Noah home; we showed him the birth tub, which he promptly ignored. I started to wonder if he was ready to witness the birth and how he would respond to the tub and the environmental changes in our house. At 6:30 p.m., Kathy and Monica showed up to check in on me. I told them I thought I was still in early labor, probably about 3 cm dilated, and they could likely go back to Iowa City. I had never had a vaginal exam in either pregnancy or my previous birth and didn’t expect to want one during this birth, either. However, my midwives did live nearly an hour away and this was my second baby, so I had Kathy check my cervix to see if they should stay or return home. I was right—3 cm. We listened to the baby whose little heart was galloping along reassuringly. They encouraged me that I would likely have the baby by the morning and said to call them right away when things picked up. As I waved goodbye to them, Betsy pulled up in my driveway—it was now 8:00 p.m.

Her warm, reassuring presence and her quiet, simple statements of encouragement were just what I needed to meet each rush and stay ahead of them.

Betsy, Josh, and I ate some veggie burgers, chatted, and dreamed collectively about this sweet baby coming soon. The rushes were a bit stronger now—I had to sigh a little, sway from side to side, or lean over a chair now to work with them, but they were still the same interval apart. I went upstairs to read to, nurse and cuddle Noah in our bed, and then Josh took him for a drive to see if he could get him to fall asleep—it was nearing 11:00 p.m. While they were gone, I tried to get some sleep, but the surges kept me from being comfortable lying down. I felt them coming faster now, about every 5 minutes and sometimes less.

Josh got home 20 minutes later and put our sleeping boy in our bed. I remembered what Kathy had said about subconsciously waiting to give birth until the firstborn was asleep. She was right! As soon as I saw that Noah was asleep, I let out a long sigh and got in a hot shower. The rushes were immediately strong and close together—I remember chanting the word “open” over and over again, and I could actually feel my cervix opening as I moaned. As I met each surge, I saw bloody show begin to drip and I felt strong and excited—my little one was on her way!

After 25 minutes, I got out of the shower and saw that Josh and Betsy had lit candles all over the room, hung white lights, and were filling the birth tub. I heard our “labor mix” of music softly playing, and I marveled at this gentle, quiet scene. It was so nice to be in my own home, with only my lover, best friend, and sleeping son there—everyone trusting my body and my baby to do their work in the most natural way. I sat on the toilet and immediately felt my baby move down the birth canal. For a moment, I thought I was going to give birth right there. I called out to Josh, “I think we should call Kathy!” I remember crawling on my hands and knees down the hallway out of the bathroom asking, “Do you guys think we should call Kathy and Monica now?” We all laughed, all knowing just by looking at me that the answer was obvious—Josh said he had heard the change in my voice and already called—they were on their way.

The next hour was spent on hands and knees over the birth ball, with Betsy performing the world’s best hip squeeze and lower back sacral pressure. I have been a doula myself since 2003, and I have never known a better hip squeeze than hers. She was remarkable! Her warm, reassuring presence and her quiet, simple statements of encouragement were just what I needed to meet each rush and stay ahead of them. She and Josh were a perfect team, surrounding me with love and humor. Like my first birth, even

though the sensations were intense at times, I remember enjoying my labor so much. I was able to remain very conversant between contractions, and we laughed and just had fun with the whole thing. Josh and Betsy were as excited as I was, and their energy and compassion gave me the strength I needed to get through transition and bring my baby down. I started throwing up and knew I was close to meeting my child. I remember thinking how life-changing this event felt for me, yet how peaceful and normal the scene was—just the three of us laboring in a little quiet house in Iowa, bringing a new life into the world in the middle of the night.

Kathy and Monica arrived at 1:00 a.m., and Kathy came rushing up the stairs saying, “I missed it, didn’t I? You’ve had your baby!” I called back, “No, you didn’t, but I think it will be soon!” There were hugs all around, a quick check of the baby’s heartbeat (steady and strong), and then they set up their supplies. We called my mom and told her to hurry over, and then I stripped off the tank top and underwear I had been laboring in and quipped a naked, “Hello, Blue Grass!” to our little town. (The room we were in had windows on three sides, and I was certainly a sight to behold in the dark sleepy town to anyone who was awake: a naked pregnant woman in a big kiddie tub in the living room.) I stepped into the birth tub. Glory! What a wonderful drug the water is! The warm water enveloped me, and I was immediately transported back to my first birth as I greeted the comfy, familiar tub for the second time.

After a beautiful few minutes’ break from the now rolling surges, I threw up again and felt my first urge to push. It was at that moment the first bit of fear crept into my mind. I remembered the long pushing phase of my first birth and knew I was at the point

of no return. At precisely that moment, I noticed the song that was playing in the background. It was “The Rainbow Connection.” This song is very special to me because it was a favorite of my dear cousin Tade, who was like a brother to me. He died tragically nearly 3 years ago at the age of 26. I never hear it without being flooded with sweet memories of Tade. It was then I heard his voice in my head saying, “You can do this, Leeshie.” I was moved to tears, and Josh took my hand and stayed near, as he heard the song, too, and knew what it meant. We had a very special time of honoring Tade in that moment, and I was filled with a deep sense of peace and fortitude. There is a moment in every woman’s labor when she realizes that she alone holds the power to bring her baby forth—I see it as being the moment of truth for the mother—the moment she finds her power and seizes it. My fear had retreated, and I was ready to birth my baby.

Moments later, my mother came in the room and took her place around the tub, reassuring me with a hug and her presence. Kathy was behind me, her calming voice encouraging me; Betsy, Josh, and Monica were also surrounding me. I began pushing with each contraction, and it was amazing to feel my baby coming down with each one—it was astonishing to actually feel the progress each time. I was kneeling in the tub and felt my baby’s tiny head emerge into the water. I remember having my hands on either side of her head, feeling her velvety little ears with my fingertips. One more push, and her body eased out—she spiraled up out of the water into my waiting hands at 1:35 a.m. on Friday, June 24, 2011. Receiving her into my arms, and cradling her as I sat back in the tub, I was aware of authentic bliss for the second time. After a time of celebrating and gazing at our precious baby, I looked between her legs to confirm what I already knew—I had a daughter.

Flora entered the outside world with a nuchal hand (compound presentation), which means her little hand presented alongside her head. This is probably why early labor had been longer than I had expected—she needed to find her way into position. When I think back at feeling her velvety little ears in

Alecia lies skin-to-skin with her newborn daughter Flora.
— Photo by Betsy Woods, CD(DONA)

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my hands, it's possible I had actually been touching her fingers on the left side—holding her little hand before her body was even born. I had no tearing, and she was born quickly and easily (even with the compound presentation)—her waters rupturing just at the moment of birth. She had soft dark hair, and I vividly remember stroking the new skin of her sweet back—is there anything softer in the wide world?

The next few hours were spent joyously poring over our new little one—nursing, resting, and visiting. My dad came over to meet Flora, and it was a cozy, peaceful night in the glow of the soft white lights. Kathy and Betsy busied themselves checking on us, tidying up, taking pictures, and making food for everyone. Monica was down in the kitchen making prints of my placenta and preparing it for encapsulation. After everyone said their goodbyes and the house was once again quiet, my brand-new girl and I fell asleep together, her big brother dreaming in the next room with Daddy. I remember noting, bittersweetly, that it was the first night Noah had slept away from me from the night he was born—what a surprise he would have when he awoke in the morning!

The birth day of Flora Arden, my wise and funny one, like the birth day of her brother before her, will be forever emblazoned on my heart as the sweetest and strongest days of my small life.

EPILOGUE

In the last 3 months we have been in Boston, I have watched Tina's cancer take away more and more of her speech, memory, and strength. She can no longer work, volunteer in Guatemala, communicate clearly, read, remember what day it is or where things go,

nor do most of the things she used to. But I looked out the window a few days ago and saw her lying on her back in the grass with my son, pointing up at the clouds with a smile on her face. She can toss a simple ball back and forth with Noah for an hour and never tire, and join his little 3-year-old world of play as easily as she always did, perhaps more so. She remembers the words, "I love you" and "my babies," and repeats them often. She holds little Flora and speaks a baby language to her that I have yet to understand but that calms my small girl in an instant. If she senses that Josh and Jessa, her children, are sad, she comforts them—even though I am fairly certain she doesn't know the reason for their sadness anymore. The why doesn't matter to her anyway, and she doesn't ask—they are her children, and she goes to comfort them without conscious thought. It seems as if her mothering skills will be the last to go, if they ever do. She wakes each morning with love on her lips and a smile on her face, and she faces her days with bravery again and again. I admire her immensely. The example she is setting for her children and her grandchildren of how to die with love and grace and acceptance is nothing short of astonishing. She will set the example for us, one more time, and pass to her next phase of life with her dearest ones surrounding her. Tina is going through her own transition. She is seizing her power.

ALECIA WHITE SCHARBACK is (at any given moment) a stay-at-home-mom, actor, doula, lactation counselor, childbirth educator, and music teacher. She lives in Needham, Massachusetts, with her incredible husband Josh, children Noah and Flora, doggies Jolly and Josie, and mother-in-law Tina. A Hawkeye at heart, Alecia is a reluctant yet burgeoning Red Sox fan.