My Ordinary, Everyday, Boring Birth Story

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ABSTRACT

Childbirth is a natural physiological process that when supported by appropriate childbirth professionals, can be an empowering, positive, and healthy experience for both mother and newborn. I wrote this birth story to exemplify what a normal, prepared, supported birth can look like in a country where the vast majority of births involve various medical interventions. Although I do not always explicitly reference these works, my childbirth and mothering journey has been informed by the scholarship of Robbie Davis-Floyd, Sheila Kitzinger, and Ina May Gaskin.

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INTRODUCTION

“We can treat birth as a dramatic medical emergency, but few of us—women or doctors—have the patience and faith in nature to ride out the natural and individual process of birth. We are afraid of the dangers, but we are also afraid of the mystery. And we have less practice in our society trusting what comes out of women as much as what goes in—whether it is a tampon, an antidepressant, an epidural, or a shot of Botox. In our culture, we are taught that we need to be augmented to be desirable, feminine rather than female. And real female power is nothing less than the power to risk death to bring forth new life.”

—Poet Rachel Jamison Webster in *Labor Day: True Birth Stories by Today’s Best Women Writers*

I don’t know why it took me a year to write my daughter’s birth story. I’m a writer. As a mother,

I write mostly in the notes section of my iPhone. But writing this story has been difficult. Not because the labor was difficult—relatively speaking, it went as smoothly as childbirth could—but because the fact it went smoothly made it feel irrelevant. It made me feel odd, abnormal. In the United States, my birth *wasn’t* normal (over 9 of 10 American births are either by cesarean surgery or epidural), even though it was totally normal. And that has made talking about it, writing about it, that much more difficult.

“Labor is labor,” a friend who gave birth normally in Singapore recently wrote me. She’s right: Birth can be the most mundane, everyday event in the world. Like death, it happens every minute of the day. I wonder if we were able to sit with someone in birth, or in death, maybe we wouldn’t fear these normal human experiences as much as we do. Maybe we wouldn’t try to control the uncontrollable.

From a young age, I was taught childbirth wasn’t to be feared. My mother, mother-in-law, and three

sisters-in-law had 11 natural (unmedicated) births among them. I don't know why the six of us, although some having long labors and some having huge babies and small hips (my 5'3", 110-lb sister-in-law birthed a 9-lb baby), were able to birth without intervention.

People are always curious: "How long was your labor?"

I never have an accurate answer. Was it 10 hours (the moment I thought I could be in labor)? 48 hours (the first time I felt a contraction)? 24 hours (when I lost the mucus plug)? 4 years (when we started trying to conceive)? It takes a long time to make a child but really just a very short time to give birth to one.

The night before Calliope was born, a week before her "due date," I went to the bathroom and when I wiped, there it was—the mucus plug, or, I didn't yet realize, only half of it. My heart quickened. I took a shower, wondering if this was the last shower I'd take before giving birth (it wasn't), feeling jittery and excited. But I didn't feel quite ready—does anyone? I'd done everything I could to prepare for a home birth and unmedicated labor—hypnobirthing classes, prenatal yoga, hired a doula, regularly met our midwives, saw an obstetrician at University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), who signed off on the home birth. I was incredibly lucky—and deeply privileged—to be able to afford this preparation and such a supportive, empowering process.

The morning after losing half the mucus plug, I readied for my prenatal aqua aerobics class but wasn't sure I should go. I called my mother to ask her.

"Do you want to have your baby in a pool? Probably better to stay home."

Instead of attending aqua aerobics, I stayed home. I ate banana bread, drank orange juice, and sat on the couch watching television. I told myself I was preparing for battle because I knew in so many ways labor was a deeply physical act (I thought it must be like the half marathon I ran in Cambodia—turns out labor was actually more sustainable than that marathon). More than anything, my biggest fear about labor was that I wouldn't get enough sleep (irony: once you're a parent, you never sleep!), so I rested.

At some point, I went to the bathroom and there it was—the last of the mucus plug. This time, strangely, I wasn't nervous. I was filled with a calm resolution and a voice in my head (our hypnobirthing teacher's lilting coo?) saying, "Sleep. . . ." So I took a nap.

I wonder if we were able to sit with someone in birth, or in death, maybe we wouldn't fear these normal human experiences as much as we do. Maybe we wouldn't try to control the uncontrollable.

At around 11:30 a.m., I awoke and decided I should call my husband, Joey, who was working in San Jose that morning.

"Should I come home?" he asked. Like my mother, he intuited something in the fact I wasn't good at deciding an answer. "I'm coming home," he affirmed.

Two hours later, he walked in the door, along with my brother who lived a few blocks away. I made myself something for lunch that must've been delicious because in those days I only ate really fattening, delicious things. All I cared about was enjoying pregnancy. After 4 years wanting to be pregnant, there wasn't anything else but to revel in it, the bodily experience of gestating life. It wasn't until postpartum when the gravity of motherhood hit me in waves of exhaustion and hormones.

My brother and Joey moved furniture in our bedroom so the birth tub would fit. My labor was so early they couldn't tell when I was having a contraction. Only occasionally I'd lean over the table and shift my hips—a midwife would know; an adult man wouldn't.

Suddenly, I remembered I had scheduled a prenatal "induction" massage for this afternoon. I called my massage therapist.

"You're in labor!" she said, as if she was the definitive vote. "If you're still feeling okay, bring Joey and I'll show him some acupressure points to use during labor."

If this isn't labor, I wondered, what is?

Two hours later, at 3 p.m., with my contractions (we called them "surges"—definitely a more accurate descriptor of the rise and fall of sensation) still about 10–20 minutes apart, we drove to my masseuse's home. The drive there wasn't memorable. We probably remarked how strange it was we were in labor and everyone else was going about their day—techies waiting for the bus and homeless men picking trash from bins. We parked around the corner from the masseuse's home. She gave birth to her son and daughter in that apartment decades earlier. She was a calm, intuitive woman. She'd know if I was in active labor.

"Oh, you look good," she said. But I didn't want to look good. I wanted to look like I was having this baby soon.

Unlike her calm, reassuring demeanor, her massage pressure was intense.

“Use vocalizations,” she instructed.

I moaned through a surge like a cow. I hadn’t made that sound before—deeply guttural and bodily. During a few surges, I didn’t vocalize, feeling like it was a secret between the baby and me. Being able to be quiet made me feel strong. Later, I wouldn’t be able to stay silent.

At the end of the massage, when I got dressed, my massage therapist said, “If you were really in labor, you’d stay naked.” I didn’t understand what she meant—but would soon. I hobbled downstairs to see Joey and her husband searching Google for “How To Fill a Birth Tub.”

“A little late for that?” I asked, leaning over the railing, a surge rising, then passing. Their 15-year-old son sat on the couch, not at all disturbed a woman in labor was in his living room. Maybe being born at home makes you intuitively more comfortable with the female body and its intricacies.

“You better fill up that tub as soon as you get home,” her husband instructed Joey. No one seemed worried. To them, this was the most natural thing in the world. *Fill up the tub*. Like we were going to have a nice, warm Jacuzzi bath.

The ride home was entirely different from the ride there. Every bump, I winced. So much pressure! Worse than badly having to pee. I thought of a friend who labored as long as possible at home and said the worst part was the late-stage ride to the hospital. I was grateful this would be my last ride of the night (it wasn’t—more on that later).

At home, again, all I cared about was food and sleep. I was an animal readying for the deep freeze of winter. I ate udon soup, an apple with peanut butter, and more banana bread. I drank tons of coconut water. I didn’t think about the fact that if I’d been in labor in a hospital, would’ve been required to stop eating as soon as I entered the door, I would’ve had an intravenous (IV) line in my arm, and would be wearing a starched hospital gown. I was in my own environment so I did what was needed at that moment—I put a tatami mat on the floor and labored on all fours.

I tried timing my surges with an app I downloaded but this was a ridiculous gymnastic feat—how was I supposed to reach for my phone when I needed to moan and stay present in my body? Joey readied the birth tub and whatever else we needed in our bedroom upstairs. He called our doula who was an hour away. It was raining all day but I hadn’t noticed.

Then the strangest thing happened. I had a deep, desperate need to watch my favorite film as a 13-year-old, *My Father, the Hero*. For those who’ve seen this film, you know why it’s terrible *and* wonderful. For those who haven’t, a brief recap: Rich, gorgeous 13-year-old girl goes on a Caribbean vacation with her eccentric French father, falls in love with a local staff member, and pretends to date her father to seem more mature; hilarity—and some bizarrely Lolita-esque scenes—ensue; girl wins boy’s heart. I watched *My Father, The Hero* for about an hour. At some point, I left the living room and sat on the downstairs toilet. At some point, I took off all my clothes. At some point, we realized I needed to get upstairs. I wanted to take a shower.

Walking upstairs in active labor was a ridiculous proposition. I got on all fours and crawled, stair by stair, the way my 15-month-old daughter now does. But she does it clothed. I was buck-naked. I wonder if my husband found me sexual or grotesque, pushing me from behind, my giant bottom (fueled by Häagen Dazs’s chocolate peanut butter ice cream) taking up his wide screen view.

I guess he found me sexual because when we got upstairs, we labored together, kissing on the tatami mat that magically reappeared from downstairs (supported childbirth has this bizarre, other-worldly way of making beautifully necessary objects appear out of nowhere). We practiced “tent time,” which was really hypnotherapist speak for “making out with your husband.” Joey touched my nipples and this made the surges, as we called them, less intense.

I know most readers want to know how much it hurt. Honestly, I don’t remember the exact pain, just that there were varying levels of intensity that would rise and fall. I remember the sound I made—a low, guttural moan like a cow that can’t climb over a fence or an elephant trapped in a river. I remember how the surges were exactly that—beginning slowly and then ramping up and as they did, I’d breathe, close my eyes, and *relax*. Everything in my body had been trained to relax rather than tense up—hours of prenatal yoga, hypnotherapy, readings, and visualizations based on other normal labors taught me how to

Everything in my body had been trained to relax rather than tense up—hours of prenatal yoga, hypnotherapy, readings, and visualizations based on other normal labors taught me how to dig deep, how to find comfort in the discomfort.

dig deep, how to find comfort in the discomfort. As for the pain recalled in retrospect, you know it's intense, but you know you got through it. You're on this side of the wall. When you look back, it's played on a hazy film, like you're watching yourself on screen. The bodily experience itself is removed from view, despite the fact you lived it. You know it was challenging but you also know there were moments of pure boredom, everyday: Someone lit candles. Someone turned on the playlist you prepared. Someone fed you coconut water. Someone wiped your forehead. Someone rubbed your back, told you, "You can do this."

Which is probably why whenever I asked my mother about her two unmedicated (in-hospital) labors, she always said, "Oh, it wasn't so bad." She's right. There is much worse and more horrifying in life than a normal, low-risk labor.

Finally, after the make-out session accelerated the surges, Joey and I took a shower. I leaned over the shower's bar and let the hot water loosen my body. This felt a lot better than the massage, which was more painful than the surges themselves.

When our doula Annemarie arrived, she called our midwife, Kristen, in the East Bay, knowing I was in active labor just by listening to me. Annemarie joined me in the bathroom. I got out of the shower, sat on the toilet.

"Want me to check your dilation?" Annemarie asked.

"No." I remembered something I learned in hypnobirthing class—if you find out your dilation isn't as far as you anticipated, this could disrupt the birth process (Ina May Gaskin calls this the "sphincter law"—prod the sphincter and it closes!). It's the same reason why dilation often retracts when women enter the hospital or when nurses change shifts. There's so much more to labor than what's happening inside the body. What's outside matters too. So, no, I didn't want someone *to tell me* what I was feeling. I knew what I felt. I felt like I wanted to push. I felt like the baby's head was really low (in retrospect, it was). If Annemarie told me, "You're only 4 cm dilated," I would've deflated and lost sight of the finish line. So, no, I was better off not knowing. There's a lot in childbirth we're better off not knowing—like an obstetric resident told me weeks before, "Childbirth is the one area medicine can't predict or perfect."

"Ready for the tub?" Annemarie asked.

"Yes." I said. But a surge rose as I walked to the bedroom. Annemarie held me, my ear to her strongly beating heart. It's the most memorable sound of my

entire labor—that steady heartbeat holding me up, willing me forward, a rhythm I can still hear, the most visceral, physical memory of the birth.

I've never enjoyed stepping into a warm tub more than I did minutes later. It was 7:45 p.m. This was when the labor felt like it was accelerating. I was grateful for the warmth and weightlessness.

The vocalizations continued, punctuated by the sweet relief of coconut water.

I shouted, "C'mon, baby. You can do it, baby! Yes, baby! Come! Come!" Annemarie and Joey giggled—what did the neighbors think was happening?

I cannot remember what I was "thinking" at this moment of active childbirth. But I can assert there wasn't 1 oz of negativity nor fear. Everyone around me quietly witnessed the progression of the labor, providing what was needed whenever I needed it. Everything physically in my body was bearing down—*down and out, down and out*—moving in this unique dance of going where it needed to go when it needed to go there.

You know how you feel when you are about to have really bad diarrhea or throw up? Not the sick feeling but the need for expulsion? That's what active labor feels like, at least for me and many others I know. You're not thinking about anything in particular (your mind has left the building). Your body runs the show. This could be terrifying if you're not prepared for this experience, or, in my case, absolutely, intensely liberating.

There's another birth story essay in which the writer, Meaghan O'Connell, says of the moment she received an epidural: "Disembodiment complete, I asked for my iPhone." But for me, labor was just *embodiment, embodiment, embodiment*. All body. Who was I? What time was it? Where was my phone? Where was the cat? *I have no idea*. It was akin to that endorphin rush during an athletic event or the bliss of a good night dancing at a club or the moment you look up at a cool, blue sky in the dead of winter and feel simultaneously in this place and everywhere in the universe. There is nothing and there's everything. You are here *and* you are there.

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Transcendence? Perhaps. But also an intensely physical transcendence. Being so trapped in your body while knowing you are also so much more than this body too.

My midwife Kristen arrived at 8:25 p.m. I heard Kristen and Annemarie busily readying gear behind me—sterile gloves, needles of various sorts, buckets, towels. . . . This made me think we were close. This made me very excited. The scope of the room steadily narrowed during labor, as we drew nearer the baby's first cry.

Finally, Kristen checked me. "The head is right there," she said.

"How long until I have the baby?"

Kristen laughed. "Soon."

"How many minutes?" I asked, impatient.

"Soon," she repeated. But I wanted a definitive answer. We live in a world of immediate, definitive answers. Why wasn't labor quantifiable like Google promises? I wanted a goal to work toward—the final mile of the race? But, no. Labor/childbirth: the unquantifiable. We don't like to sit in the unknowing.

Some of my surges pushed me upward, my huge belly cresting the water's surface. The water was hot. I grew tired, overheated.

"This is hard," I said.

Annemarie and Joey leaned closer. "You can do this," they said, a mantra.

I repeated, "We can do this. We can do this." Who was this positive person speaking from within me? My entire life I'd been negative. My blood type: A negative. My stance on most things: pessimistic. Medical anthropologist and childbirth expert Sheila Kitzinger says you labor like you live. Was I an optimist at my core? Or was this the baby talking? Are we born optimists and then life, human cynicism, wears us down?

I didn't expect to involve the baby so deeply in the labor process. I didn't know my baby's gender yet. I hadn't definitively chosen her name. In O'Connell's labor story, she says she forgot the baby was involved: "Oh yes, the baby. He was in there through all of this. The thought of that now seems bizarre. It felt so much about me, my body, my pain." I wonder how this factors into smoother labors—if a laboring woman is thinking more about the baby than herself, is she able to sustain more? Childbirth is full of lessons our American culture has forgotten to heed.

My husband smoothed my hair, said, "You're doing an amazing job."

"Okay, okay, okay," I mocked. Annemarie giggled.

Around 9 p.m., Sue, our backup midwife, arrived, but I hardly noticed. During one surge, I felt a pop—the bag of waters?

"No," Kristen confirmed. Had I pooped? The water was still a clear, beautiful blue. I was relieved no one had to scoop up my excrement but assumed this was to come.

"Do we have any kefir?" I was hungry for something sweet but easily digestible. Within minutes, a straw and a glass of cherry kefir appeared. Sweet, sweet relief. Enough to carry me through the next waves of surges.

"I want to push," I told Kristen.

"Do you want to get into bed?"

"Okay," I said. But I forgot I weighed 185 lb. In the water, I was weightless. Standing up, I was all gravity.

The team helped me out of the tub but there was no way I could climb into our king-sized bed. Finally out of the tub, I squatted. My body was in the final throes—Dr. Odent's "fetus ejection reflux" was near.

Joey held my weight, facing me, but Sue mouthed to Kristen, "That's unsustainable." The team moved me so I could lean against Annemarie and together she and Joey shared the burden of my heavy load.

Kristen waited at my side and asked for coconut oil to rub on my perineum.

The ring of fire! For weeks, I tried to predict the feeling as midwife Ina May Gaskin suggests practicing stretching my mouth to unnatural proportions. And actually, that is what it's like! But this is *the end*. Sure, it stings. The team directed me to blow like I was blowing a balloon. Somehow that helped immensely—how could breathing alone alleviate the feeling? I'm not lying: It did. The slow puffing of an imaginary balloon; the slow expanding of my vaginal tissues. *Open. Open. Believe.*

"Blow," Kristen reminded me.

The room, now: narrow. Sound ceased. My body owned the stage, only my body and nothing else—not who I thought I was, or what I believed, or where I was from, or what I looked like, or anything of who I had been up until this moment. The body that housed me for so long was now all that existed. The strongest muscle within me flexed, and my baby's feet pushed off my uterus with each surge.

And then, her body. *Her* body! I didn't reach down to feel the head. There was the largest scope of universe surrounding me while all I felt was the 10-cm core of my vaginal tunnel. Small and large. Pained and pain-free.

I pushed.

“Slow,” Kristen coached but there wasn’t anything within me telling me this should be slow. I forgot slowing down prevents tearing. I was at the finish line. This was the final sprint and I couldn’t wait. I wanted to meet my baby. Today is a birthday! Wait, what day was it? Time rounded, irrelevant.

I pushed again—what surprised me most was that there was so much more of her. In birth classes, in videos, all we pay attention is to, all we’re taught to fear, is the girth of that head, but in reality, the rest of the body is much more awkward, sharply-angled, and not at all beautiful and round. The body, on its entrance into the world, is an ugly shape.

And it packs a punch: I could feel her shoulders, her elbows, the steep hump of her bare bottom, her knees, her ankles, and her feet. I’ve never known her body as intimately as in that moment. Never will again. I felt her within me. The gift of all that work. I knew my daughter’s every angle. I felt all of her, a rush of fluid. A feeling I can still feel within me today. I can’t remember the surges, the specific references of “pain,” but I feel the body’s shape within my body in a way I’ll never forget.

Huh.

This was when I thought I’d cry. That there’d be a huge release of emotion—all those years wanting a child, all that suffering. But there was nothing but the intense calm of staring up at a big, blue sky.

Kristen slid my daughter’s naked body against my bare chest. I reveled in the pleasurable feeling of the umbilical cord still snaking out from my vagina, our last connective tissue still pulsing. *She’s still in me*, I thought. *She’s here but she’s still there*. Her heartbeat and mine were connected for just a few moments more as she squirmed, naked and screaming.

We didn’t know who *she* was yet: a boy or a girl? I don’t remember what we said but when I finally looked down, she looked like those naked mole rats who come out of the womb breathing like fish, eyes open, attempting to understand what just happened.

The birth fluids (my water never broke, so our daughter arrived not quite in the caul but with the fluids behind her) formed a puddle under the bed. Kristen asked for towels.

“We’ll clean it up,” I told her.

My husband belched a laugh. “No, we won’t.”

The midwives wrapped the baby in a blanket, wiped us both clean. The room was warm, started to expand around me, my vision that was so narrow opened to the space that included my husband, Kristen, Annemarie, and now, this child.

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A few minutes later, “Is it a boy or a girl?”

Joey lifted up her legs. “Girl, I think?”

Kristen laughed. “Yes, she’s a girl.”

The placenta was bigger than I expected. After giving birth, I thought the placenta would slide out unnoticed but it was bulky. Not painful, but still something that needed a little caressing to eject.

Eventually, someone helped us into our bed. In photos, there’s blood on Calliope’s head—evidence, I now realize, of the vaginal tear she made on her rapid escape, our shared impatience.

“What time is it?”

It was 9:27 p.m. I assumed it was easily the next day, Friday. I knew it was still dark out but thought 3 or 4 in the morning wouldn’t be abnormal. The last time I remembered paying attention to the time was only a few hours earlier but it felt as if an entire night had transpired.

Someone handed me the rest of the kefir, which I downed with gusto. Annemarie scoured our fridge for a postlabor meal—never before has leftover, crappy take-out pasta tasted so good. Udon broth, cherry Kefir, and rubbery fusilli will forever be the taste of my daughter’s birth. Childbirth for me wasn’t painful as much as it was deep, hard work. Hard work that prepared me for many more battles ahead in a way I never imagined possible.

After calling my parents to announce the news and after the baby had a chance to nurse, Kristen and Sue assessed my tearing. I was lucky—there wasn’t any deep perineal tearing, possibly because of a combination of skin tissue elasticity, the perineal massage I’d done for months, and Kristen’s coconut oil. Or it was pure luck. But I wasn’t wholly lucky: They knew I’d torn from the blood present on my daughter’s head—they found the tear inside the back muscular wall of my vagina. Although they gave me lidocaine and readied stitches, they weren’t sure they could access the awkwardly angled wound best.

“It’s up to you,” Kristen said. “But I think a surgeon, with the appropriate lights and access will stitch this tear better.”

Childbirth for me wasn’t painful as much as it was deep, hard work. Hard work that prepared me for many more battles ahead in a way I never imagined possible.

Despite how much I feared the lack of sleep during childbirth, now all I wanted to do was stay awake to look at her breathing, living body. *You're here. You're here. You're finally here.*

I agreed; we left Calliope asleep on her father's chest. Sue and Annemarie handled the cleanup. Despite the fact the nearest hospital (just five blocks away) didn't accept home-birth transfers unless in an emergency, Sue negotiated with the on-staff doctors for me to come in for stitching. Kristen drove me there and I walked into the hospital before someone gave me a wheelchair. Once in the treatment room, an IV was forced on me (for reasons I still don't understand—I guess it was protocol?). I was asked to undress and lie on a cold, metal table. The room was bright, full of harsh fluorescent lights. My feet were in those stirrups clearly designed by a man. A nurse entered, asked my midwife why I was here.

"A natural birth!" the labor and delivery nurse exclaimed. "I wish I could've seen that!"

A labor and delivery nurse who hadn't seen a nonmedicated birth. *Wait, what?*

Finally, the obstetrician entered in her scrubs and turned on a bright spotlight. "Who are you?" she asked Kristen.

My midwife explained.

"But who is the patient's doctor? With what doctor are you affiliated?"

"There isn't a doctor."

"There has to be a doctor."

"No, there doesn't. I'm her midwife. I attended her birth."

I lied there, silent, stunned, and with an open wound in my vagina. Instead of attending first to me, the patient, the woman who had just given birth, this doctor was grilling my midwife. What did any of

this matter? When someone with a gunshot wound enters the ER, are they asked why they were shot, who shot them, or does the medical staff simply work quickly to address their injuries?

This wasn't the time to discuss. "Moment of Zen," I said to Kristen.

Finally, the doctor donned gloves, wheeled a chair up to my vagina, and pulled goggles over her eyes. Minutes later, I was stitched. Only months later, after painful sex, would I learn this doctor stitched some of my hymen into my vaginal tissues.

We returned home an hour later. I walked up the stairs to the bedroom I wouldn't leave again for a week, eager to see my daughter. Kristen helped me up each step.

"Okay, I think I may need a while before I do that again," I said, joking. Kristen laughed.

Upstairs, Sue was asleep on our guest bed and Joey and our daughter-yet-to-be-named were asleep in our bed, naked chest-to-chest, the reading light still lit. There was an early Christmas morning feel to our home, like a warm place you retreat to during a snowstorm—that quietness, that safety, the needed comfort honored inside. I climbed into bed with my husband and daughter but I didn't sleep. Despite how much I feared the lack of sleep during childbirth, now all I wanted to do was stay awake to look at her breathing, living body. *You're here. You're here. You're finally here.*

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