Remembering the Breaks: A Water Birth

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ABSTRACT

In this birth story, Katherine shares that she wanted an unmedicated birth. She planned a hospital birth with a midwife. During her pregnancy, she hired a doula and she and her husband, Corey, attended both natural childbirth classes and a natural comfort measures class. Katherine had an intense labor but was able to relax between contractions, and with the support of her husband and doula, she managed to cope with increasingly difficult contractions. Her commitment and hard work during labor, and the emotional and physical support she received, helped her achieve the unmedicated birth she wanted. Katherine and her husband welcomed their daughter, Clara Mae, into the world after 10.5 hours of labor.

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INTRODUCTION

I've wanted a natural childbirth for several years. I'm not sure what specifically triggered this uncommon desire (by today's standards), but I knew that's what I wanted. I wanted to be as present as possible during my birth experience, to feel in control during a process that my body was designed for, and to avoid the cascade of interventions that are commonly associated with pain relief during labor. My number-one birth goal was the same as any mother's: a healthy baby. My ultimate birth goal was an unmedicated water birth, and I was determined to achieve that goal. My husband, Corey, and I hired a doula because we wanted as much support as possible during labor. It's easy to get overwhelmed during intense situations, and we both wanted someone there to encourage a relaxed environment, and someone who had decades of experience with different laboring and pushing techniques—for us, that was René (Birth Help, Baton Rouge, LA).

After taking a 4-week natural childbirth class with our doula and a natural comfort measures class, my husband and I felt ready for delivery. As a first-time mom, I was convinced that I would be pregnant long after my due date and was content to wait for baby. I had a complication-free pregnancy, and my midwife was willing to let me go to 42 weeks as long as baby was OK. Despite my willingness to wait, baby girl was prompt.

I woke up at 5:30 a.m. on Sunday, May 28th (the day before my due date), thinking I peed my pants—which had happened several times throughout my pregnancy. I got up, went to the bathroom, and when I kicked my leg to remove my underwear, more pee came out. I sat down, cleaned myself up, and when I stood up for a second time, more pee came out! This process repeated two more times before I woke up enough to realize that the annoying liquid running down my legs every time I moved wasn't urine. It was clear, odorless, and coming out in gushes. I was

excited but tried to remember René's advice, "Rest as much as possible in early labor. It's a long process." My midwife encouraged me to labor at home until I was having contractions 3 minutes apart for an hour (as long as baby was moving OK), so I tried to rest. I put on a pad, ate some toast, laid a puppy pad on the mattress, and tried to go back to sleep. I was content to wait for my body to be ready. I had my first undeniable contraction at 5:45 a.m. It was more painful than I thought an early labor contraction would be and lasted about a minute. Six minutes later, I had another one. I downloaded a contraction app and decided to time a couple contractions. The next five contractions were 6–7 minutes apart lasting 45 seconds to a minute. They were painful enough that I woke up Corey at 6:45 a.m. and told him we were going to have a baby today or tomorrow. I was mentally ready for a 24-hour long (or longer) labor. I called René to fill her in on what was happening, and she encouraged me to rest when I could and reminded me that the contractions could slow down at any point.

By 7:00 a.m., I wasn't comfortable lying down and I was hungry. Corey turned on Formula 1 racing on the TV, made me scrambled eggs, and I leaned over our kitchen peninsula during contractions. Corey was an amazing labor partner. Most of my pain was in my back and lower abdomen, so I was most comfortable standing up. Corey would push on my back during contractions and that offered some relief. I was completely relaxed between contractions. There's no denying that contractions are very painful, but the breaks in between make them bearable. At 8:20 a.m., I felt like the contractions were much closer together, so we timed a few and they were 3–4 minutes apart but only lasting 45 seconds. I called René, and she thought it was strange that my contractions weren't lasting very long, and we agreed it wasn't time to go to the hospital yet. Around 9:00 a.m., Corey hopped in the shower and I labored in the bathroom, talking to him between contractions, breathing and moaning during contractions. Moaning was the one thing I did during every single contraction. I continued to try to relax as much as possible. The contractions continued get more painful, and standing up was still the most comfortable way to get through them. I got in the shower (René's suggestion) to ease the back pain, and it helped a bit, but the contractions were still very intense, considering I'd only been having them for 4 hours at this point. I got out of the shower and sat on the toilet in

an attempt to relax my pelvic floor as much as possible. That's when I saw bloody show. I got a surge of energy because I knew that meant my cervix was dilating! We timed a few more contractions at 10:00 a.m., called René, and let her know that they were still 3 minutes apart, lasting about 1 minute now. I was still OK laboring at home, but we decided that we'd leave for the hospital at 11:30 a.m. if things didn't slow down. The next hour was a blur of deep breathing, moaning, standing on puppy pads, grabbing hospital bags, and hoping that my cervix was dilating quickly. I opted not to have cervical exams until after my due date, so I had no idea as to the condition of my cervix before labor started.

Corey loaded the car and René called to say she was on her way to the hospital. Walking to the car felt like an eternity. I had three contractions in the short walk to the parking lot. I sat in the back seat on puppy pads, gripped the seat and the door, and we were off. Corey turned on the radio and I sang to country music between contractions and moaned during contractions. I wanted to relax as much as possible. It was incredibly painful to be confined to the back of a car during intense labor, but I kept remembering the breaks. I would have 90 seconds of pain, then a glorious, completely relaxed break.

The 7-mile drive to the hospital should take about 15 minutes at 11:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning, but between hitting every single red light (I'm not joking, it was every one), and police stopping traffic for a large church that just let out, it took 30 minutes. It was the worst 30 minutes of my labor so far. Corey pulled up in front of the hospital and René was there waiting with a smile. I didn't want a wheelchair after

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the 30 minutes car ride from hell, so René kept close and we headed up to labor and delivery while Corey parked the car. A nurse brought us back to the labor and delivery triage area where they confirmed that my water had broken. Typically, my hospital monitors contractions for 20 minutes before admitting you to labor and delivery to confirm that you are in labor, but my contractions were 2 minutes apart at this point, and the nurse was convinced that I was in labor.

We entered our labor and delivery room at 12:10 p.m. Corey arrived with the bags soon after. They monitored baby's heart rate, which was strong and had a good rhythm. Baby girl was handling contractions very well. Then, it was time for the moment of truth: Was I significantly dilated? Before the car ride from hell, I told myself that if I wasn't at least 5 cm, we were going home. But after the car ride from hell, I didn't care how far I was (or wasn't) dilated, I wasn't getting back in that car without a baby. The nurse checked me and my cervix was very low, very soft, 6 cm dilated, and 90% effaced! Hallelujah! 6 cm!!! Words can't describe how happy I was to hear those words! That was just the burst of energy that I needed after 6.5 hours of labor. René started filling the birth tub.

The next 4 hours were a blur. We covered the clock in the room, so I wasn't fixated on time, turned on my labor and delivery playlist to help me relax and feel at home, and took it one contraction at a time. It hurt. It hurt badly. Laboring was the worst pain of my life, but I got breaks. After every contraction, there was no more pain, no more pressure. I thought about asking for an epidural several times. It's hard not to think about it. There were multiple times when I would think to myself, "OK. I'm done. After this contraction, I'm asking for the epidural." But the contraction would end, René and Corey would tell me how good I was doing, remind me that the pain was bringing baby closer to me, and then I didn't want the epidural any more. I could do this.

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After laboring in the tub for a while, René suggested I try sitting on the toilet for a few contractions. I sat backwards on the toilet so Corey could push on my back. René turned off the lights, and it was the most peace I felt during the whole process. The dark, cold bathroom with just my husband and me was the happiest place in the world. He pushed on my back. I moaned. I wanted to vomit at the peak of every contraction, but I was still at peace. I kept remembering the breaks.

René then suggested hands-and-knees on the bed. Once I got positioned I said, "René, this really hurts. I'm thinking thoughts. I'm not saying it out loud, but I'm thinking thoughts." I wanted relief. I wanted to sleep. I wanted the epidural, but I wanted an unmedicated childbirth more. I remembered the breaks. Knowing I'd get a break got me through each contraction.

A little known fact is that it's important to pee during labor. I never thought about it before taking birth classes, but it makes sense, you need to stay hydrated, and you need to pee. A full bladder

can actually impede progress because it's taking up room. I went back to the toilet and tried to pee. During a contraction, I did pee, but it was strange. This force came over me and pushed the pee out. After the contraction, I heard René tell the nurse that I pushed on that last contraction. I thought, "Wait . . . I did? That was pushing?" I had no control over it. Back to the tub I went!

The nurse checked me and said she could still feel cervix but just a small lip. They didn't say I should push, but they didn't tell me not to push, so I tried to relax, and any pushing that happened was completely involuntary. I tried every position possible in the tub: leaning forward, sitting back, and kneeling, but squatting was what really got things going. I hated squatting. It hurt, but it was effective. At one point, I reached down and could feel baby's not-yet-crowning head inside me. That gave me another surge of energy and motivation. I was going to meet my baby soon.

Eventually, I started purposefully pushing. Pushing is strange. In some ways, it feels better than contractions, but in other ways, you're certain that your butt hole is going to explode and your vagina is going to rip open up to your belly button (these were both things I actually said during labor). I pushed, and pushed, and pushed. René kept telling me I was doing a good job. Corey held onto me, put a cool cloth on my forehead, and just loved me. The majority of pushing time was spent in a sitting position with Corey behind me on the edge of the tub. He put his legs in the water and I leaned against him. That was the position that felt the best for me. My husband was close. René could fan me and speak words of encouragement. I could do this.

The on-call midwife was there throughout the pushing process, which took an hour and a half. At one point, she told me to reach down and touch the baby's head. There it was! She wasn't crowning yet, but she was close! I got another surge of motivation. I kept thinking, "My vagina is going to rip open up to my belly button, and my butt hole is going to explode, but I'm going to meet my baby soon!" I pushed, and pushed, and pushed. René's words of encouragement and Corey's presence were so helpful. My legs started to give out. I was so weak from bracing them against the tub. A nurse crawled along the side of the tub and held one leg, the midwife held the other, and I pushed with everything I had. After pushing for what seemed like an eternity, René said, "OK. Push her head out on the next contraction." "I'll try," I said.

I bore down with every ounce of energy I had, I pushed, I yelled, it burned, and then it didn't. Her head was out!

The next contraction came, I bore down with every ounce of energy I had, I pushed, I yelled, it burned, and then it didn't. Her head was out! The contraction was over, but I didn't care, I pushed one more time and her body was born. I reached down to grab my daughter. I did it. She was perfect. I rubbed her back, she cried, and looked up at me with the most beautiful eyes in the world. I was instantly in love. The midwife asked what her name was, I looked up at Corey, and he said, "She's Clara" (one of the two names we were deciding between).

People told me that I shouldn't get my heart set on my birth plan because births never go according to plan, but mine did. My birth plan was identical to my birth. I had the perfect, unmedicated water birth that I wanted. Corey supported me physically and emotionally by holding me, kissing me, and doing whatever I needed for every single contraction. René supported me mentally. She talked to me through every single contraction. She kept me calm, motivated, and focused. I couldn't have achieved my perfect birth without Corey and René. Clara Mae Moen was born at 4:11 p.m. after 10.5 hours of labor, on Sunday, May 28, 2017. She weighed 6 lb 11 oz and was 20 in. long. Clara's birth was the hardest thing I have ever done but I wouldn't have had it any other way. It was perfect.

REFLECTIONS

Having René at the hospital was essential. I definitely recommend hiring a doula to anyone who

wants an unmedicated childbirth. It's also very important to have a supportive partner. Corey was 100% committed to a natural childbirth. He never once asked if I wanted pain medication because he knew that would impact my persistence. René took notes throughout my labor, and she was kind enough to send those to me. After reading her notes, I'm so glad that I didn't know the time while I was laboring. I could have sworn that I sat on the toilet for at least 45 minutes, but apparently, it was only 15 minutes. Had I known that only 15 minutes had passed, I would have been so discouraged and may not have persisted with my birth plan. I also loved having music playing. I chose mellow songs that I was familiar with, so I could sing in my head or aloud between contractions. The music helped me relax during those precious breaks.

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My husband, Corey, was the perfect birth partner. He pushed on my back for every contraction and stayed close for my entire labor. He encouraged me and made me feel so loved and supported during the most difficult experience of my life. René Johnson, my doula (Birth Help, Baton Rouge, LA), helped me stay focused and grounded throughout my labor. She talked to me through every contraction and kept reminding me that I could have the birth I wanted. When people ask me about my labor and delivery, I say, "It was perfect." That would not have been possible without Corey and René.

KATHERINE C. MOEN is a PhD student at Louisiana State University studying cognitive and brain sciences. She has always been interested in natural childbirth and enjoys researching evidenced-based pregnancy, birth, and parenting.