This Birth (Story) Was a Long Time Coming

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ABSTRACT

The story of Joyce's birth describes a long, hard labor and the determined commitment and hard work of her mother to have a natural birth. This birth story presents a deeply moving, personal reflection on when cesarean surgery is the right choice even if not the preferred outcome.

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I am the mother of a 7-year-old and this year's celebration of a new year contained several milestones. I made it through her birthday without the usual feelings of loss, frustration, and remorse around her birth. I saw a local group offering a support circle for recovery from birth trauma and didn't click "find out more." I even ran into my doula at a party and could joke about my daughter Joyce's arrival. These are new (and welcome) feelings and outcomes.

I am also the product of a marriage that had 8 long years of infertility before I showed up. My mother never hesitated to make sure I knew just how loved and wanted I was. She had two beautiful births for me and my younger brother and told us the story each year on the eve of our own birthdays. For my mother, an unmedicated birth was an empowering and extraordinary experience and I was raised to look forward to my own chance.

I am also someone who, unlike my parents, dodged infertility. I found myself pregnant quickly and without incident. I loved prenatal yoga. I basked

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in the praise of my obstetrician's compliments on my "excellent pelvis for natural childbirth." Around the 40 week mark when others frequently asked if I was ready to be done, I readily claimed that I was not. For the first time, the body that had been hard to fit into jeans since puberty thanks to short legs and big hips seemed perfectly suited for the conditions.

I am also someone who took her dedication to having the type of birth I'd heard about yearly seriously. I read Ina May. I watched *The Business of Being Born*. I hired a doula. I did birth meditations and paid for classes focused on natural childbirth plus the aforementioned prenatal yoga classes. I chose an obstetrician known for her support of unmedicated

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birth. I had a birth plan and a partner on the same page.

I am, it turns out, also someone who has a stubborn cervix.

According to my last menstrual period, my due date was Sunday, April 10. According to my own charting (I am a scientist, after all, and had been using the fertility awareness method for 2 years as practice for when I wanted to get pregnant), my due date was Wednesday, April 13. Thanks to my sometimes unrealistic professional standards, I was someone who wanted to make it through Saturday April 16 so that I could see my students present their work at our end-of-year research symposium.

I made it through the presentations and then returned home and moved directly into encouraging the onset of my labor for the rest of the weekend, primarily through long walks and eating pineapple. In the early hours of Monday, April 18th, I awoke with contractions. They stuck around all day. Thanks to saved Gmail correspondence with two of my closest friends, I can reliably report that they got worse as the day progressed. My doula visited for a bit then and instructed me to call when I started having a hard time. I made that call later in the evening. My contractions eventually spent an hour at 1 minute apart around 24 hour hours since starting. My doula advised heading to the hospital even though my disposition seemed pretty good, just in case I was quite far along.

It turns out that was a worry far from reality. First, at check in, the receptionist commented that I seemed to be doing too well for someone far into labor. Then when attempting to check for progress, it took the resident several tries to even find my cervix. She could not find it for good reason—it was closed. As in zero opening progress after a full day of contractions. I was tired and dismayed. This was

not in any book I had read! How was I supposed to keep this up?

The hospital monitored my contractions and baby for a bit and then declared everything to be fine. My obstetrician called and suggested to get some sleep and even try a glass of wine to relax. My doula promised that the situation was nothing to worry about. Although I considered asking for a cesarean right there, I did not. I went home and got a bit of sleep. I then spent all of Tuesday and Wednesday—a full 48 hours—in the same space of constant contractions and no dilation.

On Thursday (April 21st), my obstetrician scheduled an ultrasound where it was clear there was plenty of fluid. I went to the chiropractor. I tried to relax but was so tired from not sleeping for more than a short stint since the few hours after returning from the hospital. My doctor prescribed Ambien and that didn't help either.

Finally, in the early hours of Friday, I broke down from the constant contractions and lack of rest. We arrived at the hospital, my obstetrician ordered some morphine, and I finally gained a few hours sleep. My obstetrician arrived the next morning and swept my membranes getting me to 3 cm. Rejuvenated, we returned to the cycle of walking around, breathing through contractions, and thinking opening thoughts. I (reluctantly) agreed to deviate from my birth plan and start Pitocin after a few more hours with no progress. Then, after 110 hours of painful contractions with little progress, I began to dream of an epidural. The obstetrician and doula agreed, and by Friday evening I accepted another major change in my birth plan. My obstetrician made the call to then stop the Pitocin, ordered me some dinner, and let the epidural win me a night of sleep to try again on Saturday. Overnight, my water broke and I made it to between 5 and 6 cm.

That would be the stopping point for progress. The hospital staff checked throughout the day and nothing was happening despite steady consistent contractions. We played card games to try to distract. We watched fluffy TV shows and snuck in popsicles. I had the nurses find a priest to visit on Holy Saturday. I had developed a theory that I had some kind of latent guilt preventing me from moving ahead so wanted the sacrament of Reconciliation. Catholic Pro Tip: In these cases, you can get Anointing of the Sick, which has all the benefits and none of the talking. Yet my progress remained where it had been in the early morning—5 or 6 cm. Meconium

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Family outing to celebrate Joyce's 7th birthday

started appearing and my obstetrician thought that although I was not out of time, there was going to be a limit. I spoke to my nurse and doula asking for their expert perspective. Their sound advice was that it was better to go into surgery with everyone calm than wait for an emergency. I agreed.

I had not even read the chapter on cesarean in *Birthing from Within* because I was so convinced that my plan, my pelvis, and my mom's positive birth history made it irrelevant. I had no idea how quickly the surgery would happen. When I heard the baby crying, I assumed it belonged to some other woman I had yet to meet but with whom was sharing space. I was wrong. It was my daughter and she was healthy and precious.

Despite that, I was not happy or pleased. It took years before I would say I gave birth and stopped talking about how I had "failed." I felt cheated of an experience that I had been eagerly anticipating for 30 years. Compounding the grief, my mom died 2 years later and her joyful reaction to finding out that we were naming our daughter after her became a painful, albeit still treasured, memory.

Although I did not have the experience I wanted, I did have one that lets me feel confident that birth can exist in a space where decisions happen collectively and thoughtfully.

Seven years later, I am (finally) fully convinced the decision to have a cesarean was the correct one and I likely could not have done anything to change what happened. I am grateful for an obstetrician who did not blink at going 10–13 days past my due date when all the signs showed a healthy mom and baby and I never felt like my concerns were secondary in the process. The space in between my experience and acceptance of it was not quick though. I was hurt when people commented that "all that matters is a healthy baby!" or "vaginal births aren't exactly fun!" as if my caring about the process made me selfish. An insightful therapist helped me to realize that, for me, birth was an essential key in being feminine. A similarly helpful insight was this being a case of not wanting to have needed help for something I thought I should do myself. A third was about recognizing that I felt betrayed by my body. Learning to reframe this story to be my own has taken work. I can now appreciate the ways it reflects positively on me: I don't quit easily, I am always willing to listen to others who had a suboptimal birth experience, and I had a head start accepting that parenting is not about control. Although I did not have the experience I wanted, I did have one that lets me feel confident that birth can exist in a space where decisions happen collectively and thoughtfully. I hope this is even more the case today and am grateful for all those working to make it so.

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