

Julian's Birth Story

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My story begins long before I went into labor. For a decade before I got pregnant, I had expected I would have a natural birth, for no other reason than I was afraid of all things medical: hospitals, blood, needles, the poking and prodding, menacing tools and machines. I once told my mom, "I think I'm too afraid to get an epidural. When I have a baby, I'm going to have to go natural. Do you think oral pain medication would help? A strong dose of Advil, maybe?"

When I did get pregnant, after actually studying up on birth practices and options, I affirmed that I would have a natural birth in the hospital with a Certified Nurse Midwife. We were living in Illinois at the time, and despite my having a wonderful birth preparation teacher who spoke highly of out-of-hospital births, birthing out of the hospital was extremely limited there. When we moved to Utah when I was 30 weeks along, naturally, I thought, I should continue with a hospital midwifery practice. What pushed me to an out-of-hospital birth was my deep need for my care providers to *listen*. During my first appointment with one of the practicing midwives at a Utah hospital, I tried to explain that I knew my due date was later than the traditional calculation. "I know that care providers traditionally determine the due date by counting down from the mom's last period," I said. "But my cycles are longer than 28 days. I've been charting them religiously for two years. And I know my due date should be five days later than the traditional calculation." She looked at me, smiling softly. "We get this question all the time. Many women track their cycle. But we have a policy to use the date of the mother's last period." I was more than frustrated, particularly because of the hospital's policy to induce at 41 weeks. On the drive home, I told Justin about my concerns. I knew the state of Utah was supportive of out-of-hospital births, and I had been taking a birth preparation class at a beautiful birthing center in Salt Lake City. "I think I want to give birth at Better Birth," I told Justin. We talked about the pros and cons, and he was completely supportive of the idea. About a week later, we called the birth center and scheduled an appointment. It was an easy decision when Suzanne, a midwife, listened to me, reviewed my cycle charts, and wrote down the due date I calculated.

Three days after my due date, I knew I was in labor early in the morning, around 2:30 AM. For two days before, I had experienced many contraction-like

sensations that I understood to be preparation for “true” labor. I didn’t want to talk about it with Justin or my mom and dad because I didn’t want them to dote on me. Doting would make me nervous and might slow down any progress I was making toward “true” labor. But when I woke early Wednesday with a deeper, sharper sensation that felt more urgent and made me more aware of my condition, I knew this was it. I didn’t get out of bed. I whispered to Justin that I thought I was in labor and wanted us to stay asleep for as long as we could.

We stayed in bed until 5:30 AM when I couldn’t stay in bed any longer. We got up to have breakfast. I looked out the kitchen window. The sky was still dark with night, but daylight was coming soon. With every contraction (and they were far apart, probably around every ten minutes), I had the happy anticipation of a newborn’s arrival. I talked to Justin about putting our labor plan into practice. This was the plan: Go to the grocery store and buy ingredients for a birthday cheesecake. Go home and make the cheesecake to pass time during the initial “easy” stage of labor. Eat the celebration cheesecake once Julian was born. We got dressed and went out. Pushing the cart along in Harmon’s, I smiled and breathed easily with each contraction. I was pleased with my secret as I looked for the ingredients I needed. I was in labor! I was going to have a baby soon!

Once at home we began to bake. I was experiencing contractions that I breathed through, that seemed hard, but that I could stand through. Looking back, it’s amazing to me that I withstood the extreme sensations I felt at the end of my labor. While standing in the kitchen early that morning, baking a cheesecake and stopping to breathe for each contraction, I thought the pain was difficult. It was a sharpish inside pain that I hadn’t quite felt before—a pain difficult to describe and difficult to pin down and difficult to remember now. I didn’t know that morning how intense the labor would become later that afternoon.

We started timing. The contractions were far apart—7 or 8 minutes. Around late morning, when contractions still seemed to be relatively far apart, we began to worry. Justin picked up my copy of *The Birth Partner*, read a few pages, and announced that I may not yet be in “true” labor. I was upset, to say the least. Justin and I started to argue from the stress of it—not the emotional place I imagined we would be during my labor. So I texted Andrea, my doula, and told her about our fears and my pains and my frustrations about the slow-moving

process of my labor. She wrote back right away: “Your body IS doing it, on its own time. Your baby will be here soon!”

Luckily, Justin and I recovered quickly by deciding to take the dogs to Memory Grove Park. This was a peaceful spot for us that we had visited many times over the summer. Justin played fetch with the dogs while I sat under a tree near the pond and watched, focusing on my contractions as I sat or knelt on hands and knees in the grass. I noticed during this time that the contractions were picking up, so I began timing them again. They were getting closer together! We stayed for a little longer and I felt it was time to go home.

Once we were back in the apartment, things started to get more indistinct and fuzzy for me. I remember being on my hands and knees in the bedroom a lot getting through contractions, and in the living room on the carpet. I couldn’t move once one would come on—all I could do was drop to the floor right there and call Justin. I needed him next to me to gather my strength. I breathed through each contraction, and he was right there to breathe slowly and fully with me. Next to my ear, I could hear his breath, and it soothed me. His presence brought me relief—his hand resting on my shoulder, his cool forehead touching my warm, damp forehead. He was so helpful during these moments.

We continued to prepare the cheesecake—we still had to make the blueberry sauce. And we called the midwife for the second or third time. We told Suzanne that the contractions seemed to be about 45 seconds to 1 minute long and 3-5 minutes apart. She said that it was too early and to call back later. Not long later we called again because I felt like I really needed to go the birth center. I didn’t tell Justin at the time, but I felt nauseated, went to the bathroom, and felt strong pelvic pressure. I wasn’t sure in my altered state of mind, but I was somewhat aware that these were signs of transition. This last call to Suzanne was at 4 PM. She said we should meet at the center at 5 PM.

As Justin rushed to get our things into the car, I called out to him every minute or two to help me get through the contractions. I felt in control but needed to use my “Owww” sounds to stay focused, which I had practiced a lot in my birth preparation. In between contractions, I breathlessly told Justin to put the blueberry sauce on the cheesecake. He scrambled to do it and we hurried out of the house at about 4:45 PM. The contractions became all of me then. They kept

flooding over me, one on top of the other. In the car, I would get through them with increasingly more powerful “Owwwww’s” in low rhythms. And I started dozing off in between contractions—I knew I had made it to “Laborland,” a state of mind I learned about during my Birthing from Within class. I had a few thoughts on the way to the birth center. One of them was a fear that I might have the baby before I got there. I was feeling increasing pressure in my pelvis and beyond. The other was a fear that I might not be as far along as I thought, and that I would have to endure the pain I was feeling for hours more.

We arrived at the center and the door opened for me. Three or four women greeted me and helped me over to the couch so that I could have a cervix check. Suzanne did the exam. I felt her fingers inside me, first two, then three—I think it was four fingers. “You’re at an eight,” she said. “You’re going to have a baby.” And I was so relieved that I cried a few tears. Andrea looked at me happily and offered some positive affirmations. The midwives suggested I walk upstairs while Justin unloaded the car and Andrea supported me through my most difficult contractions. I heard the wood creak as I ascended the stairs. I felt the difference in the atmosphere from my apartment, but I didn’t mind it. I sat in an armchair for the end of labor while the midwives drew a bath for me. I couldn’t get on my hands and knees anymore. I couldn’t do a thing in the world except focus on breathing, vocalizing my “owwwws” and gently swaying with my vocalizations, while Andrea whispered, “relax your face,” “relax.” And in between, I had to focus too, gently telling myself, “I can do it, I’m okay. I can do it, I’m okay.”

I got into the bath. It was hot and I was so uncomfortable. I asked for a glass of cold water. I started feeling like I was losing control. I began to feel afraid. They told me my mom and dad had arrived. My body kept moving without me. My waters erupted into the bath with a contraction. I couldn’t do anything about anything anymore. I tried to get on my hands and knees in the tub to make it through those contractions but it was too uncomfortable. Lea, one of my midwives, suggested I lean back against Justin. That was too uncomfortable. For a few moments I thought the situation was unbearable and was worried I couldn’t make it. My mom came into the room to greet me. She kissed me on the forehead and left so I could make it through another contraction.

Right before Julian came I had moved my fingers down to my cervix to see if I could feel him there. It was Andrea who suggested I do it, and by this time, I was

fragile and ready for any suggestion. Lea said she didn't think he was right there yet. "He's probably coming down the birth canal now," she said gently from across the little room. As I moved my hand downward to see if I could feel him, I was desperately hopeful that he would be there. Eyes squinting and forehead wrinkling as my fingers moved, I noticed I had opened up to let him out, and I felt the top of his squishy head (although at the moment I wasn't sure if it was he that I felt). Then another hard contraction came and my body pushed again— Julian's head was out! I didn't even know it until Andrea said so. "Head's out" she said easily. Lea came right over and they were both there, telling me to push one more time. I did and I felt him slip into the world.

They lifted Julian out of the water and set him on my chest. He was all grayish blue and covered with vernix. He was not breathing well. He let out a few little cries—not as loud as I imagined they would be. He opened his mouth so very wide, it looked like a yawn as tiny noises escaped. Trinette, my principal midwife, moved quickly, cutting his cord and sucking fluid from his lungs with what looked like a large straw. Lea called out heart rate numbers while Trinette performed mouth-to-mouth. Justin and I were afraid for him. She told us to talk to our baby, as we had been stunned into silence. We began talking at once. "Hi Julian. Hi baby. Hi Julian. We are so happy you're here!" About a minute later, Julian was breathing normally, the color flooding into his body. He was okay, healthy and thriving, with an Apgar score of 9 five minutes after birth.

Looking back, I feel that moment of physical opening up, in which I had no control and was completely vulnerable to the process of birthing a baby, may be one of the greatest climaxes of my life. I don't mean the sexual kind. I had wished for an "orgasmic birth." It wasn't. But my unmedicated, out-of-hospital birth allowed me to experience what few contemporary U.S. women experience to the fullest extent: the shear force and power of what birth is and does to a woman. My natural birth led me into a state of consciousness that I'd never experienced before. It also initiated me into a process of emotional and spiritual opening that has transformed me (and continues to transform me) into a mother. When I look at my son, this person I've created, I am sick with love for him. I am compelled to nourish and protect him. It's God's work, evolution's work, or whatever. But it's powerful and I didn't know what I was missing until he came into my life.

It occurred to me after experiencing the pains of birth that the writer of Genesis must have gotten it wrong. Women don't experience pain during childbirth as God's punishment for Eve's sin; women experience this pain because only a physical experience as intense as this can be an outward sign of what happens to a woman as she opens her heart to motherhood. It is a creative hurt, the kind of hurt you are sure is changing you for the better.