Our birth story is as much about the build up to the event as the event itself. I had a great pregnancy, perfectly uneventful up to 34/35 weeks….and, in hindsight, relatively uneventful until the end. My birth experience was nothing I had anticipated, to say the least, but there’s nothing I would have changed about it.

To start, I was not committed to a natural childbirth...

Before my son, Evan, was born, I would have told you how I admire women who have natural childbirths, but, in truth, there was only a 10-20% chance that I would have *chosen* that path during labor, and only that much having sessions with our doula. So why did I look for the help of a doula? I was committed to a hospital birth, and therefore also committed (by default) to facing a different problem: my needle phobia.

When I first became pregnant, imagining the birth left me a bit fearful. However, not fearful of the unknown as much as fearful of the IV’s and epidural I would use to deal with the unknown. In particular, I had two fears to face: tearing and needles. When I first heard about the ‘tearing’ issue, years before, I nearly fainted...for real. Somehow, during the course of the pregnancy, I came to terms with that problem with little trouble. The needles, on the other hand, would be a source of persistent anxiety, a function of a lifelong problem. In the beginning, though, I simply tabled my fears, and trusted that it would all work out. After all, there was no turning back!

Although I had chosen a great doctor, I had been curious about midwives for years, attracted to the idea of having the additional emotional and physical support during birth. Out of the blue, a friend recommended *Ina May’s Guide to Childbirth*, and I quickly zeroed in on her discussions about how fears, tension, and [insert any other unaddressed issues (needle phobia?)] can stall labor. I could buy this argument. After all, I have to focus on relaxation just to have a successful blood draw. My next mission was to start talking to my doctor about the needles. In fact, I considered the possibility that I would be unable to take an epidural…then what would my options be? You could say I was more concerned about this problem than labor itself.

Along the way, a few key things happened:

1. I learned about doulas. I wondered if this would be my ticket to getting some extra support! However, I waffled for a while…
2. At 34 weeks, I was admitted to the hospital with an infection, which required an IV. This was only my second hospital admittance in the 30 years since a bout with spinal meningitis left me trauma’d by needles in the first place.

When my doctor witnessed my reaction to the IV firsthand, she labeled it a ‘phobia’ and actually suggested therapy(!). Unfortunately, she also felt that we were a little late to address the problem. Overall, I took the IV well enough, and we all decided to think of this experience as a positive ‘dry run’ for the birth.

1. At 35 weeks, just a week later, I learned that I was 3 cm dilated, 50% effaced, and to expect the baby ANY time. That evening and throughout the night, I had random contractions. (Could the cosmic combo, full moon and lunar eclipse, have played a role?!) The next day I was assigned bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy. My doctor wanted ‘at least one more week out of me.’ That was a shock…so much for phobia therapy, not to mention more birth classes. We didn’t even have a birth plan...

I had been interested in hiring a doula before any of this, and now, under duress and a little late(?), we were ready to pull the trigger! I would ask a doula to help me stay calm through ALL of it: primarily the needles… as well as advocate for me and my husband in the hospital. Besides, if I couldn’t take the epidural, I would be desperate for someone to help me through a labor ... of a different sort.

Already, we had interviewed one doula the week before. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a fit. I figured that I wasn’t the typical customer, but she seemed more interested in espousing the virtues of a natural child birth rather than discuss my immediate problem. Once I was put on bed rest, we were on a mission. Attempt #2: That evening I ‘broke’ the rules, left the house, and met Amanda. This was the fit we were looking for. We hired her…scenarios covered! I remember that night she told me that ‘ladies like you deliver fast.’ I wondered why, was it the fact that I was already dilating? She said it was my body type. Sounded good to me, but I wasn’t going to let myself get too attached to the idea.

After a couple of meetings, I clearly remember the moment I felt peace with the task in front of me. Medicated or natural (whoa!), I was going to be fine.

Then we waited…

All along, I would question changes in ‘warm up’ contractions, and any new sensation. Could the baby be coming? Well, I’d go to sleep. If this is going to be it, I might as well get some sleep. I re-packed my hospital bag at least once thinking that it was serious enough, but each time I woke up the next morning, still pregnant.

Week 36: 4 cm, 80 % effaced.

Week 37: the same.

Week 38: 4.5 cm dilated, 90 % effaced.

Week 39: even my doctor was surprised to see me.

She and I had a short discussion about my frame of mind: had I prepared myself for the needles? I told her that I wasn’t focusing on it. ‘Is that a good idea’, she questioned? [I had believed that was best. I suppose I didn’t want to admit that if I thought too hard about it, I would well up in tears. Why build it up? For me, it was better to rely on my faith that everything would work out.] I was happy that she took the time to have the discussion, and I appreciated her encouragement after I took the earlier IV relatively well. She expressed that, in the moment, she hoped the needles would be the lesser of my concerns, and I told her that I was counting on the same thing. She told me that I could expect this baby to come ‘fast and furious’, and everyone agreed, there would be no laboring at home!

Later, though, I felt more and more troubled. Did my doctor have something less-than full faith in me? Did she think I was going to be a problem? Did she have doubts? Was it so surprising that the baby still hadn’t come…as if I could delay the labor out of shear will, because I wasn’t mentally prepared? It had been a largely positive conversation, but also a subtly confrontational one, just days ahead of my due date. Maybe I was being a bit too sensitive, but this was uncomfortable. Later, when I checked in with Amanda, I found myself telling her about it, and thankfully left those feelings behind.

The next day, we experienced another full moon, but still no baby. Jokingly, I had predicted that to be a possible delivery date. After being assigned bed rest a month earlier, I never thought I’d make it to the next full moon. Outside of that, I preferred to go into labor on a Friday, so that my husband would have a few more days with me and the baby before going back to work.

Two days later, and 3 days ahead of his due date, my son, Evan, was born on Friday January 21, 2011. Here’s how the day went:

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| That morning | Woke up, still pregnant. Told a friend about how ‘comfortable’ this had become – maybe I wasn’t going to have a baby. |
| 1:00 pm | Dressed up and had a late lunch with my mother and brother |
| 5:30 pm | Took a walk with my husband in our neighborhood |
| 7:00-8:30 pm | Had dinner out with my husband …close to home, because I was tired. During dinner I sent a message to Amanda asking to get together over the weekend. |
| 9:00-9:50 pm | Watched TV on the couch with the usual ‘warm up’ contractions going on. Just relax. |
| ***10:00 pm*** | ***‘REAL’ CONTRACTIONS?!*** |
| 10:15-10:30 pm | Exchanging text messages with Amanda – ***IT’S ON!*** |
| 10:45 pm | Paged my doctor |
| 11:00 pm | On the road |
| 11:22 pm | Arrived at hospital |
| 11:30-ish pm | I gave the labor nurse my birth plan (pointing out the highlighted part about needles), asked to consult with the anesthesiologist (needles!), and told her I had a doula coming… ‘I’ve got my bases covered.’ |
| 11:36 pm | First (only) exam: 9 cm, 100% effaced, stage +2 (!) |
| ***11:49 pm*** | ***BABY EVAN WAS BORN!*** |

Following the exam, the room broke into chaos. Suddenly, there was a crowd of people. One nurse tried, repeatedly and unsuccessfully, to put a fetal monitor around my belly. I couldn’t help but think, how hard can this be? Just get it done! Stop pushing on me!! She said she couldn’t find the baby’s heartbeat, and rather than panic, I chose to believe that the problem wasn’t the heartbeat, it was the administering of the monitor. They abandoned the external monitor, and told me they would opt for an internal one.

When I heard 9 cm, I knew there was no question as to what I had to do. What a relief. My worst case scenario was showing up at 6-7 cm and having to *decide* whether or not to get the epidural. Instead, I was in the throes of a natural childbirth, and it was already in high gear! I never even changed into a hospital gown. The good news: no time for drugs. (Actual meaning: no time for IV’s, epidural, not even a hep-lock. Incredible.) The bad news: I didn’t know anyone in the room (minus my husband), the intensity was mounting, someone was incessantly calling for a table (*what* was that table for?), and everyone in the room still seemed exceptionally concerned about the baby’s heartbeat…

My doctor, unfortunately, did not arrive in time for Evan’s birth. In all the chaos and haste, I don’t know who actually delivered him, and once we got started, the birth plan was never mentioned again. However, in those minutes leading up to the birth, there were three people, in particular, that I was extraordinarily grateful for.

First, there was my husband. There was no preparing for these events! Under the circumstances, there was little he could do, but he supported me the entire time. From calming me on the drive to the hospital, to taking me up to labor and delivery in the wheelchair, and calling to check on Amanda’s where-abouts (I suppose it was actually a call to say ‘this is out of control’, but as I understand it, my yells in the background told the whole story). In truth, the situation was overwhelming for him. Chaos and commotion…no discussion, no explanations. No heartbeat? I was in pain. He would tell you about how his ears ‘popped’ from the pressure in his head. Amanda would tell you that he took on a dreadful color. I’d tell you about how happy I was to have him there. He did his best to keep talking to me during the delivery, he cheered me on as baby emerged, and finally, he was the one who chased after the baby when he was, unexpectedly, taken out of the room just after being born.

Second and third were the women who held my hands and coached me through the birth. As I said above, as the intensity was mounting, I didn’t know any of the care givers in the room, and with other concerns, no one was talking to me or my husband. At one point, a nurse asked the others a question – she asked it 3 times, and I answered it 3 times, but she wasn’t looking at me. I was in transition and seemingly on my own. I wasn’t quiet about it either. Not only did Amanda hear it over the phone, but remarkably, one of the midwives heard me and simply invited herself into the room. The midwife stepped in, introduced herself, and took the lead in talking to me. That was a pivotal point, and one that leaves me emotional every time I reflect on the birth. I would start losing control, and she would bring me back. Every time she instructed me to do something, I would re-focus, and simply reply ‘yes, ma’am!’

Ultimately the midwife gave up her spot for the attending doctor(?), and I couldn’t understand where she was going. Feeling desperate, I quickly made up my mind: That’s right, I get to be selfish…she cannot leave! I called out, ‘where’s the midwife?’ three times in rapid fire, and as I turned my head to follow her across the room, I discovered that Amanda was there, already holding my hand! (Until that moment I had not noticed!) The midwife came around and took the other. I had an oxygen mask on, the baby had a fetal heart rate monitor on his head (confirmed after the birth), and I finally came to something quite simple: ‘I’m a little bit scared,’ I said. ‘It’s OK to be scared,’ was their calm response.

Then almost immediately someone asked, ‘Do you feel like pushing?’

I distinctly remember having to think about it before responding. I had not noticed the feeling before, but the answer was ‘yes’ and pushing commenced!

The doctor was preparing to administer a nerve-block. Despite my phobia, it’s possible that I would have been agreeable, but my first reaction was to say, ‘I see a needle…’ not knowing what it was for. One of the nurses quickly responded, ‘she’s afraid of needles!’ The doctor looked surprised, and quickly made it disappear. No discussion. That was the end of that.

After the first push, the ladies told me, ‘you are an excellent pusher’, and that was some terrific encouragement. However, next I remember the midwife saying, in a somewhat serious tone, ‘this baby needs to be born,’ and I was asked once to push in between contractions. Was it his heart rate? Whatever the concerns were, there was no time to discuss, and no time to consider options. I remember wondering: what is going on(?), but at the same time, I was not especially concerned. It seemed that there was only one way this was going to go, and we were doing it. I believe I pushed at least 3, and probably 4, times. With push number 3, I could hear everyone in the room getting excited - the most motivating was my husband - and it was over in a matter of minutes.

I looked over to the area where the baby was being checked. I expected to start crying as soon as I saw him. Afterall, I had spent the past few months getting weepy anytime I saw a newborn on TV. But that’s not exactly what happened. I felt emotional, but I didn’t cry. I just remember seeing his little face, and, despite the earlier heart concerns, had a calm sense that everything was all right. The nurse announced: 8 lbs, 13 oz.

It was at this point that my doctor arrived. I think we all (including her) were disappointed in the timing, but what was there to complain about. The baby was born, seemingly, healthy and in record time. Soon after, we all suddenly realized that the baby was no longer in the room(!). Amanda asked the questions, and my husband went after him. (My husband would later report that our boy was already ‘functioning’ well. When he found the baby, he saw that the nurse tending him had already been pooped and peed on…)

Meanwhile, my doctor took over and finished taking care of me, and I’m glad she did. Now, finally, there was a needle to contend with for the stitches, but she and I had discussed this in my birth plan. She would simply tell me what was going on before she did anything. I stared at the ceiling, fixated on this pink mark in the light fixture, and never took my eyes off it…Amanda kept talking me talking… I was elated, talking about what had had just taken place. I was able to stay calm until the stitching was over.

My husband brought our baby boy back. The baby had a serene look on his round, full face. He had just a little bit of strawberry blond hair, and a red stripe on his nose. Today that red stripe had faded a bit, but the hair is still the same (not much of it). Amanda said, ‘look at the size of those hands…’ and I’ve been loving those big little hands ever since! We attempted his first feeding experience…unsuccessfully, but before we left the hospital he got the hang of it. I spent the next half hour just shaking, stunned, yet so happy. Family showed up, photos were taken, and we all went to postpartum.

The next day we officially named our son, Evan.

**Reconciliation:**

In the reconciliation session with Amanda, she said she wanted to make sure that I wasn’t trauma’d by my chaotic birth event. Only then did I see the circumstances surrounding the birth through someone else’s eyes and understand just how ‘crazy’ it had been. Quite simply, though, I was not trauma’d by it.

On the contrary, I had a deep sense of wonderment and satisfaction, and I felt like the luckiest woman I know. Arriving to the hospital, ready to go, was the best case that I could have imagined. I’ll only admit it now, I had day dreamed about this very set of events, but I never would have bet on any of it.

The heartbeat question:

The external monitor would not have been effective given how far the baby had dropped. Amanda confirmed that there had been an internal monitor in place by the time she arrived. (After she had raced to the hospital, thrown her keys at the valet, and raced upstairs!) Later she would later remark that babies born quickly can also have dips in their heart rate. My husband also heard someone say that the cord had been wrapped around Evan’s neck, but it must have been a fleeting comment. I never heard it. Could that have been the problem? Overall, the concern had been significant at the time, but perhaps it was just a consequence of the birth itself. Who knows? It didn’t matter in the end.

The midwife:

It was at this point that I heard that she invited herself in. At the time, I figured that, naturally, she was asked in, since she was part of the same practice as my doctor. Now, I was in awe. She came in, because she simply sensed my *need*.

At a 2 week follow-up with my doctor, I also made a trip to visit the midwives. I was determined to thank the midwife who invited herself into the room. She wasn’t in, but tearfully, I expressed my gratitude to the ladies there. The following week I ran into her, by chance. When she recognized me, she gave me a strong hug and said, ‘You did a really good job. This boy is lucky to have you for a mom.’ Somehow, I’m not sure that I did anything differently than anyone else, but who was I to argue?

In the same conversation, another woman introduced me to the phrase: maternal-fetal ejection reflex. Again, there was this sense that we had escaped something perilous, when, remarkably, my body short changed the situation by have a baby in a matter of minutes. If it’s true…all I can say is hooray for nature and the human body! Although I’ve been on the internet, I’ll have to ask Amanda more about that one if we ever do this again…

Breast feeding:

Let me put it this way…Thanks, Amanda, for coming by, giving me a hug, telling me to go ahead and take a shower (she would hold the wailing baby Evan), and helping me figure it out.

Overall, I never fail to think about how perfect my birth experience was. Of course, fortunately for us, events and key people fell into place…some on purpose, some by chance. Amanda and I still talk about how my body gave me exactly what I needed, and I couldn’t agree more. The only way to get around my deep fears was a natural childbirth, but I wasn’t ready to commit to that. The only way to commit was to have no choice. Regardless of the scenario, I had gone into the birth with peace, knowing that I had the support I needed.