Veronika Jane Skoda’s Birth Story

December 23, 2010

**Lesley:**

 At about 3:30 p.m. December 22 (five days past Veronika’s due date) I went into early labor. My contractions were mild and came about every 10-20 minutes. This happened the day before, and nothing had come of it, so Martin and I didn’t get over-excited. Instead, we went to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and the Museum of Contemporary Art and enjoyed walking and laboring and admiring the sights. Later on, at home, we had a nice dinner; I touched up my roots, knowing this might be my last opportunity for awhile to groom myself; we had apple pie, watched an episode of *Madmen*, and went to sleep around eleven.

 At 12:30 a.m., I woke up with painful contractions and discovered that my water had broken. I woke Martin, and he started timing the contractions, noting that they were coming fast—every three minutes or so! We text messaged our doula Amanda who suggested a warm bath to slow things down, as I was already having to focus on my breathing to get through the contractions. Amanda came over around 2 a.m., and we decided to take a walk. My contractions remained frequent and strong, but between them I could still have a conversation. We talked about what to expect as labor progressed, and we would stop at every contraction so I could hold onto Martin while Amanda massaged my back and hips and I practiced moaning—breathing was no longer enough to get me through.

 We didn’t make it very far on our walk. We circled a cul-de-sac in about 20 minutes, and then I felt like we should leave for the hospital. Martin was calm through all of this, but he must have been hiding his nervousness, because we realized halfway to the hospital that he had forgotten our bag of baby gear—clothes, baby book, nail clippers, etc. Meanwhile, my contractions were growing steadily more intense. I sat behind Martin in the backseat, and he would reach back and hold my hand as I moaned through each one. When we got to the hospital, there was some confusion about valet parking. (It was 3:30 a.m., and the valet guys were nowhere to be found.) This was the only point at which I grew impatient and a bit panicked and snapped at Martin and Amanda. An orderly helped me into a wheelchair and took me up to Labor and Delivery while Martin and Amanda tried to figure out what to do with the cars. Amanda caught up with me quickly, and I cried all the way up to the unit. It was really hitting home that I was going to have this baby tonight, and I was pretty overwhelmed!

 Martin found us in the delivery room, where I was attached to a fetal heart monitor and was struggling to find a position in which the contractions would be less painful. He had stowed the car, but he left our bag of clothes and snacks in it. Oops! Another sign of the soon-to-be dad’s nervousness.

The midwife Titi wasn’t there when we arrived, and she took awhile to show up. (It turns out she hadn’t gotten the page, so we didn’t see her until about 4 a.m.) We were fine though; Amanda and the nurse guided Martin and me through contractions and positions, and time just flew by. I was deep inside myself at this point just trying to pull through. The worst part was getting on the toilet for my hourly pee. The pressure and loosening of muscles on the toilet made my contractions extra intense—this was a good thing, of course, but I definitely dreaded toilet time!

 When Titi arrived, she did a vaginal exam and found that I was fully effaced and six or seven centimeters dilated. She put me in the tub with jets, and it was there that I worked through transition. I was pretty much in a meditative state with Martin and Amanda watching over me, rubbing my arms and legs and telling me how well I was doing. I don’t know how long I spent in the tub, but Martin left at some point to get food (it must have been around 5:30 a.m.). I didn’t even notice he had left. He told me later that on his way out that Titi encouraged him to eat and re-energize because she figured I would have the baby at 10 a.m. at the earliest but probably closer to noon. I am so glad I didn’t know this, because I would have found the news highly discouraging. The contractions were excruciating, and I asked for an epidural. Titi reminded me, however, why I had chosen to do this naturally and how good it was for my baby, and so I pressed on.

 I got out of the bathroom and moved back to the bed. Titi examined me again, and now I was nine centimeters dilated. I settled at the edge of the bed for awhile to labor some more. During these especially painful contractions, I would moan, “No-o-o-o”, and Titi would say, “Yes, yes, yes.” I sat on Amanda’s lap and hung on to the edge of the bed and contracted there, soon telling her and Titi that I felt like I could push. I was doing some pushing when Martin returned. He was surprised by my progress as it was only about six a.m.! I sat on his lap and pushed for awhile (mostly little, tentative pushes), and then Titi suggested I get up on the bed for some serious pushing. (Amanda would have preferred that I take advantage of gravity, but I wanted the bed. I was very tired.)

 I must have pushed on the bed for another 45 minutes. It felt like an eternity, as I held my breath and pushed with all my might. I was so very tired, and it was frustrating that the baby’s head would appear and then go back in. My perineum needed to stretch, of course, and this slow progress was important, but I was ready to be done. Martin says that I got very tired and had some unproductive pushes. I remember at this point feeling like there must be some other way to get this baby out and wracking my brain for a solution. I didn’t come up with one, so I redoubled my pushing efforts! It was so helpful to have Martin, Amanda, Titi, and the nurses encouraging me. It was great to hear Martin say, “Wow!” and describe the baby’s progress as she crowned. His reactions were highly motivating.

The baby was finally born at 7:39 a.m. Her head came out and then the rest of her in a rush of warmth and a huge relief of pressure. Martin caught her and placed her on my stomach. He also cut the umbilical cord, and I kept saying, “She’s so warm! She’s so warm!” And to Amanda, “It’s over! I’m so relieved.” As the baby nurse tended to Veronika, I delivered the placenta, and Titi stitched me up. I only had a first degree tear which is amazing since the baby’s head was about four centimeters larger than average!

We spent the next 30 or so hours on the post partum unit recovering and getting to know Veronika Jane. My body had been through so much, and I was in awe of its power. Giving birth naturally was the most extraordinary experience of my life. I feel like I can do anything now. And my daughter is absolutely perfect. Martin and I are content as can be.

**Martin:**

I woke to Lesley shuffling her blankets and rearranging her pillows. She was more forceful with her bedding than usual, but I knew she was increasingly frustrated with being so big. It was hard for her to get comfortable while lying down, and she woke often to reposition herself in bed. She’ll wake me if she needs something, I thought, and then she nudged me and called my name. She was having contractions that were painful like nothing she had felt before.

While on the phone with Amanda, we got a bath ready so that Lesley had a comfortable place to labor. We thought we had it under control and that we didn’t need Amanda right away, but Amanda sensed otherwise and announced that she was coming over. I was relieved to have her at our house. Together we soon headed out for a brief walk in our neighborhood. After about 15 minutes, Lesley was ready to go to the hospital.

My focus was so much on Lesley and her efforts in labor that I wasn’t thinking clearly about the stuff that we had planned to take with us. The stuff that I did not forget at home I then forgot in the car after parking at the hospital. I was very apologetic for these lapses and was relieved that Lesley was not mad.

At about 5:30 am I left Lesley, laboring painfully and yet trancelike among the water jets of the tub. I thought I had told Amanda what I was doing, but if I said anything it was obviously incoherent. I expected Lesley to labor in the tub as she had been for a while and Titi said there were a few hours still before she expected the baby, so I had time to get away and recharge.

As an aside, when we first visited St. Luke’s it seemed like the place revolved around the McDonald’s. Whenever we asked for directions from anyone, they always referenced the McDonald’s, like all roads led from there. This just heightened the irony of the McDonald’s being in the hospital in the first place. At 5:30 am there was only one other person in line ahead of me. I ate with my mind too tired to contemplate what was going on upstairs, and I slurped coffee hoping that it would revive me.

When I returned to the room I was shocked to witness a completely different scene from the one I left. Lesley was sitting in Amanda’s lap in a supported squat and pushing! I had missed the transition and now found myself out of place. I had to step it up now. I had to find the energy and a place for myself in amongst the action. Ultimately I took Amanda’s lead and did as she did. Within the hour I was in her place with Lesley in a supported squat on my lap.

The end of the labor was amazing. I am so proud of Lesley for her accomplishment! She pushed with energy I didn’t think she had. I imagined that I would be reserved and shy to show my emotions during the labor, but I couldn’t help but express my amazement, which grew as more and more the head revealed itself. I wanted Lesley to use my enthusiasm as energy for more pushing. At one point, nearing the end, it was obvious that Lesley was tiring. A set of pushes produced no further progression. Amanda and I went momentarily silent. I was concerned that Lesley had nothing left. But Amanda coaxed me into encouraging Lesley anew and on the next three contractions Lesley showed vigor I had not seen from her before. She wanted that baby out so badly. She was ready to leave every last vestige of energy on that table. In fact, her last push was so strong that Titi had to yell at her to stop. I thought she was so focused on straining herself that she would not be able to respond, but she was so in sync with Titi (and the rest of us with her), that her reaction was immediate. Titi instructed that Lesley push with light coughing like pushes and that was all that was needed to get Veronika the rest of the way out.

We had written into the birth plan that I would catch the baby, but now in the heat of the moment I didn’t know how to request it. I am grateful that Amanda asked if I wanted to catch her and cut the umbilical cord so that all I had to say was, “Yes”. I placed my hands at Lesley’s perineum in the same way a football player might receive a pass. A crown of fine dark hair had emerged, and then suddenly a face popped out. The rest of the body slipped rapidly out into my hands. I lifted her as directed onto Lesley’s stomach and stared in awe. That moment in time quickly evaporated as the midwife and nurses got down to their duties of invigorating the baby and aspirating her mouth and nostrils.

Lesley called to have the baby turned up towards her. Watching her see her baby for the first time was another magical moment.

Next up was the umbilical cord. I was given the same type of scissors that I use when I teach dissection in school. The cord was muscular and tough and I was nervous about making a clean cut. A bit of blood spurted, and it was done.

Lesley:

I held and nursed Veronika for a few minutes, and then Martin took her to the scale to be weighed. At that moment, she pooped on his shirt. Martin didn’t mind, though, because he had another shirt…in the car.