**Ashley, Jason and Eleanor…A Birth Story**

The birth of our daughter began October 16th after a long night of relentless Braxton Hicks contractions which kept me from sleeping well. I’d had these contractions fairly regularly as early as 30 weeks and was therefore not thinking that they were the start of labor. I’d had my 39 week appointment the previous day with my midwife, and my cervical exam revealed 1 cm dilation and 50% effacement. I left the appointment thinking it would certainly be another week.

I stayed home from work on the 16th to avoid all the illness in the office. I’d received a note from the midwives requesting my absence from work for just this reason. I was happy to know that I’d have a week or so at home to rest, mentally prepare, and ultimately enjoy the last days of quiet. I’d planned to use the days away from work to do some cooking and freezing of meals so we’d have defrostable dinner options when baby comes. That morning I noticed more Braxton Hicks contractions that felt fairly menstrual at times. I’d been having new aches and pains for days which kept me wondering, “Is this labor?” I decided to go about my plans and ran to the grocery stores. When I returned I called Jason at work just to let him know I felt a little different. This was around 12:30 pm. I started timing the contractions to see if they were regular in any way. They came 10 minutes apart, 8, 6, 7, 8, 10. Jason came home which I hadn’t requested or expected. I called our doula, Amanda Moore, to run the idea of labor by her. She said that early labor could certainly be here and that contractions were commonly irregularly spaced at this point. She encouraged me to take a nap since I’d been out and about and then eat some protein, all to prepare me for the work ahead of me.

I attempted to nap at 3:00, but the contractions evolved from menstrual to mildly painful and 4 minutes apart. After 30 minutes, it was clear I would not achieve a nap. I moved to a warm bath by 3:30 and ate a fish taco that Jason had brought me for protein. Amanda arrived around 5:00 and sat by my side while Jason packed the car and prepped the house for a few nights away. Contractions were becoming more painful, and I had to begin focused breathing through them. The bathtub became uncomfortable quickly and Amanda and I decided to head out for a walk to keep things changing and progressing. We walked slowly around the block stopping to squat during contractions which required some deep breathing and lasted about 50 seconds. They were 3 minutes apart. Jason joined us for a second lap around the block. We walked slowly, told stories, and laughed, all punctuated by contractions which required me stop, squat, and breathe deeply. The stories kept us laughing and in high spirits: stories about my uncle’s self-photography, my broken arm in Guatemala, etc. We passed a few people during the walk. I had a distinct awareness that these people must really be wondering what’s going on with me. As we walked up the front porch at the end of the walk, our new neighbors across the street waved just as I squatted down for a contraction. I had been told that the woman was expecting a few weeks after me.

When we returned to the house, we thought I should try some time on a birthing ball. I used this time to call my midwives to tell them what was happening. Theodora was on call and we talked long enough for me to endure three contractions, each of which required me to set down the phone and groan deeply. Amanda was thinking that I had moved into active labor. Theodora felt differently. My strong recovery between contractions led her to believe I was in early labor. Apparently a woman would not be able to bounce back into conversation between contractions in the active labor phase. Theodora instructed me to call her in an hour to update her on my progress or to call if we felt we needed to head to the hospital. I felt a little disappointed at the prospect of being in early labor still. Amanda encouraged Jason and me to get in a hot shower to make me more comfortable. I hugged Jason and let the hot water run on my back. During each contraction I hung down from Jason’s neck and let him bear my weight. My legs began to shake and tremble and I had to return to squatting. Amanda, Jason, and I discussed heading to the hospital. At this point it was about 6:00 and Jason and Amanda were aware of the rush hour traffic we would be in. I had been told that I would instinctively “know” when to head to the hospital. Despite the pain of the contractions, I felt that it would be more intense and that it would be clear to me. I was unsure. We decided to head to the hospital anyways, knowing well that it was rush hour.

Once in the car, I started to think we had delayed too long. My contractions were at a new level of intensity. Amanda reminded me during each one to moan deeply and breathe them out while relaxing my birthing muscles. I needed the reminder every time. Between contractions I noticed the slow moving traffic and the sluggish progress on the route towards the hospital. I also caught Jason’s eyes in the rearview. I could tell he was worried about me. I told Amanda and Jason that I was feeling lots of pressure and was really worried about the baby being born before we got to the hospital. Amanda assured me that this would not happen and continued to provide me with calm reassurance and reminders to moan deeply, relax my body, and let the labor progress. Once we were in the Rice U/ Medical Center area, I felt a pop followed by immediate warm wetness. My water breaking definitely worried me. I knew Jason was driving as quickly as possible. We pulled up to the emergency drive of the hospital. Amanda helped me out of the car into a wheelchair. Jason waited to deal with valet. Unfortunately, we were wrong about the valet option. Jason had to drive to another location in order to valet the car. I was very worried that he would be away for too long. At this it was roughly 6:45. Amanda stayed with me all the way to the labor room. I remember a few looks I got along the way when I had to belt out a loud groan and scream with a contraction. Once in the room I was immediately helped out of my soaked clothes into a hospital gown. Jason was still absent. This was my biggest concern. Theodora had not yet arrived, and a nurse checked my cervix. I was 10 cm. Laboring at home had served us well.

Jason arrived and I felt a huge sense of relief. He stood by my side and I buried my head in his legs with each contraction. Theodora prepared some glycerin to help with perineal stretching. I also met Winny, our labor and delivery nurse. Amanda was close by as well. I was told to get on my back and with the next contraction hold my knees, tuck my chin to my chest, and push. Pushing did not feel obvious. I questioned if I was pushing correctly, and if I was pushing at all. Amanda took over supporting one of my knees and Winny the other. Jason moved down near Theodora to watch the birth of our baby. With each contraction I tried to push, still doubting my success. When offered to see my baby’s head emerging, I declined. I felt a strong need continue focusing. I had a three or four more contractions and was encouraged to relax after each allowing her head to slowly stretch my perineum. One more push and I felt some relief. Her head was born. I heard a short quiet cry. Next push and her shoulders and the rest of her were free. Jason caught her. She was immediately placed on my chest and a blanket draped over us. She was pink, warm, and quiet. We let her cord pulse until it was done. Jason cut the cord. It felt very surreal. I couldn’t believe our baby was here. Amanda helped Eleanor at my breast. I was filled with amazement at the success of the labor that we had prepared for and thought about for so long. We had given our daughter the best start to life that we could. We could not have asked for a better birth.