

Aloe Elise's Birth Story

Prologue

Embracing the fact that birth is a natural process and should not be treated as a medical problem, Andy and I were happy to find the midwifery model of prenatal care in Baton Rouge at the Oschner Clinic. Our experiences with each of the three midwives, Bethanie, Kathy, and Colleen, were simply wonderful. Each had her own personality that came through in our discussions at each appointment, and all were thoughtful and knowledgeable. My pregnancy was free of complications and I enjoyed swimming and doing yoga almost daily throughout the nine months. In addition to movement and exercise, the plentiful fresh fruits (particularly strawberries, peaches, and blueberries) at the farmer's market in my second and third trimester helped me stay positive and healthy.

Labor Story

It had been a long weekend of start and stop labor signs, including contractions that would be regular for hours only to then turn erratic again, spotting, and menstrual-like cramping. On the morning of Monday June 29, however, I woke up and told myself that our little girl would come when she was ready but dwelling on when it would be wasn't going to make her come any faster. In fact, it was making me anxious and a little depressed. After I awoke, I went for a walk, ate a good breakfast, went swimming for over an hour, relaxed around the house, and then went to 5:30 yoga. Throughout the day I'd had hours of consistent contractions every 6 minutes, particularly noticeable during swimming and yoga, but I told myself that this was still just part of early labor and could last another week or more. We ate a late dinner of broccoli and baked potatoes and started to get ready for bed. Because of some new pressure that accompanied the contractions, I did some pelvic rocking on our big blue bouncy exercise ball before and after dinner. As 1am drew near the contractions got stronger and we decided it was probably time to pack our hospital bag.

*****Interlude One*****

Andy and I attended childbirth education classes taught by doula and childbirth educator Rene' Johnson of Birthhelp in Baton Rouge. The four hour classes were held on three consecutive Saturday mornings and were small—only 7 couples—which allowed for a more intimate atmosphere. These classes were wonderful preparation for a natural childbirth; they combined education about understanding, negotiating, and/or declining medical interventions with confidence, as well as unmedicated comfort measures for pain during labor. We compiled a list of comfort aids to pack in our hospital bag, including: a massage tool, lotion, lavender lotion and oils, magazines, an ipod and speakers, a photograph of Aloe's nursery, a photograph of my sister Elise and me, a photograph of Andy and me on our honeymoon in the Redwoods, a copy of the yoga teacher-student prayer, a series of colorful flashcards with relaxation words and visual cues, sour suckers, vegan jerky, granola bars, an aromatherapy shoulder wrap, crayons, and a journal.

Around 2am Andy suggested I run the water for a warm jacuzzi bath. He called my mom and our doula Rene' to give an update. We were both pretty sure that this was real! I was very vocal and trying hard to concentrate on using my breath for Aloe. I was starting to think that we should leave—and I was pretty grumpy because of the pain that was quickly concentrating in my back—but as Andy reminded me, we planned to stay home until the contractions were closer to 3 minutes apart, so I continued to move around in the bath or on the birth ball for a bit longer. The pain in my back was quickly becoming excruciating and despite my downright snappy attitude, Andy pushed on my back through every contraction. Around 4:45 we finally left; by this time I was definitely feeling my body and Aloe's will to be born with full force.

We arrived at the Baton Rouge General and met Rene' at the front door. After filling out paperwork (not very fun to do while negotiating the ebbs and flows of pain) and getting a room (which was apparently pretty lucky—just one day prior women were laboring in the hallway because of a lack of rooms!) a nurse did an exam and hooked me up to an external monitor before allowing us to officially be checked in. I had 100% effacement and -2 station, but was only 2cm dilated. My contractions were increasing in intensity, particularly in my back, so lying on my back in the bed wasn't the most comfortable or preferable of positions. After the nurse left the room, I got off the bed and started swaying to get through the intensity, but the stupid external monitor kept sliding down (the least of my concerns) so the nurse kept coming in and trying to re-tighten it to keep it in place. This particular nurse didn't seem to be keen on letting us stay with me at only 2cm and truly, the idea of going home was not an idea that I was willing to entertain. In fact, this unpleasant nurse, the idea of getting kicked out, and the unexpected force of my contractions all contributed to a sense of panic that made this beginning of labor the hardest. Additionally, Jackie arrived with the birth tub, but was not allowed to set it up yet because I wasn't officially given the word that we'd be sticking around. This was a little discouraging too. Around this time someone told me that I was experiencing back labor and that this little fact was why the pain was so passionate— a revelation that actually put things into perspective for me. If I could work with movement and breath to get her to turn over, the intensity would likely subside. I kept that idea in the back of my head.

Shift change! An absolutely lovely new nurse, Dodi, started her shift and cared for us in a truly flexible, mother/baby-centered way. At some point, midwife extraordinaire Kathy Hill came in and did an exam which allowed me to stay and be officially admitted. ☺ Finally we could get the birth tub set up! While it was being filled with water, I mainly stayed in the shower with hot water raining on my back in a cat/cow position (on all fours) trying to rock back and forth. This wasn't the most comfortable of positions because of the fiberglass floor and small shower space, but the warmth of the water helped tremendously. Andy was absolutely incredible throughout all of the back labor—he pushed on my back as hard as he could from about 2am until at least 11am. He helped me concentrate on breathing with soft words and demonstrated deep breaths. He has since said that it was extremely hard to watch me in such agonizing pain, particularly because neither of us expected it. My mom was also amazing; she led me in chanting “om” which helped me to concentrate and work to glide through the contractions—though the rounded mouthed “oms” often turned into deep, guttural “mmms.”

Finally the tub was filled and I slowly crawled over, pausing during contractions, to get in. The warm water felt amazing and I immediately felt my body relax a little bit. The next few hours were spent in the cat/cow position, propping myself up with my arms, doing pelvic circles with the hope of luring Aloe into an anterior position. Despite frequent gulps of water and apple juice, I was growing very tired and started to fall asleep in between contractions for a minute at a time. I should note that by this stage, it was clear that I would not be utilizing the crayons and paper, or eating any of the snacks we packed; in fact I never had a moment to even think about all the comfort goodies we thoughtfully packed in our hospital bag! Andy was concerned about unnecessary energy expended because I was holding myself up on my arms so he kept encouraging me to lean on the railing of the tub. My mom kept putting cool wash rags on my face and forehead, which felt wonderful though I had stopped vocalizing much of anything some time ago. Besides the warmth radiating from my husband and the tender caring pouring from my mom, the other thing that got me through these strong contractions was looking to a photograph taken of my sister Elise and I, posed in the backyard of our house when she was in middle school and I was in high school.

******Interlude Two******

Four and a half years apart, Elise and I had a sweet sisterly relationship. She looked up to me as her big sister and I looked to her to keep me grounded with her love of life and amazing ability to brush worries away. Eight years ago, when she was just 14, she died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. The pain of losing her will never subside, it only changes shape, but throughout my pregnancy I have felt a special presence from her that has been unshakeable. So intense were the feelings sometimes that I had to remind myself that she actually wasn't in the room after all. During these nine months, it was as if all the anxiety that had built up in me since her death—anxiety about my own death, or fear of the death of my parents and Andy—had just slowly unraveled, like a tree shedding its leaves in late fall. Eventually, just before I went into labor, I started to make peace with the beauty of life rather than only focusing on the fragility of it. I took this feeling, this focus on the beauty of life, into the labor room with me, and I was reminded of it each time I looked at the photograph of my sister and I.

After a few hours in the tub, Rene' suggested that I get out, possibly get an exam to see where I was, and move around a bit. Kathy came in to check on me, took one look and said that she thought I was holding back, but that I could do this. I had expanded to about 4cm but the magnitude of my contractions was more like I was transitioning. I sat on the toilet for awhile, rocking and doing more pelvic circles. Around this time, Rene' suggested that at some point we might want to discuss rupturing the membranes to move things along a bit more. I was pretty terrified of this, remembering the meat hook-looking thing that was passed around in childbirth class, and looked to Andy to help me process this decision. Up to this point, I never really had a moment to consider interventions or medication, I was just trying to move forward through each sensation, to feel each experience and either fight it or work through it. As I was fretting over whether or not to concede to an intervention (after all, if my doula suggested it then maybe there was something that I should be worried about?) Andy put his hand on my thigh and gave me a reassuring look—a look that said that he was concerned but was there for me and that we would get through it all just

fine. After all, we had gotten through the 6+ hours of back labor together! Then Kathy came in the room and I squeaked out “are you going to talk to me about rupturing my membranes and the meat hook?” She said that my membranes were bulging in the last exam and I should maybe get up off the toilet, put on a robe, and walk the halls a little bit. Everything was happening so fast—each sensation of the contractions was like a steep mountain peak. Dodi and Andy helped me get a robe on, but I quickly doubled over and sat right back down on the toilet....then....a big gush. I knew it was my water finally breaking.

Moments after it was confirmed that yes, my water had broken, I got back in the tub only to be greeted with an immediate feeling to need to take a bowel movement. I expressed this to Andy and my mom, Dodi and Rene’ and they asked if I felt like I needed to push. Indeed it did feel like that, but I was more concerned about taking a bowel movement in the tub! Little time to be too concerned with that though, because then I started to experience my body taking charge in a way I have never experienced. Like a gentle separation of body and mind, my body began to contract, convulse, and push all on its own, in a calm but determined manner. As if push was the magic word, all of a sudden Kathy appeared and a number of other nurses started to appear too—I was aware of their presence but I certainly wasn’t overwhelmed by it; instead I was in my own world of sensation. Kathy and Rene’ encouraged me to go with the pushes until all of a sudden someone said that I needed to get out of the tub. Apparently I was bleeding a bit and they wanted to get a handle on where the bleeding was coming from and make sure everything was okay. Going from the warmth and comfort of the tub to the sterility of the bed wasn’t really the most comfortable of transitions, particularly because I was now on my back. But honestly, I wasn’t complaining either; my mind was no longer concerned with my own comfort. For the next 45 minutes I pushed our daughter into the world. There was a quick learning curve about how to push; I was lucky to be surrounded by people who were cheering me on and supporting me with their words, looks, and touches. I had a hard time understanding what it meant to “bear down” – a phrase that kept being thrown out to me. Finally, someone said “just imagine pushing downwards rather than outwards,” which really helped me visualize the process.

At some point, Kathy said “reach down and feel your baby” but I couldn’t really feel anything tangible, so they placed a mirror so that I could see her coming out. While the mirror helped a little, the most beautiful and inspiring image in front of me was actually watching Andy’s face. The dozens of emotions displayed on his face and radiating through his body to his shaking hands both calmed me and motivated me. With each push, her head would come a little bit further and Andy would light up in awe, and each time she retracted back inside of me he looked at me in such a loving and supportive way that I felt confident and strong. Despite being in a hospital, on a bed, surrounded by about 7 people, it was as if Andy, Aloe, and I were the only ones in the world. With the next big push, Andy said “her head” and I again pushed as hard as I could, using visualization and vocalization, until I felt a gush of warm liquid and heard the most beautiful cry in the world. Andy placed our daughter on my chest and shielded her eyes from the light with his big hands. With tears of happiness in her eyes, my mom cut our baby’s umbilical cord. Our daughter had such big eyes and a precious little mouth eager to latch on to my breast. At 1:50pm on Tuesday June 30, 2009, Aloe Elise was finally here, lovingly birthed into her new family.