

## The Gift of Motherhood after Trauma

### A Birth Story

I write this holding my sleeping 7 week old son in my arms; giving birth to him was one of the most beautiful, empowering, fulfilling, and self-giving experiences of my life. I did not know that a little person could embody so much love. My husband and I love our son and at the same time, this little boy represents my husband's love for me and my love for him. We have become a family in the truest and richest sense of the word. I had hoped for children and a family, but I feared it also. You see, I come from a broken home; a place where children were not wanted by adults who did not want themselves; abandonment, rejection, abuses of all kinds. I had to overcome my fears to embrace my future.

There was a time in my life when I believed the lies of shame from my past. I believed that if I ever told a man the abuses I had endured, he would see me as worthless and reject me; then I met my husband and he loved me, and I realized I had no idea what love actually was because I'd never experienced it before. He was willing to wait to have sex until we got married; he respected me. After we got married and the flashbacks of trauma affected our intimacy and woke me with nightmares, he held me; he told me my abuse wasn't my fault; he drove me to therapy; he helped me prosecute my abusers; he protected me; he loved me and he gave me a new life.

Despite all this, I had trouble approaching pregnancy. There was trauma. I went to therapy. I was charting my cycle and when my fertile days came, I would be filled with fear; terrifying, debilitating fear. My therapist helped me to realize that I was projecting my abuser onto my husband. The message from my abuse was that if I became pregnant something terrible would be done to me. If I wanted to move forward, I was going to have to surrender to vulnerability and trust that I would be ok; to trust my husband, my midwife, the hospital, my body and most of all myself.

Six weeks after talking with my therapist about surrendering to trust, we were pregnant. I had braved vulnerability and reaped the greatest reward; a brand new little life was growing inside me. I knew right away that I wanted a natural birth. I feared losing control of my body and struggled thinking about being numb and immobile from an epidural or having people "handle" my body. It was the next step, and I knew for the health of my baby and myself, I was going to have to continue facing my fears and owning my truth about my abuse and how it could affect my delivery.

I wanted to give birth with a midwife at home or at a birth center. I knew I would need consistent care from a female provider I could develop a trusting relationship with. I needed a safe, calm environment. I needed someplace I could relax and focus on labor instead of being hypervigilant about my safety. I have Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from my abuse and my biggest fear was that something or someone in the birth environment would trigger me and I would go into flight, fight or freeze mode. I was so worried I would miss the joy of my son's birth caught up in the unrelenting grip of a trauma trigger. If you are one of the 1 in 4 women who has experienced sexual trauma, then you may be relating right now. You are not alone in your fears or your concerns. Through speaking my truth, I was able to share my concerns and get the type of trauma informed care I needed.

At Western Wisconsin Health, I found caring compassionate midwives who listened to my concerns, answered my questions honestly and who above all cared about me, my son, and my place in the birthing process. They believed in me and my body's ability to bring my son into the world and they

helped me believe in myself. The midwives and nursing staff helped to ensure I was safe and secure in the birthing environment. They listened to me; they respected me; and ultimately, my son's birth was a tremendously healing experience.

In the wee hours of the morning, I awoke with what I could only assume were the slightest of contractions; after timing them, I realized they were coming consistently every 30 minutes. I was excited. I was a week and a half overdue and I wanted that baby to come on his own. Fearing induction, I had gone to my chiropractor, had sex with my husband, and done the inversion exercises from birthing class. My birth plan was written and my bag packed. Like a slow boil, labor was starting. By 10am, contractions were 15 minutes apart. Early labor was manageable. I was still working around the house, determined to keep myself busy and laboring at home as long as possible. A contraction would come and I'd brace myself against a counter or doorway, breath through it and then it would be gone again. I soon learned that labor was rhythmic, designed to be manageable, and designed to give me a break in the in-between time. I could handle that; knowing it would pass; knowing there would be time to recover before the next contraction.

I don't like eating when I'm in pain, but I worked on oatmeal and Sunny-D. I called the birth center and my doula to let them know, and the day passed. By 11pm, I starting having bloody show and my contraction were 5 minutes apart. I was determined to stay home till they were 3 minutes apart, so I texted my doula; with her beautiful guidance, I started my sojourn through the night doing lunges in my bedroom and knee lifts on the toilet. At this point, I wasn't chatting with my husband or doing house work. These contractions required my attention. I spoke affirmations to myself, visualized the ocean, rocked in our nursery rocking chair, and showered. I moaned. I promised myself I'd get a break between the contractions and the break always came. I could trust my body.

Around 5am, everything began to slow. I'd been waiting all night for my contractions to speed up and here I was going in what felt like the opposite direction. Fearing my labor was stalling, I starting making plans with my doula. Should I go to the hospital? I started doubting myself. Was birth as close as I'd thought? Had I been mistaken? Was this some sort of long pre/false labor? Was I even in labor anymore? I was in labor and my body knew what it was doing. My intuition told me I needed to get someplace safe to deliver my baby. I was in fact in the "Rest and Relaxation" phase of transition. I would find out upon arrival at the birth center that I was fully dilated. My night work was done and it was time to move my son through the birth canal.

My doula met me at the door of the hospital. I could feel contractions stirring as I waddled my way into the birth center. I could feel my breathing getting short. My midwife met me inside; I was relieved and happy to see her. The room was perfect, the nurse was kind, and my husband was by my side; I was someplace safe to have my baby. My doula sited my belly with a scarf, while I positioned myself on all fours, to get labor started again. My body began, and soon enough contractions were coming regularly. Around 11am, my midwife asked if I could feel my baby's head. I reached down and sure enough high in my vagina was my baby. The surge of excitement that went through my body when I felt my baby was indescribable. He was real and I was making progress. This was really happening.

As the afternoon wore on, my labor intensified. The labor sling became my best friend. I leaned in it forward and rested my head on a pillow on the bed; it gave me relief and leverage. The sling helped support my body and helped me focus my energy. At one point, I thought I would abandon the sling and try all fours on the bed. For me, all fours on the bed transitioned my labor pain from my front to my

back. I've had back injuries in the past and the pain was unbearable. I had to stay on my feet and keep my labor pain in the front. I went from there to the shower. From the shower, I thought I'd try the tub. The same thing happen in the tub; my labor transitions to my back. I cried to get out. I had to stay on my feet. Back to the sling; my new best friend and labor tool. I positioned myself in the sling, so I could look out the window. This was March and there were snow covered trees in my view. I imagined myself pulling my son in a little red sled. As my body continued to labor, I added things to the visualization in my mind. Pretty soon my husband and I and little boy were out cutting a Christmas tree. I hung on to those thoughts and focused on those trees as each contraction came and went.

By 6pm, my son's head was a fingertip away from the opening of my vagina. I did not feel an urge to push like I thought I would. I hadn't lost control of my body like I feared either. My body had been diligently and safely moving my baby through the birth canal. The pain was intense, but I was safe. Safe in the sling, my visualization, the kind hands of the nurse who asked permission to touch me, and the hawk eyed experience of my midwife. I had spent the afternoon deeply moaning and shouting "no" at the contractions because it was fun to think I could tell the pain off.

Now it was time to push. I had written "un-coached pushing" in my birth plan, but that was changing and that was ok. I needed direction. I'd never done this before and my body knew what I didn't know; what I thought was an 8 pound baby was in fact a nearly 11 pound baby. My body was making a way in its own time and direction. I asked my midwife where and how to push. With my permission, she put her fingers inside me where the baby's head needed to go. It took me a handful of contractions to coordinate the pushing with my muscles and the location. It was hard for me to feel. As I began to feel the strength of my body, I pushed and pushed. I was moving my baby. He would be here soon. Pushing was empowering, painful, breathtaking, and exhilarating all at the same time.

I started feeling "the burn" as my baby's head pushed at the opening of my vagina. I have scar tissue from injuries of abuse. I knew I was in the same location, but this was different. I had the power to make this different. I was in control of my body and this was my baby. This was life-giving pain. This pain was good. This pain had a purpose. I spent a lot of time before therapy and recovery trying to run from or numb my pain, but this time, I could choose to push into the pain; to go through it for myself and for my child. This was self-giving for the sake of love and I was in the driver's seat; so with the next contraction, I pushed into that pain; I pushed and pushed and my baby crowned and I wanted to cry with joy and relief; and with a few pushes more and some help from my midwife, my son was in the world; all brimming 10lb 14oz of him.

I tore. It didn't matter. My new scars are for my child. They are from something given, not taken. I gave birth to my son standing up. I was able to walk from the end of the bed, where I had been leaning in the sling, to lay down and wait for the placenta. The pain was gone. I held my son. He nursed. He looked up at me with his father's eyebrows. We laughed. The birth of my son taught me what my body always knew; my body is beautiful and called to a higher purpose. I was made not to be used but to be loved and to give love.

If you relate to any part of my story; if you've experienced trauma and have fears surrounding pregnancy or birth; if you've never shared your story with anyone; please know that you are not alone. There are others who have experienced similar traumas and fears and there are kind and compassionate people who understand and can help. If you are struggling, please let your birth team know. They will be there for you. Please know with the right tools, there is life and love after trauma and you deserve both.

