

“We drove an hour for YOU!” The 52-hour Journey of our Breech Birth

Here we are...a place I hoped we'd never be... it's 3:30am and time to discuss a hospital transfer...

I've been out of the birthing pool for just over two hours and am laying on our couch wrapped in all the towels and blankets we could find. I'm freezing cold and shivering as I hear my midwife say, "It's time to discuss the options". We had previously selected a specific hospital for transfer - if needed - but that no longer seems to be our best option so we run down a list of nearby hospitals. The house suddenly turns into a command center. Both of my midwives and my doula are walking around the 1st floor of our townhouse calling hospitals to see who is on-call and how they will handle my case.

You see...I'm breech. Well, my baby is breech and I've been in labor for 48 hours now. I'm seven centimeters and entering transition as we decide to make the transfer. All the nearby hospitals say they will do an automatic C-section if I'm brought in but I don't want a C-section...I know I can deliver my baby vaginally even with a breech presentation. The midwives begin calling OBs directly. They know of one female OB in the area that will allow moms to deliver vaginally for breech presentations but she says she won't take me because it's my first baby. The odds are against me. It isn't looking like I'll be able to deliver vaginally after all. I've worked so hard these past two days to get to where I am and can't believe I'll have to be cut. The feelings of defeat begin to set in. There is one more possibility though. It's a male OB that is in another county. It's an hour drive to get to him. We make the call and wake him. I'm not expecting him to say anything different than the others but within a few minutes my midwife enters my living room and says, "He'll take you! I told him you were breech and wanted to deliver vaginally and he said to bring you in." Thank you God! Off we go...

It's after 4am and my midwife is driving at the head of the pack. We're on the Florida Turnpike with a general idea of where the hospital is. We're relying on her memory for what exit to take. My husband is driving me and my parents are following us. Behind them is my doula. It's a four-car caravan in the middle of the night driving north for my last chance to deliver our baby naturally.

Surprisingly, I remember most of the drive. My pain is more intense and constant than it has been. I'm shivering cold and telling my husband to turn off the a/c one minute and taking everything off and asking for the a/c colder the next. I can't get comfortable. I ask him to slow down. Each and every bump makes the contractions all the more difficult to manage. I'm screaming in pain. I'm in and out of sleep the entire ride.

My parents must think I'm crazy. I didn't prepare them for this. They don't know that there's plenty of time before the baby arrives. They must be scared that I'll have the baby in the middle of the road. I had told them I'd go to the nearest hospital if I needed a transfer. That hospital is a three-minute drive from my house to the emergency room entrance. But I can't go there. I can't walk in there knowing that I won't be given a chance to birth my baby. I have to make this journey to the one place where I have a shot at a natural birth.

About an hour later we arrive at the hospital and I am admitted. The OB enters my room and does an internal exam to check how I'm doing. I'm still seven centimeters. He then announces, "This is an automatic C-section". In that moment the last bit of hope that I had remaining of delivering my baby naturally disappeared...

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Over forty-eight hours ago my mucus plug released and my contractions started at six minutes apart. I wasn't expecting it to happen like that. I know plenty of women who lose their mucus plug and don't go into labor for days or even a week. I settle into the couch downstairs and keep timing the contractions to be sure this is the real thing before I wake anyone up. It's 4am and I'm certain I'll meet my baby within this day.

Two hours later, my contractions are going strong and are now about four minutes apart. I wake my husband with the good news and text my midwife to give her a heads up. I begin what turns into a marathon of vomiting. My contractions continue. My midwife and doula come by. Halfway through the day I am one centimeter dilated and 100% thinned. Seems unreal but I know better than to let the actual number disappoint me. It could be worse so I take it in as progress.

My midwife leaves to return later in the day. My doula stays. I ride out the contractions sitting on my recliner with my husband on his knees in front of me. The warmth of his hands on my thighs alleviates my pain more than he can understand. I sleep if only for a few seconds between each contraction. My midwife returns. Time passes. I shower. It's nighttime. This should do it. I am more or a night person anyway. I'll feel more relaxed and make good progress once the sun is down and I'm surrounded by darkness. We all spend this first night together as my contractions continue. The TV is on and although I am not focused on it, I am relieved that it is helping the time pass for everyone else. Everyone (except for me) takes a few hours to nap. In the morning, I am three centimeters - progress but a long way to go still. My midwife and doula leave for several hours. My husband is exhausted. I decide to call my mom and ask her to come stay with me while everyone rests. I don't tell her over the phone that I've been in labor for over 24 hours already but she suspects something is going on.

I continue to vomit and feel tremendous strain as I get every bit of liquid bile out of my stomach. The next time I go to the bathroom I see a dark colored discharge that I hadn't seen before. I'm concerned it may be meconium. I call my midwife. My other midwife is closer to my home and gets here quicker to check my discharge. It is meconium. My contractions continue. My mom spends the day with me while I continue to labor. She leaves in the early evening to return later on with my father who stays upstairs without my ever seeing him. Nighttime arrives for a second time as my midwife and my doula return. All are present now along with my husband who was able to get some rest upstairs. They are concerned about the marathon vomiting and are trying to get me to drink and eat as much as I can keep down. I manage to keep down some drinks and miso soup but only temporarily.

My pain is increasing. The sleep I've gotten between each contraction over the last day and a half gives me the stamina to continue. But the pain is increasing and I need to try something else. I ask for my birthing pool. My husband and doula prepare the water. I get in. It is absolutely magical! I am so happy to be in the water. I am so impressed with how much pain relief it provides. I enjoy this stage of my birthing process as much as one can while experiencing the mounting contractions. My contractions intensify and my body temperature begins to fluctuate. This was one of my concerns (the other was fear of having a migraine during labor). As a thyroid cancer survivor, my body's temperature tends to fall lower than normal. I am hot from the birthing pool but my entire body is shivering.

I have been in the birthing pool for some time now and it looks like my midwives feel things are moving along. I hear them preparing for the birth. They start to set up the table with all the birthing supplies they will need when the baby is born. My midwife wants to check me again while I'm still in the water. I am five centimeters. Five centimeters! Five centimeters...unreal. I have the stamina to continue. I'm not giving up. But I become aware of the time. I see that we are about to hit the 48-hour mark. And I start to worry about what that means...

My emotions begin to speak. Internally, I call upon every woman that has ever birthed naturally. I ask for their support, their wisdom, their guidance and their presence. I call upon the spirit world to give me the strength that I need in this moment. I find myself getting upset as I silently scream for help. I hear myself saying, "Where are you?" as if the generations of women birthers had forgotten to come for me. I call on my own birth experience as I was born weighing almost 12 pounds to a five-foot mother who birthed me without drugs or interventions. It's in my genes! I can do this! And as I am going through this catharsis internally, my baby's heart rate starts to rise.

I am no longer in the comfort of the birthing pool. I am cold, wet and shivering wrapped in all the towels and blankets we own laying on the couch as I hear the words I never wanted to hear. "It's time to discuss the options". Options, what options? I don't want options. I want to birth my baby. That's my only option. But I trust my midwife wholeheartedly. She didn't use the words but I know if she is saying this then it really is time to discuss a transfer. And a hospital transfer is what we do at 4:30 in the morning just over 48 hours from the time my contractions started on that early Tuesday morning.

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It's now almost 6am on Thursday morning and my one last chance at a vaginal delivery has just announced that I should be given an automatic C-section. You see my baby is not just breech but a bit transverse. My

water has broken and I have meconium present. I've been vomiting for days and apparently I broke a fever on the drive up. My baby's heart rate continues to reach peaks that are too high and begins to plunge below the norm and let's get real...I've been in labor for two days now and am still at seven centimeters.

As the sound of the word "C-section" rolls off the OB's lips I hear my husband's voice. He's speaking with full certainty and with a clarity that I've never before heard from him. He says to the OB, "We drove an hour for YOU!" My heart stops. My leg kicks my husband. I'm not breathing. I'm thinking, "Shut up!" Such few words but so much is implied. I'm even begin to feel fear. I think it's because I don't want my husband to lose his temper with the OB. I think it's because I don't want this OB to be upset with us since we need him on our side. But the truth is that those words solidified our destiny. What I felt was the power of those words and how in that split second my life took the path that I was born to take...

The OB didn't skip a beat. He said "OK, let's see what she can do" and left the room. He too must have felt the power of those words. By now my concept of time is nonexistent. All I know is that I'm in the hospital room with my husband, midwife and doula. The hospital nurse also comes in and out. She insists I lay on my back. I beg to be able to sit up. My midwife turns me on my side. I'm no longer vomiting but the pain is unbearable. I'm hardly awake. All I remember is darkness and the voices of my birth team. They say I'm doing great but deep inside I am waiting for my C-section. You see I begin to believe that it's over. It's not so much that I believe that I can't do it but I feel the C-section knocking at my door. It's in the air. It's seducing me and I surrender to it - emotionally I give in.

The OB returns and I'm eight centimeters now. I fall back to sleep and don't hear if there is a decision made. More and more time passes as I wait. I'm confused. Why are my husband, midwife and doula encouraging me? Why do they want me to keep bringing my breath and energy down? Why do they want me to keep laboring? Don't they know I'm having a C-section? Don't they feel the devastation that I'm feeling? Aren't they in as much disbelief as I am in? I'm awake for so little time between contractions that I can't ask them why they are saying all those things to me. I remain confused and continue waiting to be taken away to the OR.

I manage to get some words out and ask the infamous "How many more?" referring to contractions. I know there is no answer but I can't help asking. I hear the OB's voice pierce through the darkness "Do you want an epidural?" Before I even get a chance to consider, he says "No? Ok." It's as if he doesn't want me to have one. He asked but wasn't really offering. That's interesting. And why did he say No? Don't I need one for my C-section? I fall back to sleep before I can think this through.

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I'm lying on my left side facing my husband and midwife. They are holding my hand and touching my thigh. I see their faces go blank. I feel the fear that just came over them. I suspect it has something to do with what I just felt. I see them staring at the external monitor - there is no heartbeat. I know what has happened and do my best to get the words out. My baby's heart didn't stop. I look at my midwife and say "I PUSHED! I can't not push! I HAVE to PUSH!"

It was such a divine feeling. My body had to push. It wasn't mental or even physical. It was divine. I was moved by spirit to push. My body knew exactly when and how. It was time for my baby to be born...

Because of the baby's breech position I knew I'd be checked again. Everyone had made it clear that they needed to be certain that I was a full 10 centimeters before pushing to avoid the baby's head getting trapped once the body had come through butt and feet first. A possible complication with breech births since the head is bigger than the body. The hospital nurse checks me but neither my husband nor my midwife feel confident with her so we wait for my OB. My contractions stop and in those moments I feel a rush of life and absolute ecstasy come through me. After all we've been through, after giving in emotionally to a C-section, after more than two days of natural labor...the moment was finally here. I was going to PUSH my baby out!

About seven minutes later, at 7:55am on Thursday morning, I gave birth to a baby boy weighing 5 lbs. 14 ounces and measuring 19 inches long. He was born in front of an audience. Seems that the rumors had spread across the hospital that there was going to be a vaginal delivery of a breech presentation and the

hospital staff wanted to witness something they thought they'd never see. My husband recalls hearing a few of them say "She's going to do it natural? But they didn't teach us natural birth for breech presentations in medical school!" to which he responded, "Watch her do it". And that I did. Our son came out butt cheek, foot and testicle first. A strange sight indeed but a true testament to all that birth can be when allowed to take its natural raw course.

My son is about to turn 1 and is as healthy and as full of life as can be. Over this first year of his life I have come to fully understand the power of those words my husband spoke. Those words that he spoke for me when I couldn't speak them for myself. Those words that set us on course for a natural vaginal delivery when we came as close as one can possibly come to getting a C-section. It was those words that paved the way for me to slip right through the massive "C-section Net" that catches so many of us. It was those very words that saved me. Not just from getting a C-section but also from losing a piece of myself that I know I'd never get back. Had I ended up with a C-section that day an essential piece of me would have died on that operating table. You may not understand but I know I would have lost the very piece that makes me who I am. I would not have been aligned with what I know to be truth. The self-betrayal would have cut so deeply that I would have remained wounded for life far deeper than the scar I would have had on my abdomen. I would have been changed in a way so profoundly that I would not have survived the experience as myself. It would have affected my mothering and it would have affected my marriage. My life would not be as it is. I would not be as I am – as I was born to be.

We live at a time when it's the norm to make people feel comfortable about what happens in their lives. A time when we allow people to feel like they've done everything they possibly can even if things don't go their way. But I feel we do each other a disservice in doing this. I didn't need my birth team to make me feel ok with getting a C-section...I needed them to hold my vision of a natural vaginal birth when I couldn't do it for myself. I needed my husband to speak my truth when I couldn't. I needed to be able to surrender to the devastation of having a C-section at the depths of my inner being while my birth team held my destiny in check so that I could peek out from within the disparity I was feeling and still feel the presence of the possibility of having a natural birth.

We are survivors. With that said, we adapt to what comes our way and make peace with it in order to continue to live. I assume I would have done some form of this had I ended up with a C-section and would today be a profoundly altered version of myself. But in all honesty, I thank my midwives, my doula, my OB, my baby, myself and most of all, my husband, each and every day because I don't have to do that. It is because of this that I know birth. It is because of this that I know birth in the way that I was born to know it. It is because of this that I know myself.

As I prepare for my son's first birthday I feel into the gift my husband and I gave him on his BIRTH-day. I remind myself of what we transmitted to our son with every choice we made and I remind my son to never betray himself as we did not betray ourselves throughout his birthing journey.

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