

My Birth Stories

Adapted from Road to Grace

A memoir by Constance Rock due to be completed in 2011

When I look back, it was really with the birth of my first son that my interest in midwifery began. I wasn't even aware at that time that midwives existed anymore or that home birth was an option. When I became pregnant, shortly after getting married, I did what I thought I was supposed to; I took myself to a doctor. My prenatal exams were quick and I never felt I could ask questions or that I had any kind of connection with my doctor. It didn't feel good, but I didn't know where I could get those needs met, so I acquiesced to the only choice I saw.

I felt isolated; not having any friends with children. Yet when I tried to talk to my mom about what I was experiencing, she wasn't much help; she only remembered feeling great when she was pregnant. So I was on my own to figure it all out. I did have an innate trust in my body to grow a baby and give birth normally. I thank my mom for that. I believe the conversations you grow up with around birth shape your beliefs about it and at least everything my mom had to say was positive.

When my husband and I went to the childbirth classes our hospital offered, I expected to come away knowledgeable about birth, but in actuality, I was left more confused. It seemed as though they made something simple, really complicated. I did enjoy seeing the birth videos even though they made me cry. Then again, everything made me cry when I was pregnant. In the classes they talked about pain medications and I didn't listen to much of what they had to say about that. I had already made up my mind. I wasn't interested in drugs. I couldn't even stand the local anesthesia given during dental work, so I couldn't imagine dealing with anesthesia in labor. I thought labor was going to be hard work; like 'labor' sounds, not painful, but hard. My mother had never talked about labor being painful, so it just wasn't something that entered my mind. I didn't have friends who given birth to dispel that belief either.

Alexander's birth was fast, starting early in the morning on his due date. My labor was only four hours from start to finish, but more than half of it was spent in the car moving at a creeping pace through the morning rush hour traffic. We had moved twenty mile from Northridge to Redondo Beach during my pregnancy, but never thought that changing hospitals might be in our best interest too. I cried for my husband to drive faster. I couldn't wait to get to the hospital; my contractions were so intense and I was so uncomfortable in the car. I naively believed that once I got to the hospital, I would be cared for; nurtured and supported through my labor.

The reality was a shocking disappointment for me. The hospital staff seemed interested in one thing only; their protocols and efficiency. Before I was admitted, a woman at the front desk insisted that I sign a stack of paperwork. I was having contractions every two minutes that were bringing me to my knees. At that point I couldn't even speak. All I could do was moan through them. My husband signed my name on all the documents and I was taken by wheelchair into a room with two other moms who had already delivered and were happily chatting on the phone. I thought their voices would drive me insane. I considered locking myself in the bathroom and hiding there in the dark to get away from the chaos, but a nurse insisted that I put on a blue gown and climb up onto the bed so she could exam me.

All of a sudden, I had two nurses on me at once. One checked my dilation during a contraction while at the same time another one inserted an IV into my vein and my blood pressure was taken on my other arm with an automatic cuff. I was seven centimeters dilated and struggling to cope with the growing intensity of my contractions. Having all of these medical procedures inflicted on me at once without the consideration to wait until I was in between contractions was an outrage to me. My husband tried his best to comfort me; saying soothing sweet things to me, but every bit of input just overwhelmed me more.

I hadn't planned to have any pain medication; I'd already made up my mind about that, but all plans were forgotten; I was so out of control at that point. I thought I was going to die; how could anyone survive this much pain? I begged for them to stop; to make the pain stop. I lost all tract of the fact that I was having a

baby. I was so taken over by in the powerful contractions gripping my body that all I could do was wail and writhe and beg for mercy.

Mercy came; just not in the form of drugs. It came in the form of a kind nurse who sent my husband away, then took me into a tiny labor room alone and stayed with me. She calmly told me I was making the pain much worse by fighting the contractions. She said that if I would just breathe slower and deeper and allow the contraction to roll through me without tensing up, that it would be much more bearable. Her peaceful steady demeanor got through to my panicking mind and I was able to latch on to the idea. If I can only calm my breathing down, I'll be able to do this. It took me a few contractions before I could get the hang of it, but I did as she directed. I slowed my breathing and relaxed my body. The next contractions were milder and I was able to stay on top of it; no longer feeling like I would drown in it. The nurse stayed and breathed with me; my entire focus on her breath. It seemed the only sanity in a sea of chaos.

It was probably only a few more contractions like that before I felt a strong urge to push. It overtook me; coming out of nowhere; like a semi-truck at high speeds barreling through my body. And it felt so good! I couldn't believe the relief pushing brought. The nurse gently checked me to make sure I was completely dilated then asked me not to push while she ran to let the doctor know.

I was wheeled into a delivery room where the doctor roughly checked me. I yelled out in pain and he sarcastically asked how I thought I could handle the pain of the delivery if I couldn't even stand a pelvic exam. I ignored him; what a jerk. How about a little compassion? This might be routine for him, but it was the most radical thing that had ever happened to me.

I was an enthusiastic pusher, using everything I had to get this baby out as fast as I could. Alexander was born after only fifty minutes of pushing. As he crowned, the doctor cut a large episiotomy; through my entire perineum. That was back in 1985; large episiotomies were standard then. My baby's cord was cut immediately and he was taken to the waiting warmer on the other side of the room where he screamed rigorously as he was roughly dried and suctioned. An antibiotic ointment was put into his eyes and he was injected with vitamin K; all of this done without my consent. After being weighed at seven pounds, twelve

ounces, he was tightly wrapped in a swaddling blanket and held near my face so I could see him. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut against the bright florescent lighting and the burning antibiotics.

He was taken away to the nursery after a few short moments of seeing him where he remained for four hours. I asked the nurses why and was told I needed to be patient; they were busy. As the fourth hour approached, I became adamant that my baby be brought to me. He eventually was, but I was surprised that he didn't look familiar to me. I had thought that once he was in my arms I would know him. But he felt like an unfamiliar little stranger to me. He was beautiful, with a full head of hair and a handsome cleft in his chin, just like his daddy, but his scrubbed clean little body didn't smell right. I had expected that his smell would be sweet and earthy, not the powdery smell of baby shampoo.

We were discharged the next morning after a quick lesson in baby care and breastfeeding. I had no support at home; I didn't know I would need it. I didn't know anyone who had breastfed a baby so when my nipples got sore and cracked there was nowhere to turn to for advice. I felt alone and helpless. I thought my mother would teach me how to be a mother. Isn't that how it's supposed to work? But my mom was still young and rebelled at the idea of being a grandmother at her age.

I lasted for three weeks; nursing my baby with cracked bleeding nipples. The pain so severe, I started pumping my milk and putting it into a bottle for him. He drank so easily with the bottle. He just calmly sucked it down and went to sleep. When he was at my breast, he fussed and choked; pulling away and crying in frustration. The bottle seemed to make him so much happier. I thought he was rejecting me; that he didn't like my breasts; that he was choosing the bottle instead. I was heartbroken; my baby didn't want my milk. I switched to formula within a few days because pumping was painful too. That was when I became depressed. I didn't recognize that it was hormonal; I thought I just wasn't adjusting to being a mother. I had wanted a baby so badly. He was planned and welcomed and so loved, I just wasn't happy. All my friends were out having fun and I was sitting home with a baby who didn't even like my milk. I felt like a failure.

Alexander and I did bond although not immediately. Within a few weeks, I was head over heels in love with my little man. Everything about him was sweet and adorable. I just wish I'd had some undisturbed time with

him in the first few hours of his life when my hormones were optimal for bonding. Had that happened I would have had an easier time adjusting to being a mother and I might have had more confidence in my ability to breastfeed him.

If I had had the support of a midwife to help me make sense of my experience ; to put it into an empowering context for me, I know I would have been able to see what an awesome job I did giving birth to Alexander. A midwife would have been able to help me see that it's normal to feel so out of control in labor and she would have been able to help me surrender in the earlier parts of labor when I was panicking.

In retrospect, many important things came out of what seemed at the time to be an upsetting and disempowering experience. It was years before I recognized this, but the nurse who had cared for me in labor was my inspiration for becoming a midwife. Although overall I perceived the hospital staff as indifferent to my struggle, that nurse showed me the enormous difference one calm compassionate person can make; really, the difference between labor being bearable or not. I know she was the only reason I had an unmedicated birth. Without her gentle guidance, I would not have believed I could get through labor and I would have insisted on having pain relief. Then I'm sure I would have walked away from the birth knowing that doing it without drugs was impossible.

If I hadn't had the experience of panicking in labor and asking for pain relief, and then getting through it despite my certainty in the moment that I could not, I don't know that I would have the strength of conviction in other women's capacity that I do; or the ability to bring women back from that panicked place; or the compassion I feel when women tell me their hospital birth stories. I know when a woman who wanted an unmedicated birth caves in and gets an epidural that she did not have the ability to endure the overwhelm of labor in an environment of such disconnect; that she could not hold the belief in her ability in the company of those who didn't hold that belief for her. I know some women have the ability to give birth naturally in a hospital; I'm not discounting that. I just don't know that every woman experiences the pain of labor the same; that one woman's pain or overwhelm can be compared to another's. I just know that with the right support; with a strong enough belief in her, a woman who's certain she can't do it actually can.

Having had the experience of the hospital staff's indifference, being treated roughly and not having the support I needed postpartum, gave me the insight that those things were missing and I know that without that experience, my commitment to women would not necessarily be what it is. Although I've always wished I could go back and make different choices, Alexander's birth and all the pain and disconnect surrounding it was the contrasting experience that ultimately shaped my midwifery career.

A year later when my postpartum depression was over and I loved being a mom, I was invited to attend childbirth classes with my best friend who was single and expecting her first baby. Unlike the hospital classes I had attended, these classes were held in the home of the teacher who was also a registered nurse. And unlike the classes I had taken, her classes presented options in an unbiased manor so students could make informed choices for themselves. These classes made it clear we were the consumers and the choices to be made were ours to make. In comparisons to these highly informative classes, it was clear to me that the intention of my hospital birth classes were to have us be good patients. This was when I first heard about home birth as viable option and I was an immediate convert. I don't know why I knew this was what I wanted, but I was so certain, I went out and hired a midwife before I even conceived my next baby.

Before getting pregnant with my second child I read everything I could find about conception, pregnancy nutrition and home birth. During my research I came across a book that described how to conceive either a girl or a boy. I so wanted to have a girl this time because I had a beautiful little boy and the addition of a little girl to our family would be the best gift I could possibly imagine. My husband and I followed the instructions to track my ovulation for three months so I would be able to distinguish exactly when I was about to ovulate. When the three cycles had passed and it was time to conceive, we planned a month long trip to Greece as a belated honeymoon since we didn't have one after we got married. The instructions were to make love two to three days before ovulation because female sperm lived longer then the males do. The males would swim faster and get there first to find the egg hadn't been released yet. The females would get there later and would live long enough to make the wait for the egg to appear. We followed these exact guide lines and came home

from Greece three weeks later pregnant. I called my midwife and scheduled my first appointment the day after returning to Los Angeles.

My midwife was warm and motherly, taking her time to sit with me and answer all my questions. My prenatal exams lasted an hour during which time she discussed my nutrition as well as all the tests and procedures usually done on pregnant women and newborn babies so I could make informed choices for myself. My midwife always asked how I was doing emotionally and supported me in whatever I was dealing with. Sometimes I cried on her shoulder and sometimes we laughed until tears ran down our faces. My relationship with my midwife felt like a friendship with a big sister or a mom. I found myself really looking forward to our appointments and as my due date approached, I realized I was actually excited to face the challenge of giving birth again.

When I told my midwife about the terrible time I'd had breastfeeding Alexander, she reassured me I would be successful this time with the right support and she insisted I go to Le Leche League meetings before I gave birth. I felt reluctant to go because I had a toddler who hadn't nursed since he was three weeks old and I felt ashamed; like I was a failure and would be judged by these militant breast feeders. She was compassionate with my concerns and offered to go with me to the meeting so I would feel supported. When we went to the first meeting I was pleasantly surprised how loving and supportive all the women were. I felt they were all standing for my success and willing to help me in any way possible. By the time my baby was due, I felt confident I had everything I needed to have this experience be a great one.

My due date came and went and I thought I would lose my mind. Because Alexander had come first thing in the morning on his due date, I expected this baby to do the same because I knew the exact date of conception. As the days passed, I became more and more upset; calling my midwife daily to cry and ask her what was wrong. She was great with me and calmly reassured me everything was normal and my baby would be arriving soon.

Early in the morning four days after I was due I woke up to mild contractions. I hadn't had any mild contractions the first time so I immediately knew this was going to be different. I had about two hours of

easier contractions readying me before I went into active labor. This time I knew what to expect when the contractions got hard and I had the loving support of my family and midwife reminding me to stay relaxed and breathe. When the contractions were at their strongest, I climbed into my bath tub and eased into the soothing comfort of the warm water. Although these contractions were just as strong as they had been the first time, because I was able to stay calm and surrender through them, my experience was positive in every way. Labor was one of the most difficult things I had ever experienced and yet I knew I could do this. I just had to remind myself whenever I started to feel overwhelmed.

When I got out of the tub two hours later I asked my midwife to check me and I was still seven centimeters; exactly as I had been before getting into the tub. The only difference was my bag of water was bulging and holding my baby's head up away from my cervix. My midwife suggested I allow her to break my bag so the baby could come down and press against the cervix. She told me it would make my contractions stronger but that most likely I would be completely dilated very quickly. It was a difficult decision to make. I thought my contractions were already as strong as they would get and yet she said they needed to get stronger. I went through a few more before I came to the conclusion that I was willing to do whatever it would take to get this baby born. It was either that or stay in labor limbo. I told my midwife to go ahead and break my water.

With the next contraction it was already clear my baby had come down and I was beginning to feel the urge to push within a few more contractions. Once the urge was strong, I was checked and told I had a large cervical lip because my baby was in a posterior position. I was asked to pant through these pushing contractions so the swelling in my cervix would have a chance to go down. This was without a doubt the single most difficult thing I had ever done. Holding back the urge in my body to bear down was like trying to hold my breath underwater for longer than I could possibly stand. I struggled and fought for control, but my body wasn't having it. It was in charge and it was pushing this baby out. My midwife checked me again after what seemed like an hour and I was told my cervix was completely dilated and I could push my baby out. I wanted to scream with triumph! Holding this baby back was outrageous and I didn't think I could have done it for even one more contraction.

With the next urge, I bore down and pushed with all the strength in my body. What blessed relief! Within a few pushes my baby began to crown with intense burning. I pushed and pushed but she sat there on my perineum; unable to stretch past the scar tissue from the large episiotomy I'd had with my first birth. My midwife massaged the scar with warm oil and after what seemed like forever my baby's head finally emerged through my intact perineum. My squirming wet baby was lifted up into my waiting arms and placed on my chest.

Everyone gathered around us as we welcomed this precious little being into our family. We were so mesmerized by the beautiful little face; it was at least ten minutes before we thought to check the gender. As my husband reached for the receiving blanket over the warm little body, I braced myself for the news. When he declared it was a girl, I burst into tears with relief. I had been so attached to having a girl I almost couldn't imagine it going any other way. My beautiful little girl Arianna remained in my arms for the rest of the day as my midwife examined her, cleaned her up and helped me to begin nursing her.

Arianna's birth although equally if not more difficult than Alexander's was by far the most triumphant experience I'd had in my life. Surrounded by love and support, I gave birth to my posterior eight and a half pound baby girl in the privacy and comfort of my bedroom. I ended up nursing my daughter for three years with very few issues. I did get depressed again although this time I had the loving support of my midwife to help me though. Knowing it was hormonal issue I didn't have the same experience of inadequacy I'd had the first time. I knew in every cell of my being I was successful. I knew I was strong and I felt that in every area of my life. I credit my midwife for that.

During the five years between the birth of Arianna and my next pregnancy I ended my marriage and began a new relationship. I also began studying midwifery and took on an apprenticeship with my midwife. Five months into my pregnancy I had the privilege of catching my sister's first baby. Getting to support my sister and catch my niece Malia was as thrilling as my own home birth.

Probably because I was so busy with home schooling my older children, running my Waldorf preschool program and running from birth to birth with my midwifery apprenticeship I went into premature labor at

twenty six weeks. My relationship was also under a lot of stress at that time. A woman's body can only stand so much stress before it has to give something up and my body was choosing to give up the baby out of self-preservation. Luckily, because I was a midwife, I was able to recognize the warning signs; a low back ache, menstrual like cramps and a rock hard belly. I took immediate action. I went on bed rest and took strong relaxing herbs. As long as I stayed relaxed, I could keep the contractions mild. But as soon as I tried to get up or something upset me, the contractions would intensify. I dilated to three centimeters and lost my mucus plug during that first week on bed rest.

I knew my pregnancy was seriously endangered; my baby unlikely to survive if he was born this early. My choices were clear. Calm down and stay in bed, or lose your baby. I stayed in bed.

I don't remember exactly how I managed it with two other children to care for, but I was in bed until my thirty seventh week when my midwife finally allowed me to get up. I had somehow, out of sheer force of will, held on to my pregnancy; my belly now round and full; my baby at last mature enough to be born at home. This was a victorious time for me and my partner. We had somehow beat the odds and kept ourselves together enough to make this happen.

Zachary was born three weeks later, on his due date, after only an hour and forty minutes of intense yet blissful contractions. I don't know why I had as much pleasure as I did pain with this labor; maybe it was because I had no fear and I was ecstatic to be having a full term baby in the privacy of my bedroom after the months of fear that I would lose him or he would end up in the neonatal intensive care unit. I was pushing before I even got into the rhythm of labor. Thirty minutes later, surrounded by family, my huge eleven pound baby boy slid out of me; my partner lifting him up to my chest with shaking hands. He was beautiful and perfect in every way; we instantly fell completely in love with him. This was the absolute best moment of our relationship. It was sweet and supportive and really, a peak life moment for both of us.

A year later I became pregnant while I was still breastfeeding Zachary and I wasn't fertile yet; at least I thought I wasn't. But clearly, I wasn't paying much attention because I didn't realize I was pregnant again until my belly started popping out and it became obvious that I was carrying another baby. I had no idea

when I conceived because I hadn't had a period since before I became pregnant with Zachary. I was probably at least twelve weeks along before I realized my pants had become too tight.

Oops....It wasn't as though I could claim that I didn't know how babies were made; or the fact that after giving birth, I would ovulate before I menstruated; I knew I could become fertile again at any time; breastfeeding wasn't a reliable form of birth control. I knew all of this and yet there I was pregnant; and not just pregnant, but probably about to enter my second trimester. I knew my baby already had arms and legs; and fingers and toes; the little face would look human and the gender would be clearly defined. At this point, if I listened with my doppler I would be able to hear a tiny heart beating.

This time I knew reducing both my physical and emotional stress would have to be prioritized, so I closed my preschool, slowed my schedule way down and asked my family for the support I knew I would need. This was probably why I didn't have any premature labor with this pregnancy. I didn't have a single contraction until she was due.

When I did go into labor with her it was slow and meandering; this was really the first time I had anything even resembling early labor. I had invited many of my friends to this birth and they had brought their children; there was way too much excitement in the house. My contractions stayed spaced out all day long despite every attempt I made to get them stronger and closer together. I walked and took herbs to stimulate them, but the reality was I was overwhelmed with so much activity in my house.

Once all the children fell asleep and some of my friends left, I finally went into active labor. We woke Alexander and Arianna right before the birth just as we did when Zachary was born. After three hours of strong regular contractions, I checked my own dilation to find I was complete with an anterior lip; just like I'd had with Arianna. This time I was unwilling to hold back because I knew I could push my baby past the lip. I insisted my midwife massage the lip while I bore down and within ten minutes my baby emerged in a posterior position, with her fist coming first like miniature version of superman.

Angelica came close to what I thought was probably her due date, but after examining her, it was clear that she was actually three weeks early. She was a beautiful well developed eight and a half pound girl, covered from head to toe with vernix; the creamy white substance that protects the baby skin in the womb. She looked like a bagel smothered in cream cheese. I fell in love with her immediately. Her unplanned status forgotten; completely irrelevant the moment her warm little body was snuggled into my arms. She didn't open her eyes for days because she was not quite ready to be out of the womb. When she did finally look out into the world and her eyes met mine for the first time, I was taken aback by the strength; the powerful presence I saw there. I had never seen a newborn quite like her.

Although I was disappointed that at twenty five months Zachary chose to wean himself right before Angelica was born, I knew it was his choice. Angelica went on to nurse for three years just as her sister Arianna had. I felt such a sense of joy with my complete family. Eventually I also found myself grateful for my four differing births because although they were not all as blissful as I would have liked, I got to experience the contrast and I believe it's left me a stronger more confident mother and a gentler more compassionate midwife.