

*Note: This is the story of my second birth, and my first at home. My first son was born six years prior at the hospital. I was transferred from homebirth midwifery care at the first signs of my 20-hour labor when my midwife diagnosed me with HELLP syndrome, a rare complicated version of preeclampsia. After being a midwife for 12 years prior to this second birth, it felt very natural to me to catch my own baby. I am grateful to my midwives for trusting me and trusting birth.*

It was mid-afternoon on my due date and the Braxton hicks contractions were feeling different and coming more frequently, perhaps even in a pattern. I decided I'd try out a contraction-timer app that I had downloaded a long time ago, but had never used. This way, I could see if what I was having was in a pattern and whether it could be counted as "early labor" or not. It felt a little silly, as they could only be described as menstrual crampy, but they had a definite start and stop, so I decided to go for it. For about an hour, from about 2:00pm to 2:45, I carried my phone around with me, pressing "start" and "stop" with each one. I was constantly up and down the stairs to pee, and my sister called during this point. She noticed my voice was different as I talked a bit through a surge. I told her I was crampy, menstrual-like, and that I wondered if things would start soon. I spent some time doing a few dishes, hanging out in hands and knees on my bed, enjoying the breeze through my windows, and then having a snack of yogurt, fruit and granola in the back yard. I thought, "this could be my last snack before labor kicks in..." and I made myself eat a big bowl of it, despite the fact that it wasn't as appealing as it usually is.

The contraction timer proved to me that I was not in labor yet, though it definitely gave me hope of it being "pre-labor," the part where my body was getting organized for the real deal. Contractions were not regular yet, they were every 2-8 minutes, lasting about 30 seconds. I texted the midwives, just to let them know I was having some pre-labor activity. Things continued as I enjoyed some time in my bedroom, stretching, moving, putting on music. I had asked the neighbor's nanny to pick up my son, Leo, from school since I didn't feel like walking to school and back. She texted that they were playing on the playground for a bit and would be home around 4. I called my husband Randy around 3 and told him that I was having some pre-labor activity and wanted him to be home with me and Leo and to please be home between 4 and 4:30. He was glad to!

The surges continued to happen, not painful, just attention-getting. When I saw the kids coming down the street, I willed myself to not have a contraction so that I could normally walk outside, attempt to pay the babysitter (she refused), and walk Leo inside with me. It worked, I pulled it off. I told Leo that I wasn't in labor yet, but I was having some warm up and likely labor would be starting that night. He was excited. And Randy pulled in a minute later, much to my relief.

I hung out in our sunny living room while Leo played a bit upstairs and Randy got the garbage out. Brenda, one of our midwives, had planned to stop by to do a blood pressure check and she texted at 4:20 that she was on her way. She came for a brief visit and I realized I was starting to feel some hormonal buzzing/shifting after each mild surge. I only had one contraction during her 10 minute stop-by, but it was strong enough to make me know it was real. I cried a few tears of relief, excitement and overwhelm. My blood pressure was normal. Brenda left, telling me she would be staying around Portland.

Within a minute of her leaving, I felt a contraction start that felt big. The sensation morphed to a watery fullness and a big pop and release as a giant flood of water came out of me. As I realized what was happening I hopped up off the couch and jumped off the carpet to the wood floor, laughing and calling to Randy, “My water broke! I need towels! Big towels!” It was 4:41, I texted the midwives “SROM!” [Midwife lingo for “spontaneous rupture of membranes.”] Brenda writes immediately, “Oh my! Clear?” I wrote, “Yes,” and at 4:42, “Wow that is a LOT of fluid holy shit. All good.”

Laughing, I called to Leo who came partially down the stairs to witness me and Randy sopping up the fluid with towels, and me with a towel between my legs as more came out. “Leo, my water broke! That’s a good thing. That means labor is really starting!” A big smile spreads across his face, “And the baby is going to be born! Tonight?” He jumps up and down a bit and I tell him, “Yes, maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow!”

For Randy and I, the feeling of “maybe this is it,” shifted to, “it’s on!” I expected the contractions might be different, harder, closer, but actually they spaced out for the next 20-30 minutes. I called my parents from the couch downstairs to let them know that labor had started. I also called my sister, who was going to come to the birth or at least come soon after to help.

I went in the bedroom to be in my comfortable, birthy space and Randy was already there, the bed was moved to the wall/windows as we had planned, he had taken the dog crate out of the room and was starting to make the bed with the labor sheets and waterproof mattress cover. I remember loving the colors in the room at that moment. There was gentle sunlight off the green trees in the back yard, the pale greens and blues of our old “Monet” sheets that Randy had just put on, combined with the gentle breeze coming through the windows. The room felt good. Randy had music going, and I was kneeling at the foot of the bed, moving my hips around and feeling happy and surreal. It was almost dinner time, and I wanted Leo to eat and I was thinking some alone time for me sounded really good, so we decided Randy and Leo would go to the nearby Chipotle for dinner. Before they left, Leo was like, “Let’s dance!” He was feeling the good energy and the clear space of our bedroom. Randy and Leo had a one-song dance party in our room, while I watched and swayed from my kneel/squat on the bed. I was so content to watch and love them, and was aware that I didn’t feel like joining them.

While they were gone, I could get into the head and spiritual space that I wanted to be in for labor and birth. I lit one of the birth candles on my birth altar. I looked back in my journal to find what I had written about my intentions for labor and I read it out loud, reaffirming those intentions. Then, knowing that I was inviting pleasure and sensuality into my labor, I set to dressing myself for the occasion. Until this pregnancy, I had respected, but didn’t understand, the women who would put on makeup or a special labor dress for their births. But, from the standpoint of wanting to be in touch with my sensual, even sexy, playful self—I understood that it helps to *feel* it in

your body. And it's hard to feel that way in fuddy-duddy clothes (I am remembering what I was wearing at the start of Leo's labor; a totally non-flattering combo of red plaid flannel pajama pants and a very oversized shirt of Randy's—royal blue with white paint stains on it. There's no way to feel sexy in that get up). I had a labor dress/nightgown that was an option I thought of for labor, but it felt silly putting on a nightgown at 5pm. So, I put on my new nursing tank top with a nice white v-neck long sleeved shirt that fits well. And nothing on my bottoms—why bother, I was leaking amniotic fluid. It felt good and right to be bottomless. Then, I adorned myself with my labor necklace, made of beautiful blessing-filled beads from beautiful women and a pair of feather earrings that Frankie made me for mother's day. I had on a bracelet that Leo made me for mother's day, and took off my watch. After putting my hair in two braids, my pre-determined hair do of choice, I felt ready to welcome my labor.

Labor started to pick up, but I wasn't timing anything, or even really paying attention in that way. I was in my room, music on, following my body to be in whatever position felt right. Mostly, kneeling on the soft pads I had put down at the foot of my bed, leaning onto the bed. At 6:10 I called Randy to ask him to pick up some raw milk from Rosemont on the way home. He was already at Rosemont when I called, so they were home shortly after. I immediately asked Randy to start setting up the tub. Leo came up to the bedroom and I told him that I was really in labor now, and warned him that I was being loud during the contractions. He seemed excited and happy, and he helped Randy to set up the tub. Meanwhile, realizing that I was really getting into it and knowing that my ability to gauge where I was in the process was going to fade, I wanted the support people heading over. I texted Corinna, our family friend and Leo's long-time babysitter, who was going to be present for the kids, first. I knew I was checking out and I needed Randy to be with me, so we needed her here for Leo. She immediately got on her way. Very soon after, I texted Deirdre, one of my best friends and former midwifery partner. I asked her to come help Randy with the tub and help gauge when/how to get Frankie here. I was vague in my first text, "Can you come soon?" "Yes, how soon?" I attempted to text "Now-ish" but it came out some other strange word, but she got it. I was really getting into strong contractions. Still, I had a little more texting to do—to Phoebe, my good friend and liaison to my women's circle. I had to let her know what was happening and to spread the word so that all the women of moon lodge could keep me in their thoughts and prayers. My sister also called at this point to ask if it was okay if she come first thing tomorrow, which I agreed it was. She spoke a lot about logistics and I remember not being able to focus on it, and thinking, "Why is she telling me this now? Oh, right, because she doesn't know that labor has picked up!" So I told her I really didn't want to be on the phone and we quickly got off. I remember thinking, "it's turned the corner to serious labor now," and I wanted to know what time it was so I could remember later. I looked at my phone. It was 6:36. I didn't know it at the time, but I had only less than 2 hours to go till birth!

Sometime around this point, the music was bothering me. It was someone I didn't know, and I felt it almost an intrusion that they were in my bedroom. I told Randy, "turn this off. Put on Xavier Rudd." That worked great, and I also remember consciously enjoying the snippets of Rising Appalachia that I heard after that. I was really in labor land now. Leo had been playing outside with Corinna for a while. Deirdre arrived and got right into helping Randy fill the tub. (As soon as it was assembled, I said to Randy, "Fill it." This surprised him and, unbeknownst to me, made him call the midwives, telling them only, "Robin asked me to fill the tub!" And, hearing my serious labor sounds in the background, they headed our way.) Randy and Deirdre were doing the

tasks on my “early labor list” and “labor contact list.” I was loving that all of that was going on, from my place at the end of the bed. Randy brought me sliced mango early on after he got home, which was great. He also brought me my pregnancy favorite from Rosemont, veggie sushi. I quickly realized without getting too close to it that there was no way I’d be eating that so I asked Randy to put it back in the fridge for another time. Labor tea appeared ... I heard Deirdre arranging to get Frankie over. I loved that her competent and experienced energy was there. At one point, during a contraction, she started to midwife me with her words, “That’s it, Robin, soft and open,” or something to that effect. Those reassuring words, that I’ve heard and offered to so many women, brought me to my thinking brain (kind of like I was at work) and so I said, “No talking to me.” I knew she understood. Randy would stop now and then to kiss me in the most delicious ways, which would immediately give me strong contractions. It all felt strong, good, just on the edge of overwhelming but I kept welcoming it. It felt productive, like I could feel my cervix opening, down low, just above my pubic bone. I was frequently walking to and from the bathroom to pee. And on one of those trips, feeling like things had picked up to a next serious level, and moving fast, I said to Randy, “Call the others,” by which I meant the midwives. I was psyched to hear him say they were already on their way. Brenda arrived minutes later.

My memories from active labor and transition may or may not be in the correct order in which they happened. It blurs in my mind, as time takes on a different dimension in labor. It seemed I had to go pee after almost every other contraction. I alternated between the end of the bed, kneeling on the floor and walking to the bathroom. Brenda and Deirdre were in the hallway upstairs, so I would pass by their encouraging presences each trip I took. One of the trips, Frankie had just come almost all the way up the stairs and I heard Brenda telling her she should join Leo and Corinna in the back yard. The look on her face was one I don’t see very often in our self-assured girl, it was uncertain. I was glad to see her and told her that. Knowing I had only seconds before my next contraction started, I wanted to reassure her and also let her know what was up. I said something like, “I’m going to be really loud in a minute. But everything is good.” She nodded and smiled and turned around to go back down stairs. I continued into the bathroom as a contraction started and immediately started moaning very loudly as I leaned on the sink. One of those bathroom trips (or probably more than one), Randy came with me, which felt so good to have him. At one point, a contraction came on while I was sitting on the toilet. His hand had been on my head and I leaned into it pushing against him and moving my head around in his hand, pinning it against the wall and pushing hard. I knew it had to be hurting him, but the sensation of it felt so good to me, like I didn’t know how I would cope without it, so I apologized but told him I had to. He acted like it was the most normal and comfortable thing in the world to have his hand mashed between my head and the wall.

Looking back on my labor, I am aware that I never felt afraid, and I think that made the pain so much more like intense sensation than pain. My intention had been to find the pleasure parts and I had done a lot of in depth research during my pregnancy into the connection of birth and pleasure and sexuality. I did not feel sexual during my active labor, but I did feel sensual and so in my body. Randy’s kisses were extra electric and everything was very much alive. It was intense, though, and moving so fast. Around this time I wanted, in addition to Randy’s presence, the energy of women to hold the space around me. I didn’t need the midwives to *do* anything, just to be there and be the container. I said to Randy, “I want the women in here now.” I felt with each contraction that my cervix was opening, and my LOUD mantra during contractions was, “I’m

ooooopeninnng!” shouted firmly at the top of my lungs. It was like I was reminding myself what was happening and it felt strong. Randy reminded me at one point, when I was entering transition, to take my breaks—find the pleasure in the in-between. I was grateful for the reminder, but my response was a little whiney, I think. “But I’m not getting any breaks!” The contractions were so close, they felt back to back, but his reminder did help me be in those few moments more fully. The next two contractions, I remember, felt easier, especially at the end of them. Like I felt something happening inside that actually felt good. It was different and I remember it feeling like I was somehow “cheating” a bit. In retrospect, with my midwife brain on, I was probably getting close to fully dilated and the baby’s head moving down into the part where the cervix was gone probably felt good. I remember feeling Randy really close then, too. And then, the next strong surge brought nausea—“get the bowl!” I shouted and I vomited my way through the next contraction. A sure sign of transition.

It was probably around 8 pm at that point (not that I knew that) and, besides the mango slices I’d had around 6:30, I hadn’t had anything to eat since that yogurt and granola around 3pm. For some strange reason, I was interested in looking to see what I had thrown up. So, I opened my eyes after the contraction to get a glimpse of it before Randy took it to the bathroom, and I remember feeling like, “not bad” when I saw it was just mango-colored throw up. I was now standing up on the side of the bed, closer to the tub and the next contraction came on strong. I climbed up onto the bed (which had a chux pad on it) and half squatted. I was surprised with the involuntary pushing and pooping that was happening throughout it. I was aware that it felt like way more poop than most women do, as I had been taking pretty high doses of Magnesium the last few days. Though I am not shy about my bowel habits with Randy, I was happy he was in the bathroom cleaning out my puke bowl while I was shitting all over the bed (or so it felt)! Luckily, it was contained on the chux pad, and Brenda graciously wiped me afterward, saying, “You ready to push your baby out soon?” Hearing her say that, I felt a mix of things. In my body I knew that was what was happening, yet my mind couldn’t believe we were at that point already, so it was validating to hear her confirm what my brain thought couldn’t possibly be happening so soon! Also, her question made me think I needed a response. Was I ready? Well, it felt to me that I still likely had a little bit of cervix left in front—based on what I felt during the last contraction. So I said something like, “I don’t think my cervix is totally out of the way yet…” And I tried to articulate something like, “but I’ll just follow my body and it will be out of the way soon,” but I’m not sure exactly what I said. Randy came back into the room and I heard Brenda say quietly to him, “She’s pushing.” And he said something like, “Oh, wow,” or “already?”

I knew the kids were getting ready for bed and were going to go to sleep in our downstairs guest room where it would be more quiet. We would wake them when birth was close. Knowing we were getting closer to birth, Deirdre told Corinna to bring them upstairs to be closer before they even went to bed. She didn’t tell Randy her reasoning, and he didn’t know how soon the baby was coming. I could hear in his voice that he was wondering why they were upstairs and he was about to tell them to go down and go to bed. Before he could do that I grabbed him and said, “Randy, the kids are going to stay up until after the baby is born.” That’s when he realized how close things were.

They had told me the tub was just now ready for me and I was ready for it! I took off my tank top (the long sleeve shirt had come off some time earlier) so I could be naked. I remember climbing in and immediately feeling like, “Yes.” It felt soooo good in there! I think I had a contraction right away, which was somewhat pushy, like the last one. More poop, unfortunately, small bits of it. I didn’t really mind it and knew that, with dilution, it would be fine, but Randy was working hard with the pooper-scooper to get it all out. I started to tell him not to worry about it, but then thought, “well it would be kind of nice to not have this floating around,” so I let him continue. I think this was when I looked up at the camera that was supposed to record the birth and saw the lens was closed. I pointed that out to someone. Then I was vaguely aware through the next contraction or two that the battery had died and Randy got and set up his old video camera to take its place.

Pushing started gradually and I still couldn’t believe it was really happening. I let it build on its own and really tried not to add to it unless I had to. The feeling in my body was a feeling of big fullness. I felt inside with my fingers after one of the early pushing contractions, I think to make sure I could feel the head and know where I was in the process. It was still high, but I felt it. I thought, “Oh, this is going to be a while.” But after the next contraction, which I pushed through but not particularly hard, I felt again and his head was so much lower. That’s when I was like, “Okay, this really is happening soon.” I felt with my fingers after each contraction, and I think there were only about four more or so. I was impressed and heartened by the quick descent. The “ring of fire”, stretching sensation as the baby got lower was sharp, how I remembered it from Leo’s birth, but not scary this time because it was familiar. I think it was also less because of the water and also because I was relaxed and felt totally in charge. No one was doing anything “to me.” During this time I was partially squatting, sometimes leaning back against the edge of the tub. I was taking it slow, not blasting through the sensations. It was quiet in the room, the light was beautiful sunset glow on the trees out the windows in front of me with the bureau of candles glowing behind me (Randy had lit all of them at some point, which I was so glad to see).

At this point (for the last 3 contractions), I was compelled by my body to really push with each one. The surge would start and this was the only time in my labor I felt I had to consciously surrender because I wanted to put it off. Like, “Oh, do I really have to do this part? I’m not ready.” To, “Yes, I’m doing this. I can do it. I want to meet my baby!” I was aware that my sounds had really changed and I was pushing hard. I felt the head parting my labia and coming around the pubic bone. I told the room that baby was starting to crown. At this point I was aware that I had my back to Randy and I wanted him to be able to see, so I turned around and reclined a bit with my open legs toward him. This was the time when the kids were entering the room. When I turned fully around I heard Leo make this happy little gasp sound and the three of them laughed in joy of what they saw—the top of baby’s head. That sound made me so happy inside, and I was glad both kids were there. I asked Randy if he wanted to feel the head. As he was reaching towards it, I felt the next contraction starting to build and I seethed out very directive words, “Don’t f\*\*\*ing touch anything else. Just the head!” He listened well, because his touch did not bother me, I don’t think I felt it, which was what I wanted. I had enough sensation happening!

With the next contraction I pushed hard. I had my hand on his head as it was emerging. I felt it come out about half way and then gave another push and the whole head was out. It wasn't as much as a relief as I had expected, though I was really glad I had done that part! I announced, "the heads out." And I felt a little in limbo. I was squatting and feeling his head with my hands. I looked down and had a brief moment of, "is he posterior?" and then, "no, this is the back of the head." I realized he hadn't restituted yet. I was trying to be patient to wait for the next contraction but I was a bit confused as to whether or not I was having a contraction. Something in me said I shouldn't wait for the next contraction. I pushed again and pushed a little on his head with my hand to see if he would come. Nope. I changed position to help him reconstitute and come out. I moved to a hands and knees, running start position—back towards Randy. I felt him move inside of me—good, he reconstituted. I still didn't feel a contraction and it felt like it was taking I while so I just decided to push again. Still didn't come. I wasn't worried, just felt like I needed to keep moving. I moved back to my upright squat and felt him move again inside of me. That felt like what had needed to happen. I pushed and out he came. As he was coming out into my hands, I felt the cord around his neck, so I somersaulted him forward with one hand so I could unloop the cord with the other. It all felt very natural, not unlike the many other times I'd resolved a nuchal cord, but this time done more with my touch and feel and intuition than with sight. I brought him up to me—my two hands under his armpits, me squatting in the water. We did it! I looked at his face and joyously kissed it all over before bringing him to my neck and chest and leaning back against the edge of the tub. It was 8:28 pm. I immediately asked Randy to climb in with me so we could look at and touch our new baby together. Randy looked to see right away and said, "It's a boy!" Wow! A boy! I believed him right away (unlike at Leo's birth, despite the fact that I knew he was a boy the whole pregnancy) and it felt so right. Frankie and Leo were right there at the edge of the tub to my left, looking and touching. We were rubbing up the baby trying to get him to breathe more enthusiastically. His heart rate was great and he was doing some shallow breathing, but he had done no lusty cries and he was still a little limp. The midwives listened with the stethoscope and I told everyone, "He's fine. He's coming around just fine." Which I knew he was, and he did. Randy modeled some good deep breathing and was stimulating his feet while I rubbed his back. He pinked up great and was doing just fine. Eyes open, looking around. Leo suggested that I nurse him, which hadn't even occurred to me! Oh yeah, the breast! I put him closer to it, but he didn't seem quite ready. We just wanted to gaze at each other.

I asked someone what time it was. I couldn't believe it was still so early! It was still light out, and there was a beautiful sunset glow out the window.

After some blissful time in the tub, I felt ready to get out to the bed. I saw that I'd had my "separation gush" in the tub and thought getting out would also help the placenta come. The midwives helped Randy and I out (or he helped me, I don't really remember). I held the baby close while they wrapped me with towels and helped me climb over the edge of the tub and walk the two steps to the bed. Frankie crawled in next to me, and Randy next to her. Leo stayed at my side standing next to the bed. We all ogled over the baby, touched him, petted him while he immediately latched on to my left breast. Light was fading fast outside, so in addition to the blaze of candles, we turned on two dim lamps in the room.

I was feeling a little crampy and like I wanted to get the placenta out so I could be done with labor. I handed the baby to Randy (thankfully, he had a long cord) and got into a squat on the bed. Brenda had the cord with some gentle traction as I pushed. She told me, "It's coming" at the same time I felt that it was coming. I said, "I got it," and I caught my placenta in one hand as it came out. Such a relief! And barely any bleeding with it. Leo looked at it with Lindsay and I and then I lay back down and was happy to have a firm uterus, the baby back on me and not in labor any more!

We were a new family of five after a labor that was 3 hours and 47 minutes from the "official" start of my water breaking, but just 2 hours from when I actually acknowledged, "this is real labor." And best of all, it was all completely normal and uncomplicated! I had asked for "boring" in the sense that there would be no drama or unique adrenaline-raising circumstances, and I got it! It was really the labor and birth of my dreams and I was, and continue to be, so grateful.

Randy, Frankie, Leo and I then sung the song that has been sung to each of our children after birth. It is a song that I learned from Elizabeth, my midwife in Colorado, who taught it to me while I was attending births with her in her practice. We sang it to each baby after birth before leaving the house. Randy sang it to Frankie after she was born. We both sang it to Leo after he was born (though I choked up crying with joy through most of it and didn't get all the words out). And now, all four of us sang it to the new baby.

*We all came to welcome you, we all came to your birth.*

*We all came to welcome you, to welcome you to Earth.*

*And I was there to love you, I was there to love you.*

*I was there to love you and give my body for,*

*Your safe and peaceful entrance here, through heaven's open door.*

It was such a moment of love and happiness. I was so proud of all of us and so grateful to be home, in my bed, connected to my loving partner and children. I was glowing, beaming with excitement, disbelief and total gratitude. "I rocked that!" I exclaimed, and my sweet birthing team agreed.