

Birth Revisited

by Mary Aspinwall

Our son Gabriel Luke was born at 11.14pm on Saturday 30th January 1999 at our home in West Cork. He was delivered in a birthing pool after a fast and feral labour, most of which I spent howling at the (full) moon.

Whereas our daughter, Martha, took three days to labour into this world Gabriel came in only three hours. I knew at about 3:30pm that things were moving, although I had no pain, just regular tightening sensations. I drove into town to get some shopping and met a friend in a cafe for a cuppa. I was feeling great and planned to take a long walk on the beach in the twilight with my daughter and her friend, but the heavens opened so we got some videos and headed homeward. I cooked up a huge pot of thick minestrone soup and chose a good bottle of red wine to have with it and lit some candles. We all had supper and then Martha (who was then seven) went to stay with our next-door neighbour's. She had looked at some birthing pictures and (despite her initial enthusiasm) had decided it was not, after all, for her.

The mild contractions were now coming every five minutes or so lasting up to a minute. We rang the midwife to put her on standby that we might need her as she lives one hour's drive from us, started filling the pool and then settled down to watch a movie. I assumed I was in for the long haul, but only five minutes into the film I got the first big contraction, swiftly followed by another. We told the midwife to come and my husband, Wayne, began heating up enormous pans of water and kettles... as if we were in some old black and white melodrama. Pools are great, but the average domestic water heating system takes two hours to fill one. To make matters more complicated our stove and the pool were a flight of stairs apart, so there was a lot of toing and froing with steaming cauldrons. During each contraction (every three or four minutes) I needed Wayne to put very firm pressure on my back. He somehow managed to be in two places at once. Since nearly all the pain was in my lower back I was worried the baby might be posterior. These labours tend to be long and grim. I took *Ku'i carb* 200 and then a higher dose but I can't say it did much. The contractions were by now thick and fast and painful, so although the pool was only half full I got in and went on all fours to try to relieve the pressure on my back. Around this time I switched from breathing through contractions to screaming through them. It felt like the only thing to do. In between I came back to focussing on my breath.

Our midwife, Elke Hasner arrived at about 10pm. She walked in on one of my banshee wails and said later she thought to herself: "That sounds good". She took over back pressing duty so Wayne was able to top up the pool with the various pans and kettles. Between contractions I was able to stand up briefly so Elke could check the baby's heart once with a sonic aid monitor. It was hale and hearty. The contractions were growing closer and closer together so my breathing time was shorter and shorter. I felt everything was going too fast. It was something I had not prepared for. I asked Elke to make me up a herbal painkiller. I took *Aconite* 200 to ease my rising sense of

panic. I had a list of acupuncture points for speeding up a stalled labour from Steve Gascoigne, the acupuncturist who had been treating me in the run up to the birth. I got Wayne to ring him and ask if there was anyway to slow it down. Steve asked "Why would you want to do that?" I answered "GRRRRRR" and thought uncharitable thoughts about the opposite sex. "You could go to hospital; that would slow it down..."

Once or twice whilst this was going on I felt a fleeting urge to push, but just dismissed it. It just couldn't be that time already, but the desperation and the out of control feeling was, in fact, transition. I felt the need to take a *Pulsatilla 1M* in which seemed to help and in no time at all I was pushing.

My waters broke and unlike last time (when they were artificially ruptured) the water was clear and meconium-free. I noticed the water level had gone up in the pool, but it wasn't until Elke said: "Use him" that I even realised that Wayne had climbed into the pool with me. I hung on to his neck and the change of position and his calm and strength helped me to bear down. Very quickly I could feel the head in the birth canal and put my hand down to help me gauge how hard to push. The water was great for giving a greater sense of control as the force of gravity is so much reduced. Within ten minutes I was able to push just enough to deliver the head and next push launched baby into the water into the waiting arms of Elke who unwound the cord from its neck and swiftly passed my darling to me.

We both just stared in wonder at the wide-eyed beauty before us. For a while I didn't even think to check whether it was "a boy or a girl". It just was. I held the baby to my breast, but having just had three huge bowlfuls of minestrone he wasn't remotely hungry and was more interested in looking around him. Once the cord had stopped pulsing Elke clamped the cord and Wayne cut it. All too soon the third stage started and I passed our boy to his papa and got back on all fours to deliver the placenta. After that I was feeling a bit chilly and I wanted to get out of the pool. Getting out was a real revelation of what the pool had been doing for me. As I stood the force of gravity almost pushed me back down. I felt weak and unsteady. Elke helped me out very gently. Our boy was still enjoying floating around on the palm of his papa's hand. I put on a nice thick towelling robe and sat down on the bed and looked forward to being able to spend a bit of time with our son. I had forgotten that there might be after-pains. I was stunned by the force of them. They felt exactly like the first hour's contractions and once again I needed very firm pressure on my back. All the pain was in my lower back. I had to focus hard on my breath to stop myself from screaming. Since *Kali carb 10m (a high dose)* didn't seem to help at all I worked my way through a few more remedies to no avail. I was sick of feeling pain. I wanted to be with my son. I started thinking laterally and decided to have a large medicinal swig of brandy and a couple of Paracetamol which made me feel better but didn't really alter the pain. Finally Wayne suggested going back to *Kali carb 200* and that worked beautifully. Good to know someone understands minimum dose! I had a shower aiming a very hot jet at my lower back and started to feel human again. So by 3am the placenta and my blood pressure had been checked and we said farewell to Elke. The three of us snuggled into bed together and slept for an unbroken, blissful four hours. Martha came over next morning to see her baby brother for the first time. She was a little underwhelmed when she realised he only had two modes: suck or sleep, but she is getting the hang of just gazing at him. In the last issue I asked for your thoughts and

good wishes around the time of the birth. On the day I went into labour I was almost two weeks overdue and I know many people were thinking of us. Unbeknownst to me the Salmon provers were having a reunion that weekend in England and phoned me on Sunday for news. Apparently Gabriel is the third Salmon prover's baby to arrive during one of these weekend reunions. Perhaps that was what he was waiting for. I wonder how many of the Salmon babies came on the full moon? Also on that Saturday a friend of mine had organised a day's meditation retreat and dedicated the practice done that day to us. Many thanks to all of you for making this birth such a healing experience.

In the past year or so three friends have had home births with Elke and it was only as I was reading Midwifery Matters (published by the Association of Radical Midwives) that I realised what rare events home births are in Ireland. There are only thirteen independent midwives currently working in Ireland and in 1996 of 50,390 births only 206 were at home. Sally Millar points out that although women have a legal right to home birth under the 1970 Health Act, the inaction of the Health Boards means there are still areas with no midwife cover.

In addition, those who choose a home birth are penalised financially. Although one now receives a grant of £600, this leaves a shortfall of between £250 and £400 in midwifery fees. If you also opt for a water birth, pool hire costs around £150 for a minimum three week hire period. Having said that, the fees mentioned include not only the delivery itself but also monthly ante-natal checks; and ten consecutive days of post-natal visits. This level of continuity of care is an enormous bonus. After a home birth it is a good idea to ask your local doctor to pay a home visit to check the baby over, particularly the heart and lungs as a midwife may not be trained to do this for you. Home birth was a wonderful experience for all of us and once it was all over we were able to curl up in our own bed with our new-born son and sleep the sleep of angels...

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