

Before I became pregnant with my third baby, I knew I wanted to do a natural birth. With both of my older two children I had easy-breezy epidural births, both overall good experiences and around 8 hour labors, resulting in healthy babies. However, I really felt that I had missed an experience that my strong body was capable of- it was like riding a golf cart at a marathon. I also knew that my next baby would most likely be my last, and, I wanted to be truly connected, at every moment, to what was happening- I wanted to be actively *giving birth* to my next baby. Somewhere along the years I lost my fear of labor and birth, and realized that it was something I was perfectly designed to do.

From the early months of pregnancy, I did a daily routine of strengthening pre-natal yoga. With my two older children sometimes joining me or running underfoot, I would stretch widely and practice deep breathing, while thinking, *I am strong*. It was such a simple thing to do, but over the months, I became more and more physically and emotionally strong- and ready for labor. I planned to have a water birth, and reserved an inflatable birthing tub at the only hospital in the state which supported water births.

Ten days before my due date, weak, cramp- like contractions started every ten minutes. They would get stronger every night at bedtime, filling my heart with excitement that it finally could be baby time. I would pace and walk the living room, ready for action, but the contractions would eventually slow down and fade away. This went on for one week. By the end of the week I was so very frustrated! I wasn't able to eat well, sleep well, sit for long, stand for long, or lay down for long. My body was tired from the constant weak contractions and deep cramps, but nothing seemed to be seriously progressing.

On day number seven, three days before my due date, I told my husband I wanted to walk the baby out. I had experienced less contractions and cramping the night before than I had the rest of the week, and felt like I was *never* going to go into labor. It was the end-of-pregnancy desperation kicking in, full swing. I put on my sneakers and my husband took me on a date- to a nearby lake with a hiking trail around it. The slow walk felt great, I felt my sore hips stretch out, and a few mild contractions, but nothing too exciting. On the way home, we stopped to pick up a pepperoni pizza (my family's putting-yourself-into-labor tradition). We got home, and I started feeling the same weak contractions I'd had all week- but every 5 minutes! I was elated. But, I was still weary that they might fade out, as they had been doing all week. As we sat down to eat, they continued at a steady 5 minute rhythm, and were progressively slightly stronger as well. I sat with the family, but only sipped some water, as my stomach felt focused with its contractions. I finally told my husband we should go get checked out, just in case the contractions were actually headed in a baby-type direction. He asked if he could take a shower before we left (still sweating from our walk!), and I said sure, no rush at all. I looked at my daughter- age 6- and saw that her hair was a mess, and thought, "*I don't want that in new baby pictures!*" so I had her come sit with me so I could braid her hair. As we sat on my bed and I slowly braided her hair, quietly being aware a few more noticeable contractions, I told her it might be time for the new baby to come. I didn't want her to get her hopes up if we were just going to be sent home, so, I reminded her how long it can take for babies to be born, and told her not to expect anything right away. She had been preparing to be at the baby's birth, watching birth videos, and learning all about labor and birth.

As soon as she skipped off out of the room, hair freshly braided, I had a strong contraction

which took me to my knees and took my breath away. After a few seconds of gasping, I realized that *this* was what all those breathing exercises were all about, and I forced myself to breathe calmly through it. I visualized the contraction melting, and once the peak passed, I breathed out any tension in my body as I thought of it melting away. That was the first moment I knew for *sure* I was in active labor, and the baby was coming. Once the contraction was over, I walked up to my husband and told him we were going to the hospital, *now*. He had his towel flung over his shoulder ready to hop in the shower, but he started rounding up the kids and grabbing car keys. I made it into the back seat of the van before the next big contraction hit.

On the way to the hospital, I listened to relaxing music on my iPod, and breathed through several more big contractions, again imagining them melting away after they peaked.

We got to the hospital about 25 minutes later, and finally were checked in and waiting for the midwife to come in. I felt irritated that the hospital policy was for me to check in first at triage, and then move to the birthing floor. I knew I was ready for the birthing floor. I was also irritated I had to wait for the midwife, and asked the admitting nurse how long I would have to wait. After about 10 minutes the midwife came in to check me. She asked me the basic questions, how long have the contractions been going on, how strong, any nausea, etc. I answered all her questions and I told her I was doing just fine. She finally was going to check for dilation, and, I remember thinking, “*God, please let me be somewhat dilated! If the contractions are this strong and nothing is happening, I don't think I could do this for too much longer!*” I was hoping for at least 6-7 centimeters for me to take courage that things were going along.

The midwife stopped talking mid-sentence and looked up at me sharply. “Do you feel a need to push?” She asked me. I shook my head, thinking, “*What an annoying question*”. Then she said, “Because the baby is right here. You're ready to push”. I laughed. I laughed, and laughed. I felt so silly because I couldn't stop laughing and smiling. I **COULD** handle this labor thing alright, after all. In fact, I was almost done!

I reminded the midwife I wanted a water birth. She said they didn't have time to inflate and fill the birthing tub, and, they may not even have time to fill the bath tub, but if I wanted to try for the bath tub, they could try. I agreed. She phoned upstairs, “Start filling the bathtub for a water birth, we're coming up now!”

They wheeled me upstairs, and I had to hang around for a few minutes while they filled the tub and prepared the room for the birth. I quietly breathed through a few strong contractions on my hands and knees on the bed. Then they asked me to move to the tub. I slid into the warm water, and felt my whole body relax. I smiled and told the midwife that I felt like I was at a spa. I looked over at my daughter, who was next to the tub, and smiled, and told her she was doing great. I held my husband's hand gently. At that moment, there was literally no pain anywhere in my body, and felt totally peaceful.

Then- with the next contraction (my first in the tub)- the most intense pain of it all- one, big pain, longer than the rest- I saw only white and I screamed- I felt the baby literally spread my hips and slide through- and then, a warm, wet baby boy was placed on my chest. Eli Maximiliano, 7 lbs, 11 oz.

The total time from picking up the pizza to delivering my Eli was 2 hours. The total time from when I knew I was in labor to the birth was about 45 minutes. The total time pushing was about 30 seconds.

My birth experience with Eli was the most amazing thing I have ever done. But, I don't think it started when I was in labor- my whole pregnancy I had been preparing myself for it, and the biggest step for me was losing any fears I had about the pain and letting my body work the way it needed to. The oddest part about the birth was that, for the first time, right after birth I was able to walk and move, instead of having a sand bag for a lower body for hours afterwards. I had no tears and needed no stitches, which was a first (with both of my other babies I had tearing), so was very surprised by how great I felt afterwards.

I was only in need of a nap and some (cold!) pepperoni pizza.