

Birth

Paul's 'Pinion

Birth seems pretty violent to me. Terra needed stitches after hers. Yet, the birthing of a new life is as sacred an experience as I've ever witnessed. As with every other form of violence in our hitman culture, we've fled from it and dull our awareness of this sacred violence through various interventions like epidurals. We even contract it out to our doctors who perform our violence for us through C-sections. This example of hitman culture is as clear as any.

Before we decided to have a baby, Paul and I had long talks and explored the idea of being parents and what the birth process might look like. At some point in all this talk, I realized I was going to continue to question whether to be a mother or not for the rest of my childbearing years if I didn't just do it. I had a deep urge to have a child, and we wanted to explore our ideas about parenting.

We decided now (then) was as good a time as any because there would never be a perfect time.

What gave me the idea that I could have a baby at home without a doctor or a midwife was the sense of self-trust and connection I had developed through my lifestyle.

I think my yoga practice is one of the ways I have fostered a strong connection with myself, my health, and my body. Even more, having lived in a porous world with only a layer of canvas to separate my flesh from the soaking rain and having fed many living fires in order to receive the nourishment of warm food has awakened in me an inner truth, an inner power. I trust my body enough to believe that I can birth a baby without medical interventions. I have sat with intense menstrual pain which induced vomiting and a wrenching of my being. I have directed these intense experiences toward prayer and recognition of pain and suffering in our world. I have transformed pain into understanding and empathy. I trusted I could

transform the pain of childbirth and share this sacred moment of connection with my child, my community, and now you.

I have attended many births as a doula (or birth servant). I have offered my body and strength as the rock to push against while singing words of encouragement. I have been a midwife to goats and have intervened minimally, trusting their bodies to know how to birth. I have supported a doe's perineum and helped her gently coax her kid from her womb.

All this to say that I knew what was possible.

Some people might think we were being negligent by not going to a doctor at any point during my pregnancy, but I knew I wasn't. I was recognizing that I trusted my body and my baby. I trusted our health and knew that I didn't need to trouble myself with spending my money, or the state's, for nothing. Just

because something is available doesn't mean we have to use it. There are other ways. I also knew I could not contract out the sacred violence of this birth.

I gave birth in my own home, acting as my own midwife, with the support of family and friends, one of whom was a very experienced doula. I understand that this is not for everybody. Of course not. But I recognized I could, and so I did. And Paul trusted me and my body. We trusted that I would be able to tell if something wasn't right, and we could take precautions if that was the case. We also trusted that chances were it would be fine.

Through the pregnancy, I had to filter out other people's ideas and doubts and listen within myself to whether those were in me—or just other people clouding my judgment.

On one such day early in the pregnancy, I was feeling the weight of someone else's worry. I had a phone conversation about the birth which led me to question my choices. I lay down for a moment and took some deep breaths and then decided to look in a book called I Ching, which has some lovely wisdom within its pages. As I like to do with this book, I closed my eyes, held it, and put forth some questions: "Is this the right path of pregnancy for me? Are my intentions safe? Am I making the right choices?"

When I opened the book to the symbol "Li," which I had never come upon before that day, serendipity spoke. It happens that, the same day, I had been playing with the spelling of a family name Lee and come up with Li as a gender neutral middle name. Not planning any sonograms or ultrasounds, I was nestling into the nine-month wait and name game.

The symbol Li represents fire clinging to wood, or rather, passion clinging to truth. The words I read encouraged me, affirming that I knew my truth and although others have truths that may cloud mine, I can let my passion cling to my truth as the fire clings to wood.

Another book I highly recommend, Birthing from Within by Pam England, leads the reader through birth art. In that book, the author suggests that if there is a crouching tiger waiting while a woman is trying to give birth, the woman will feel instinctively that it is not a safe place and she will not be able to relax. Relaxing is essential to birthing. The hospital room, with its unfamiliar smells, sounds, and people, or interventions based on time and schedule, all felt like a crouching tiger to me. Some women might feel safer in this environment. For me, being at home seemed best.

Creating birth art strengthened my intuition and helped me address my fears ahead of time so I could move beyond them. The visualization of overcoming a challenge can help us recognize our fears, not as truths, but only as stories.

I will never forget a woodburned plaque that still hangs in Turtle Island Preserve's outdoor kitchen, Nacho Mama's Café, which reads:

Fear is the thief of dreams.



The birth team supporting Terra during labor. (Photo credit Maria)

After Zinnia's birth, we asked everyone in attendance to write down their experience for Zinnia in later years. Here is a compilation of three accounts, provided by our friend Amelia, our friend and doula Christi, and Paul's sister Ellen.



Amelia: I am constantly grateful for the community that we live in and the friends that I have found who help me on this journey through life. I have a deep appreciation but little understanding of the happenstance that put us all in the same place at the same time, but I sit in wonder...full of gratitude. The events that led up to this day put Paul and Terra in my life, but this next meeting was planned. We all sat in preparation, getting more and more excited as Terra's belly grew.

Christi: The day before Zinnia's birth, Terra texted that she was having some cramping/contractions. I spoke with her on the phone and she was feeling good, excited that this may be the beginning of labor. She and Paul went out to eat¹, and she returned home. I felt that call was the "get prepared" call. I packed my bags and felt excited and calm, that feeling that comes when a baby will soon be joining our outside world.

Ellen: I got the text at 9:30 p.m. I was at a gas station filling up after a parent meeting that had gone on longer than expected. I was gearing up for a three day weekend that was going to be the last of my summer vacation before I started my second year teaching Montessori. "Contractions are becoming more regular, you don't need to come here yet but we will keep you updated." It couldn't have been better timing. I had three days with no obligations. I was so happy that I would get to be there for the birth.

Amelia: I remember getting the call late one night to put me on alert. I found my headlamp and put it beside my bed just in case I needed to find the hideout in the dark, and I forced myself to sleep despite the

¹ **Terra:** We had a gift card to Outback Steakhouse and figured we weren't going to get to use it after the baby was born. It was pretty surreal.

anticipation. I woke up early the next morning. I didn't want to go to work. I knew I could think about nothing else at this point, so I came on over to find the farm—full of life—true to its name. Terra was obviously laboring. Christi was there. It was quiet. I was anxious and nervous.

Christi: The next morning, somewhere between 4:30 and 5, I received a text that the contractions were getting stronger. I had a conversation with Terra, and we decided I would come over and sit with her for a bit, check for dilation, and determine whether I would call in to work or not. So off to the farm I went, bags in tow. When I arrived, Paul had to come meet me so I wouldn't get lost in the dark! As I arrived at the hideout, I observed Terra in her space, moving through contractions very well. The energy felt great; Paul and Terra were sweet with each other, with a loving vibe that was infectious. At 5:30 a.m. the fetal heart tones (FHT) were 130 beats per minute (BPM). A good rate. We decided to do an internal check at 5:45 a.m. Terra's cervix was opening, already at 2-3 cm, and there were no forewaters. That means I was able to directly feel the baby's head!! As I touched Terra's cervix, I swept a few adhesions away; that allowed her to open a little easier. Terra continued working marvelously through her contractions.

Ellen: I got another call at 5:30 a.m. from Paul to confirm that the baby would be born that day!

Christi: At 6:45 a.m., Terra laid down on her side to get some rest, as she had not slept much since the night before last. At 7 a.m., Paul and Terra's neighbors, Maria, Sebastienne, and Ada arrived bringing sweet energy, food, and awe. At 7:15 a.m. the baby's heart rate was 120, with rates of 120, 150, 120 during the contraction. We wanted to check the FHT during the contraction because it is one of the ways we know how the baby is tolerating labor.

Ellen: I meant to leave before morning traffic picked up. Three or four hours later Arthur and I were in the car. I was cursing that I took too long packing, and stressing out that I would miss the entire birth.

I'm sure that I was slightly reckless on my way, becoming more and more frustrated at my leisurely packing and preparing. Meanwhile I am getting congratulatory texts from friends and updates from the farm to let me know that the time is coming soon.

I reached the farm between 8 and 10 a.m. My frantic energy and the farm met each other like water on a hot skillet. My mood evaporated and was sizzled away by the smiling faces and the glow around the farm that day. Sebastienne and Maria were weaving about the wooded trails, preparing to feed the chickens and goats with Ada, Maria's 10 year-old daughter. As I tromped through woods towards the hideout, I could tell I was moving closer and closer to the heart of the feeling that surrounded me. I stepped through the screen door and I felt that I was entering a soft sweet womb. Everyone was smiling, glowing, happy, and to my relief there was no baby born, not yet.

Terra was propped up on the pillows, sweating, even though it was a very crisp and cool morning. Everything felt so gentle and sweet. My frantic energy was put into such perspective. I felt ridiculous. I explained how nervous I was that I had missed the whole event. "How is it?" I asked Terra. She gave me a wide, bliss-filled smile, "It's intense."

Christi: The immense amount of energy coursing through Terra could be felt in the hideout, and the beauty of everyone tending fire, hauling water, and preparing a sacred space for Terra to birth was just beginning to unite everyone. Amelia and I toned with Terra, singing with her as well. The singing will always be a favorite part of my birth memory of Zinnia and Terra. Amelia led us in several songs, and I felt the opening in my own body, so I knew Terra was progressing nicely. At 8:30 a.m., we also did an external fundal check on Terra, showing three fingers between fundus and xiphoid process, which translated to about 4 cm. Then after toning² and singing, another external fundal check showed two fingers, translating to about 6 cm. At 8:52 a.m. the baby's heart tones were 125.

Ellen: I left quickly to find myself a job so that I could put all of my excited energy to use. Arthur had found a job tending to the fire. I made myself busy by relieving Susie in the kitchen and made corn cakes and eggs. It was one of the least efficient meals I have ever made. I made each plate separately: three corn cakes, two eggs, then to the garden to collect veggies, return to the stove to sauté. Reheat the corn cakes that had gotten cold, deliver the meal and back to do the whole thing all over again. I was so grateful for my inefficiency and anyone who wanted to make an order.

Christi: Terra made me giggle at one point because her contractions were clearly getting more intense, as they do when in active labor, and she welcomed one with, “Here comes annnooooootthhheerrrr onnnnnneeee! ☺” in a sing-song voice that left no doubt that she was happy about it. Sometime during this process, she said, “Goodness gracious,” and Amelia and I looked at each other and smiled. Amelia said, “It’s serious now.” Karen arrived during our toning, and she melded right in, sharing her energy and massaging Terra as she contracted. Outside, everyone was still carrying water and filling the pool. I began setting up immediate birth supplies, as well as post birth supplies. I gave Amelia and Karen a tour of the items, so they could assist.

Amelia: As the day unfolded, I was in awe. The community of people who worked seamlessly together to welcome this babe was amazing. Watching those who quietly completed the farm chores, heated water, herded goats (who were also excited), and then sat with curious eyes was so comforting. What a wonderful way to bring this babe into the world!

Ellen: Around noon, Terra and her birthing team left the small hideout and entered the simple and beautiful setup that was created for the purpose of providing her with a comfortable, outdoor water birth. The fire tenders transferred the hot water from the claw foot tub and into the plastic inflatable pool. Blue and green yoga mats were laid down like a red carpet so that gorgeous naked laboring Terra could walk from her wooden pallet stairs, down across the mulch path, and under the canvas popup.

Terra laid in the pool. The water was shallow, so one side was lifted to create a deeper end where she could lay comfortably submerged. It felt like fall, but all the leaves were bright green.

² **Terra:** To tone is to hold a sustained note of a single vowel sound, usually “ah,” or “oh.” I remember one particular contraction when our toning felt like angels singing.

Terra had mentioned at our birth team meeting the week before that she would enjoy hearing drumming during her birth. I popped up, ran through the narrow path, around the well house and chicken coop, and scurried up the ladder above the toolshed, where I knew the drums were kept.

Our songs felt like waves becoming stronger as Terra's state became more intense. All of our voices joined with the drum and her moans, until one by one the voices would quiet down, the rhythm would change, and we'd move to a different song or become altogether quiet, until the next swell. We were all caught up together in the same tide, and it was pulling us all toward one common goal.

Christi: Terra was able to move about and find positions that worked for her. The water lightened the weight of the baby considerably. At 1:33 p.m., we did an internal exam and she was completely dilated! There was a little forewater, as well as an anterior lip on her cervix. I mentioned that it could be easier to push if the water was broken, and asked her to bear down while I inserted my fingers and grabbed the amniotic sac. As she had a contraction and bore down she expressed gratitude and asked her water to break. It did. Everyone exclaimed in amazement.

Amelia: Things got a bit more intense, and Terra decided to move inside. The physical strength of the whole community showed in each of us then. Christi applied counter pressure to the perineum to give Terra a target to push toward and constant assurance that she was doing great. Karen's deep strong voice was singing and ohming. I had a sheet around my back for Terra to pull against and a shout of strength when needed. Paul provided stability in precarious positions and emotional support. It showed in the strong calves of the onlookers as they stretched up on tiptoe to look through the windows. The strength of this community was clear. And no one could forget Terra—your power, trust, and courage inspire me still.

Christi: Terra squatted and pulled against the sheet around Amelia, who was on the bed. She got her bearings and started pushing and directing the energy at this point. The baby was moving down the birth canal nicely. We kept checking FHT and everything sounded good, but I didn't write them down. Karen and I were behind Terra, and Paul and Amelia were in front of her. Everyone else was outside the windows of the hideout, looking in! That was a funny sight!

Ellen: We were all outside listening. We were not the only ones! There stood Mercurio, the 200 lb. billy goat, peering through the trees. He began sauntering down the path toward us. There was a scramble of horns and hooves, wire fencing, and stakes. There was running back and forth through the easement, past the kitchen, and through the garden, to connect the solar panel to the electric wire. Arthur was able to muscle the goat back into the fence. We gathered and laughed about the escape. Before we knew it, he was out again. This time, I was able to tempt him with food. By the third escape, we were able to sturdy up the fence. Once the goat was thoroughly pissed and we were all filled with good stories, we returned to the hideout and listened to the waves still crashing within the darkened door. After a few moments of listening quietly, we heard Christi yell, "That's it! That is it!"

Christi: As the baby started descending more, getting ready to crown, we supported Terra even more. The energy was intense. The room was throbbing with life. Time seemed to stand still and move quickly all at once. I spoke to Terra about small pushes while supporting Zinnia's head as it began to emerge. I was

thinking, “This baby will be slippery, do not drop it. Grasp firmly so it does not fall.” At this moment, practical thoughts were competing for space in the pure, sacred energy of the life force. Everything was throbbing, everyone melding together.

Amelia: I specifically remember several moments of seeing pure amazement in Ada’s eyes as the day progressed, but none like the moment that Zinnia first made her appearance. Her head was born, and the eyes of the onlookers said it all. I remember helping to pull her up to her mama for the first time. I felt relief, gratitude, and so much joy!

Christi: Then Zinnia’s head was out. I checked for the cord, which she had around her neck, but I couldn’t pull it over her head. With Terra’s next push, she summersaulted through her cord and out of Terra’s body. This was the point that we both felt Terra tear. After the placenta was born, we got Terra onto the bed and Zinnia onto Terra’s belly. I was rubbing Zinnia, encouraging her to start learning to breathe. Her lungs sounded wet, so I used the DeLee suction to clear out her throat. I continued rubbing and talking and suctioning. Amelia helped me by suctioning out Zinnia’s nose and mouth with the nasal aspirator. Terra was lovingly talking to Zinnia in her new mama high. Susie reported that Zinnia was born at 5 p.m.

Amelia: The next few moments were a little tense as she wheezed for breath and stayed a little purple. It was a moment of connection for me with Christi. I was grateful to be present with her in that moment. To share the worry—to work together to make sure we had a healthy baby—a healthy mom.

Ellen: Every sound Zinnia made allowed me a breath of relief. Every overextended moment of silence, I felt constriction. All around me were smiling faces, clear eyes, focused and positive minds, especially Terra’s. She looked down at her baby girl, absolutely elated. She cooed sweetly to her baby as Paul and Terra and Christy sucked fluid from Zinnia’s nose, rubbed her chest, and waited for stronger cries.

They came! I immediately called my mother, who would have sniffed out any fear in my voice. Finally, I was able to pass along confident news of a healthy, happy baby girl. Yes, her fingers were a little blue, but she was crying and wailing as strongly as you could hope for.

Christi: At that point, we decided to take a look at Terra’s bottom to see about the tear. We determined that she should get stitches. Paul called and spoke with a friend at the hospital. She told them to come on in. We got Terra cleaned up, dressed Zinna, and figured out the car seat placement in the car (which took about five people, because the base didn’t match the seat). Terra grabbed some food, and off we went.

At the hospital, the doctor examined Terra and confirmed two tears. A second degree perineal tear and another near her clitoris. She was able to stitch these up, and off everyone went back home.

Ellen: Zinnia’s life has been filled with tiny miracles. I’m sure I am only privy to a few, such as the hawk that flew down at the farm and caused such a stir, and can you believe it, at that very moment a hawk swooped down at their car just as Paul, Terra, and Zinnia pulled into the hospital.

I drove home happy that all three of these beloved people were and still are in the arms of such a sweet and supportive community.

Christi: This was the most connected, beautiful, community-oriented birth that I have ever attended. It was amazing that throughout this labor, Terra would ask her body to open, water to break, anterior lip to recede, placenta to release, and her body would oblige. She had a very strong connection with her physical self. Watching Terra in labor was an honor, a joy, and an affirmation that women can follow and lead their bodies in the magical dance of birth. Singing with other women, fire, water, air, earth, everything that was present to bring this little person into our world continually brought tears to my eyes. The food that was provided for everyone kept away my usual post birth headache. I was nourished on every level on the day of Zinnia's birth. I think everyone there was. Thank you, Terra and Paul, for allowing me to share this sacred space with you.

Terra: Birthing Zinnia reaffirmed my trust in my body and intuition. It also confirmed for all of us the power of a community that supports one another in meeting our basic needs directly.

After the birth, Amelia organized a meal train where different community members brought us food so that we would not have to cook in the days immediately following. She originally intended for seven people to sign up so that we would receive a meal every other day for two weeks. There ended up being so much interest and support that we were offered a meal every day—and sometimes two—for two weeks. Several other people took on some of my management duties at the farmers market. We are extremely grateful to live in a community with so many kind and generous people.



Amelia, Terra, and Zinnia. (Photo Credit Maria)