

# December More Voices: Birth

Category: Birth

written by Paul Gross | December 1, 2024

Dear readers,

My wife's labor with our first child did not go as planned. We took childbirth classes, and like every other couple, we hoped for a birth experience worthy of a Hallmark card: manageable pain, minimal drugs and a supportive partner—in this case me, a family-medicine resident, whose comforting presence and able coaching would smooth over any rough patches.

Fast forward a few weeks: It's D-Day. Diane is exhausted, having endured forty-eight hours of labor, the last twenty hours of which have been unbearably painful. She's said yes to narcotics and has survived a very uncomfortable night, during which, during a lull, I took refuge in the hospital cafeteria, where I chatted with our capable midwife, who reassured me that there was little to do but allow nature to take its course.

Come the morning, nature does take its course, but in an unexpected direction. When Diane's body finally signals that it's time to push, the baby's heart rate slows—a sign of fetal distress.

A sense of alarm permeates the air and draws onlookers. What has been a private affair—Diane, our midwife and me—now becomes a public event. The room fills with nurses anxiously watching the decelerations, which grow more pronounced with each push. Meanwhile, the baby's head isn't advancing.

Our midwife calls for backup.

"Stop pushing!" someone yells. "I can't!" Diane yells back, her face red with effort.

A nurse hurriedly wheels a metal cart into the room, part of a chaotic ballet I've seen before. We're heading somewhere serious. *This isn't happening*, I think.

A young obstetrician materializes. I pray that she's competent. And kind.

A no-nonsense nurse plasters an oxygen mask over Diane's face. A moment passes.

"I can't breathe!" Diane shouts.

"The machine light is on...that means the oxygen's flowing," the nurse insists.

"No it's not!" Diane yells, trying to rip the mask away.

Meanwhile, the OB is looking at the fetal tracing and, all business, examines Diane, who screams again.

"The baby's got to come out," the OB says. "I need forceps."

A nurse hands her a pair of frighteningly large metal tongs, which she positions and thrusts deep into Diane, whose screams intensify as the OB fumbles with the tongs, trying to manipulate them around the baby's head.

It takes forever.

She finally gets a grip and pulls, Diane still screaming. A head emerges, and we see an umbilical cord looped around the neck. The OB unwraps the cord, and with a final tug, she pulls out a gush of baby and fluid.

It's a girl. She's limp. Bluish. No movement. No cry. The OB hastily cuts the cord, and another doctor swoops our lifeless child away.

As I look back on that morning, what I remember most clearly is my own feelings of helplessness. Shame for not protecting Diane from a stupid protocol—the oxygen mask she didn't need. Inadequacy for not having done more to ease her hours of labor, suffered in a pain-and-narcotic-induced haze.

I also remember feelings of panic and dread as our limp, lifeless baby was carried away. As a resident, I'd seen many good people suffer terrible outcomes. A friend and fellow resident had recently lost his toddler son to a brain tumor.

*Is this our turn?* I wondered hopelessly.

And yet, whatever emotional trauma I experienced paled in comparison to Diane's ordeal—two days of pain, physical exhaustion and a loss of bodily control culminating in a brutal physical violation, an assault that tears the skin and scars the soul. Could I imagine what that felt like? No, in all honesty I could not, even though I'd watched it unfold.

The final twist:

Surprise! A happy outcome! Our baby daughter, who we named Cara, started breathing after a few slaps on the back and some puffs of oxygen. *A healthy baby girl! A miracle!*

This rescue snaps our attention away from what has just transpired. *It could have been so much worse, we tell ourselves. And look, there's a baby to take care of—nursing to do, diapers to change. Time to move forward.*

And yet...don't the body and soul keep score?

In thinking about our birth experience, in recalling the women in labor I saw as a medical student, the ones being yelled at by unfeeling staff—"PUSH HARDER! STOP GRUNTING! HARDER! STOP SCREAMING! PUSH HARDER! STOP PUSHING, THE DOCTOR'S NOT HERE!"—it makes me wonder: How many women are scarred by childbirth? How many experience PTSD?

And how many willingly go through it all again? Two years later, Diane was pregnant with our second daughter—ready to take her chances.

Could I have been so brave?

December's *More Voices* theme is Birth. What's been your experience with birth—as a mother, a partner, a caregiver or health professional?

Share your story using the [More Voices Submission Form](#). For more details, visit [More Voices FAQs](#). And have a look at last month's theme: [Recovering](#).

Remember, your story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

We look forward to hearing from you!

With warm regards,

Paul Gross  
Editor