

Isadora's Water Birth

The cure for anything is salt water-
sweat, tears, or the sea.

- Isack Dinesen

The three months leading up to Isadora's birth were filled with grief and stress, beginning with the sudden, tragic deaths of two close family friends at summer's end. Then in September, planes crashed into the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. I thought the world was coming to an end as I listened to the radio. The towers collapsed, thousands died, people were filled with fear and rage. And then George W. Bush declared his "war on terrorism" by targeting Afghanistan, and he began bombing the hell out of a country already in ruins. I imagined all the women- the pregnant women, the women with children, the women in labor. What was it like to give birth with bombs falling around you? And then in October my mother went into the hospital with what looked like lung cancer. On a visit down to Cape Cod to see my mother, my son George got croup, and I stayed up for two nights with him, carrying him in and out of the bathroom, steamy with hot shower water. I sat on the toilet in my parents' bathroom, struggling to keep George on my lap, as I was hugely pregnant. My husband was back in Maine and my son was sick and so was my mother and the world was in ruins and people were dying violently and I was so tired. I was scared. I cried a lot.

I continued crying on a daily basis- at least for a good hour or so for the next three weeks. It felt good to cry. But I felt guilty about it, as if my sadness for the world were somehow seeping into the little life that was in my belly and doing damage. I worried aloud about it during a childbirth relaxation class my husband Craig and I took at the Ballard House. When the instructor asked me what my pregnancy story was about, I told her how sad and scared I was and how I felt bad about feeling this way, for the baby's sake. "Why feel bad?", the instructor asked. It's just the beginning of this baby's story.

On Monday night, November 19th, which was my son George's fourth birthday. I lay in bed, having contractions and crying. When I slept, I dreamt that I was having a baby. I kept trying to calm my mind down, but I was having the rushing thoughts that signal labor. The next afternoon, I was sitting on the couch with George and my water broke. The gush of warm, salty water was familiar and yet surprising. The little soul inside me was ready to come out and be in the world.

I called Rae, my step-mother-in-law, who was going to fly in to support me during the birth, and I also called my midwife, Brenda. Because my labor with George was fast, I anticipated that this one would be even faster.

But it wasn't. It was a slow and lolling labor. As the night wore on, I made two huge pots of soup, got the house ready, and gathered up all the birthing supplies. Midnight came and went. My in-laws arrived as did Brenda with Kelcy, her apprentice. Brenda set up the Rubbermaid tub and began to fill it with hot water.

Craig and I walked the streets of our neighborhood in the dead of the November night. I rested and slept a little, but not much. I was too excited. My labor continued, soft and hazy and gentle all evening and into the morning.

After George was safely off to preschool, Craig and I went for another walk. While walking, my contractions became much stronger and closer together, but when I came back to the house, they slowed down again. So we went back out with Brenda and Kelcy for another walk at around 10:30 am. By 11:00 or so I was really rolling, having to stop and lean against Craig for some powerful contractions every three or four minutes. As we were walking I began to feel euphoric. The neighborhood looked so beautiful! The blackness of that tree against the bright sky was amazing! My body was manufacturing its own very potent painkillers. I felt ecstatic.

My body was preparing me for opening. The slow and gentle trickle of salt water between my legs comforted me. And I felt safe in the hands of my birthing team. We went up into the bedroom where the tub was set up. The room was cozy and safe and quiet, and I knelt in front of an armchair because I wasn't ready to get into the tub. As I knelt and Brenda and Craig rubbed my back, I felt an intense rush of grief bubble up from the deepest part of me. It seemed to come up my throat, and I was able to let it come up -all the sadness I had felt for all those months. I sobbed and moaned, salty tears trickling into my mouth.

I knew it was time to get into the tub after I cried all the tears that would come. The warm water felt so good, and I sunk in as deep as I could. I floated and realized between the contractions, I floated and looked into my husband's eyes, and he wiped my neck and face with a cool cloth. I breathed. And then a contraction would come and the wave of it would take me up and rock me until I thought I would surely die from the pain, the searing, clenching strength of my uterus. And then as the pain became its most unbearable, it would begin to let go. As it dissipated, I would float and breathe and look at my husband. His eyes were electric and filled with love.

The midwives knelt next to the tub, encouraging me through the contractions, listening for the baby's heartbeat, and giving me sips of water. Rae stayed in the back of the room, quietly documenting the experience by taking pictures. I was surrounded on all sides by great energy. I felt loved and taken care of.

I was in the tub for a few hours, and the contractions kept getting stronger, coming one on top of another with barely any resting in between. I was awash in the most intense pain, and I hung over the side of the tub, sweating and panting, unable to focus on anything. The sweat poured off me. I needed something to do with all that pain, and I kept asking Brenda if I could push, thinking that at least I could push through the pain. Brenda told me that I would know when I needed to push, that my body would take care of itself, but that I still needed to let myself open up to let the baby through. She said that she thought something was holding me back from completely opening up.

With those words, I realized that I was holding back out of fear. I was afraid-afraid of the pain, afraid of the unknown, afraid of splitting open, afraid of letting my baby into this world, this world that is so horrible and so beautiful, so rich and so painful. I suddenly knew that I needed to stop trying to control the pain or struggle against it and instead to open myself to it, to let it wash over me. I went deep inside myself and found that dark, quiet place and pictured my cervix as a flower that needed to bloom. I let it bloom, and the pain washed over me, and my body was transformed. I got on my knees and the next contractions brought a powerful, wracking spasm, a physical recognition of the depth and vastness of my openness-the pushing was my body's own response to that deepest feeling. I reached down and felt Isadora's head, like a sweet fuzzy peach. And with the next contraction, she slithered out of me completely, into the warm water. Brenda passed her to me, and I lay back in the tub and held her and told her that I love her.

Isadora is a water baby, a healing baby, a love baby. She's like the warm salty seawater she emerged from-peaceful and calming but also intense. Her sweet soul comforts me when the world gets too rough and ugly. And I love to nurse her. It connects me to the powerful, perfect tug of life.

Nicole Chaison is a free lance writer living in Portland, Maine