

Let me start off by saying that I have two BEAUTIFUL, healthy children that I was blessed to give birth naturally to. I know natural birthing is quite a controversial subject these days. Between the many statistics, opinions (medical and otherwise,) pressure from friends and family, and those who insist that not giving birth naturally is nothing to be ashamed of, it can be quite confusing when deciding which course to take. While I do my best to never judge another mother's choices, I do know that certain decisions and actions can contribute to a healthier and more enjoyable birth (Yup, that's right. Enjoyable.) I'd like to share some of my experiences and maybe a few comparisons between both of my birth stories.....My husband and I had been in Okinawa for only a few months before I found out I was expecting. Back in the states, I gave birth to my son at home and had the privilege of having an AMAZING midwifery team, so naturally I was looking for a similar experience with my second here. I was so disappointed to find out that there weren't any American midwives and that I would need a translator for the single Japanese midwife on island who services Americans. I wasn't completely comfortable with that, (not to mention, it would be a bit of a strain financially,) so I decided to look into other options.

Pretty early on in my pregnancy, a friend mentioned that they had seen a car decal for something called Oceanside HypnoBirthing and Doula Services. I had already been seen at the Kadena clinic and was considering giving birth at Foster with a doula since the possibility of birthing at home seemed to be severely limited. I contacted Amanda Dodson and she ended up being the best thing that happened to me during my pregnancy! Her support (before and AFTER birth,) encouragement, and genuine desire to see a mother empowered by childbirth was a fundamental part to my wonderful birth experience. She helped me look into different local options (Yui clinic,) and supported me when my husband and I decided (after much prayer) to give birth at the new Foster hospital. Most importantly, she helped reaffirm my suspicion that childbirth could be an enjoyable event.

Let me give a little background. I had a relatively short labor with my oldest (9 hours) but very painful. My contractions came right on top of each other, and though I had the support of my wonderful husband and previous doula, I was completely unprepared mentally. My water had broken over 24 hours before active labor started, and I was having prelabor contractions for almost as long. I was timing them at 5 minutes apart, and being a first time mom, thought I was in labor. My midwife and doula arrived to find an anxious mommy who clearly was not in active labor. They made my husband and I breakfast, checked me (I was barely at a 2,) and told us to rest up because the baby might not be coming for a while. Shortly after they left however, I went into active labor. I remember crying in the shower because I didn't think there was any way I would be able to handle real labor if it was already so painful. I was completely discouraged from the get go and even after my husband called them to ask them to come over, I didn't realize that I was actually in labor! For me, the checks in the beginning were discouraging as well, and as I neared the transition, I felt so out of control of my body that I began to panic. Thankfully, the urge to push came quickly and I was encouraged to push in whatever position was most comfortable. For the first time since my labor began, I felt strong. After my beautiful boy was born, the midwifery team weighed and checked him out, cleaned up, cooked us some dinner, told us goodnight and that they'd be back in the morning. I didn't realize how wonderful this was until I gave birth in a hospital setting! But I'm getting ahead of myself...

In any case, this time around, I knew that I wanted to not only give birth naturally, but work with my body rather than feeling powerless. So first, I asked to be seen by a midwife for my prenatal appointments. I was scheduled to be seen by a midwife (which ended up being a total blessing.) I was very upfront about what I wanted from the first appointment and she essentially told me that I had the right to birth how I wanted to, and that if I wanted an all-natural birth with no interventions, then I could do it. So, I wrote up a birth plan and asked her to show it to all the OBGYN and midwife staff so nobody would be surprised when I arrived. I also began to prepare myself mentally and emotionally. Amanda gave me a list of positive birth affirmations as well as a list of bible verses confirming the strength God gives us to do what He created our bodies to do. I spent a little bit of time each day reading over these verses and affirmations, reminding myself that childbirth does not have to be a fearful experience. I bought myself a special birthing gown and a candle with a calming scent, body butter for massage during labor, and had a playlist of worship music that I had listened to during my daily quiet time. I also spent a lot of time in prayer, asking for the Lord's strength and His peace when the time came to bring my little girl into the world.

Several days after my due date, a Saturday, I started having prelabor contractions. I tried not to get my hopes up because I hadn't had any sign that my water would break anytime soon. Not to mention, I had a prenatal massage scheduled for the next day and I really wanted the baby to wait for that! Anyway, on Sunday, the contractions became more frequent and at 6 pm I had the first sign that my water would break soon (you moms know what I mean) an HOUR before my massage. I decided to go anyway. Those poor Japanese women when they found out I was contracting through the whole thing! My water broke on my way out (thankfully not enough to get everywhere) and when I got home my hubby and I put our son in bed and sat down to watch some tv. At about 9 pm, I started having active labor contractions. We put on the music, turned off the tv and the lights, and lit a candle. I found leaning over my birthing ball helped tremendously with contractions and my husband put counter pressure on my back as well. I focused on the music and breathed deeply; working with my body each time a contraction came. I was completely at peace, a HUGE difference from the labor I had with my son. When the contractions started to intensify, I had my husband call Amanda and she arrived sometime after 10 pm. She encouraged me to drink water, put pressure on my back when I needed it, and did some light touch massage. Her presence was extremely calming, and we found ourselves laughing and joking during labor (something I had heard of other women doing, but couldn't imagine after my first birth experience.) Around 11:30, my contractions picked up and became very intense. We decided to call a friend to pick up our son so we could get ready to head to the hospital. I could tell I was transitioning, and was starting to feel some pressure at the end of each contraction. It seemed that bending over something was the most comfortable position, so I ended up leaning over the backseat of our car with Amanda beside me still applying counter pressure to my lower back. We got to Foster in probably 7 minutes (My husband FLEW down 58!) and I walked through a contraction to get inside the hospital. We headed up to labor and delivery, and by the time we got there the contractions were coming strong and hard every minute or so. I told the charge nurse I was going to need to push soon so I needed a room. She insisted that we had to check into Triage and was not happy when I declined having any type of blood work or IV. She responded with, "Well, this IS a hospital." I told her that it was on my birth plan and I would sign a waiver if I needed to. She left the room and I continued to work through the contractions, though I was

a bit more stressed out at this point than I had been before. When she came back in, she wanted me to lie on my back to do a check. I told her no because I really didn't see the need for it. I was obviously in full blown labor and I was feeling a lot of pressure at the end of each contraction. She seemed baffled and left the room again. After some time passed and my contractions became stronger, Amanda brought up the point that doing one check might get me into a room more quickly and eliminate the risk of giving birth right there in Triage. I agreed to do one check but asked the nurse not to tell me how far along I was. (I knew that if I was at a number that wasn't as far along as I thought I should be, I would become discouraged and labor could slow down.) Thankfully, she just said that they were going to admit me to a room though it wasn't time to push yet. When we got to the room, I assumed my leaning over the bed position, trying to breathe through contractions. At this point a male OBGYN entered and told me that he had looked over my birth plan and everything was agreeable except for the fact that he was a man (I had asked for a midwife or female OBGYN and absolutely no males in the room besides my husband until after the baby was born.) Apparently there were no other females on duty and my midwife was on a trip to Tokyo. I knew the baby would be there soon, so I told him it was fine. He began to explain why he wanted to put in a heparin lock (with no running fluid) in case of emergency. I told him that it was in my birth plan not to have one, and again that I would sign any paperwork I needed to. (Also, in case you're wondering, the reason I declined the IV is simply because I have given birth before without one, and I get very anxious over needles. I knew having one would be unneeded and would just stress me out, which is something I definitely wanted to avoid.) Well, anyway, he didn't seem very pleased by this and left the delivery room. Not long after, I started feeling the urge to push (I must have only been in the delivery room 10 minutes.) The charge nurse looked over at me and exclaimed, "Are you pushing?! Honey, if you're pushing you need to tell me!" I responded with, "I'M PUSHING!" Someone darted off to get the OBGYN and the nurses told me it was time to turn around and lie on my back. I told them no, and continued pushing. I became vaguely aware that there were two male corpsmen in the room as I delivered leaning over the back of the bed. (I found out later that the OBGYN had never delivered in the position, and I'm assuming this is why I "needed" to turn over.) In any case, Nicolette Raene came into the world perfectly healthy at 8 lb. 4 oz. with no complications or even a tear. To their credit, the staff at Foster Naval hospital followed most of my birth plan and allowed me to do skin to skin for an hour afterward. They didn't hassle me about declining vaccines, eye drops, or the vitamin K shot (though I was told they didn't have the oral supplements as an alternative, which was untrue. She was given Vitamin K orally after she was seen by the pediatrician.) However, one of the major wishes they violated was allowing the corpsmen into the room. There honestly was no reason for them to be there as I delivered because I was doing skin to skin for an hour afterward, and they were only there to wash and weigh my daughter. Amanda even reminded the charge nurse that I had asked for no males in the room, but her comment was brushed off with, "Well, someone needs to be here for the baby too." I don't believe that nurse will ever realize how much she violated me with that rash decision. Not only did she take away my right to decide who was present at MY birth, but she also allowed other men to see me exposed, something that is exclusively shared between my husband and myself. I know it may not be a big deal for some women, but I'm tired of a mother being told to suck it up and get over feeling embarrassed by having strange men see her at the most vulnerable time of her life.

Anyway, the stay afterwards was unfortunately not all that great either. The rooms and meals were nice, but co-sleeping was not allowed and sleep in general was limited with how often the staff came in to do vitals on both myself and my daughter. (Oh, and the water in the shower didn't get warm! How bizarre, right? I was freezing and shivering when I went to wash off after birth.) Also, they really like to violently poke their hands into your stomach periodically so that you "heal" faster. Ugh. Anyway, though I am thankful that my daughter was healthy and that I was not forced to do anything against my will, I have concluded that I will never give birth in a place where protocol trumps a mother's rights and emotional wellbeing.

All in all though, my labor was wonderful, and whether you're birthing at home or in a hospital, you really can be empowered by your experience. Nothing compares to looking back and knowing you were strong for your child, that you took charge of the labor process and brought your sweet one into the world.

In the end, I would suggest a few things for expecting mothers. First of all, be well informed. Do your research and stand up for your decisions. Don't allow yourself to be treated as if you're stupid or don't know what you're doing. Listen to your body! Take the time to prepare yourself mentally and emotionally, and have a support team. (I would highly recommend a doula!) But most of all, never lose faith in your God-given ability to birth a child and in the One who gives you the strength to see it through to the end.

Rachel