

What does your birth plan mean?

You are about to read how you can assign meaning to the way we give birth. This will be an introduction to a series of walks around a mind museum curated about our birth stories. We will look at what can hold us back in our personal stories today and how we can reconnect to traditional and holistic birth preparation. So that women can cross over into early motherhood with a warriors welcome - no matter how you birthed.

“At least you have a healthy baby”

“I’m just so glad you’re ok”

Directly after birth, or the first time you connected with your baby, what was going through your mind? Can you even remember?! Nothing and everything. There’s a focus on feeding and nurturing. There will be photos, kisses. Someone like a midwife or your partner might say “you did so well!”, “I’m so proud of you”. Still, what were YOU thinking and feeling?

Was this birth what you hoped for or did your plan take a detour? This article is for women who thought “where were my birth wishes during that experience?” This is for the women who felt blindsided by labour and birth and didn’t get the birth story they wanted to share.

So you’re plunged into the newborn time-warp and you will be somewhat relieved that your labour is over, you feel grateful that your baby is here. A few days in you start to sequence the birth and may need some reminders of the chronology. You may even have questions like, “why did that happen then?” and “how did we decide that?” If you had any interventions you didn’t expect some ‘what ifs’ might start to seep into your mind during those long nights and you start to think, when did our birth plan change course?

My first birth preferences basically said ‘no thank you’ to everything including vaginal exams so it was quite a shift when my planned homebirth ended with a caesarean birth. When we were preparing, my husband had packed the just-in-case hospital bag including a laminated sign for the door saying “sshhhh, hypnobirthing mum in progress”.

I remember feeling embarrassed seeing that sign stuck to the door as I was wheeled passed on the way to my emergency section. More like “hypnobirthing mum failing to progress”.

But what I learnt over the next 3 years was that my planned homebirth didn’t end with a caesarean, it started my journey home.

I know now that if I had ‘achieved’ that homebirth, I’d be feeling proud of myself, that my plan ‘worked’ and I was ‘successful’ at birth. I wouldn’t have learnt and unlearnt all the meanings I placed on giving birth, being a mother and my judgemental part would still be fairly loud, shouting at others and myself inside.

Where does your birth plan come from?

When we are little we have already begun to write our life/birth plan. We create our rules for life about age 7 and these values about how to belong in our family/culture are all unconsciously created. If you have a 6/7/8 year old you might hear these rules come out now and again if you listen closely. They usually start with,

“You should/should never...”

“When I grow, I will never/always...”

These beliefs can be positive and keep us safe and others can limit us. Young kids think in black and white and that's how our rules can remain, all the way through to adulthood.

When we approach something as huge as childbirth, these values shape our preparation and planning. You may think, well of course I want the best birth for my baby and me and so that means I will have this type of birth as that's safest. But your 'safest' and your 'best' is subjective.

During pregnancy, we prepare. How?

Physically; with nutrition and exercise (yes that weekly prenatal yoga class counts!) You might learn some birthing movements and practice making sounds. You may even oil your perineum or harvest colostrum.

Socially; listening to positive birth stories, we gather information and then more information! To be informed is to be empowered and that is partly true but it's not an absolute, not when it comes to birth. Knowledge is power but it's not complete protection. Knowing about something in depth cannot prevent it from happening. It may help some of your choices but when it comes to the wild ride of labour, your rational mind can be out of reach.

Mentally; a popular choice is Hypnobirthing which includes feeding your mind positive affirmations, meditation and scripts alongside learning the physiology of birth, crucial breathing techniques and the importance of advocacy. Many women have benefitted from this preparation and it is very appealing to think you can breathe your baby out and in my case I believed I may even have an orgasm on the way. Again this can happen and it is possible, it's just not an absolute given.

All this preparation does help each in its own way yet what it doesn't do is guarantee how your birth will unfold.

How about **emotional** preparation, what did you do? How about **spiritual** preparation? Absence of these latter pieces tend to be missing largely in our culture and yet are probably the most important. You cannot separate the body and mind and during labour your body works incredibly hard so your mind needs to be alongside it.

So you did the prep and you still didn't have the birth you wanted, now what?

We are programmed to think about things with cause and effect. This thinking has been ingrained since the renaissance of science a few centuries ago. It's in our conditioning to find

reason to understand the world. The human mind likes to search for a solid truth, in our culture at least. So your mind might say things like:

“Well you probably could have practiced the breathing techniques more”

“what if you didn’t spend the last month of pregnancy eating rubbish?”

“Maybe if you'd been a bit more informed about induction you would have spoken up”

The inner voices will not quit. You cannot win down this path.

Your feelings about your birth

Is there sadness and disappointment? Shame or anger at certain moments in your labour? They are all valid and you really do feel them. These feelings are heavy to bear and some women can carry them for months and years after birth. It feels so sad when you don't get what you want. Just watch a 3 year old when he can't have another cookie, it can flatten them yet we are competent adults and this is a baby's birth, of course you want the absolute best for them.

What is the birth story you tell yourself?

My hidden secret after my first birth was that I “gave up”. I could not shift that belief for years. I had a birth debrief and rewind sessions which helped me release a bit of the emotion but not that belief. That belief was quietly ruling parts of my life. I was shocked that I wasn't the person I thought I would be in birth.

When the unexpected happens in labour, we create a story about it to ourselves. We look to blame or justify or just feel plain disappointed with others or ourselves. But life goes on! And we have this new little life to nurture. As time goes on our birth story remains like a sentimental piece of clothing in the bottom of your drawers that you will never take to charity but also doesn't get worn.

I did eventually get that clothing out, I washed and hung it out to dry as I did my preparation in my second pregnancy. I held my story up to the light and examined every thread. I dusted off Pam England's groundbreaking book 'Birthing from Within'(1) and did my emotional and spiritual preparation. It felt like I was preparing for my death, I knew something unexpected would happen... and oh man it did! But I was ready for it.

What does your birth mean about you?

The value we place on the way we birth is damaging. A caesarean birth or a medicated birth is no less meaningful than a 'straightforward' vaginal birth. And even when a woman has what she describes as a positive birth, the inner judgemental voices can continue postpartum, eg, if she wasn't able to breastfeed like she wanted or her baby was admitted to NICU. These voices

ultimately belittle the marathon we've just completed. We can believe we are WEAK, A FAILURE or A BAD MOTHER. These psychological complications are hidden and can contribute to the layers of invisible postpartum stress.

Birth in the system

We have to accept we are usually operating within a maternity system invested in risk management based on empirical knowledge. This system is struggling. Midwives within it are struggling. They *know birth* more than any doctor yet they are expected to follow protective organisational policies that place the focus on 'better health outcomes' for the baby and the woman's body. Academic midwife Dr Rachel Reed talks at length in her seminal book 'Reclaiming Childbirth As A Rite Of Passage' (2) how the female body has been taken over and managed over centuries. This can result in the central person's knowing in birth, the mother's, being neglected.

So what can we do?

Because childbirth is a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual journey, we need to include preparation in all of these areas.

Next time you're pregnant or planning a pregnancy, before you write your birth preferences, feel this important call. This isn't just a document to passively write, it can open up a huge opportunity for self exploration and psychological growth. You are the centre of this journey you'll be going on, it's going to happen so yes, pack the transfer bag but also think carefully about each wish. Where does it come from and why? Do not assume it's just intellectually 'right' for you, keep opening it up more to dig down a little.

Examples of birth preferences:

- "I do not want an epidural thank you"
- "I would like delayed cord clamping please"

These sounds reasonable enough right? Question it still, why don't you want an epidural? You might use the BRAIN acronym. So that's the evidenced and intuitive parts covered but still, go further...What do you think about women who choose an epidural/do not to have delayed clamping? What would it mean about you if you had an epidural or if cord clamping couldn't happen? What would you believe about yourself? And how would this belief affect you after birth?

Tips for conscious birthing

- Prepare for the unexpected

- Imagine yourself having an intervention you don't want, coping with it AND still respecting yourself
- View childbirth as an initiation, meaning, it will be tough and you will have to sacrifice something
- Embrace your fears, they are normal and you will learn about your limitations
- Practice pain-coping techniques - there are loads in 'Birthing From Within'
- Lower your expectations of your birth partner, they may advocate for you in theory but in the moment they may default to social conditioning and it's not their fault
- Shift your beliefs to be true at any one time so rather than "I am strong" it becomes "I will choose to be as strong as I can and that is enough"

We can't change what happened in your birth but this is the gold, you CAN change how you tell your story. Fast forward 10 years, your child asks,

"What was my birth like mummy?"

You deserve to answer openly, not brush over the difficult parts to protect them. Children are learning about birth from you.

Imagine saying,

"You came into this world in a powerful way. It wasn't easy but we made it together *and this is what I learned...*"

References: (1) 'Birthing From Within- An Extra-ordinary guide to Childbirth' - Pam England and Phd Rob Horowitz, PhD. 1998.

(2) Reclaiming Childbirth as a Rite of Passage: Weaving ancient wisdom with modern knowledge - Rachel Reed. Word Witch Press - 2021

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Rosie lives in Yorkshire with her husband and 2 sons where she enjoys being a perfect imperfect mother.

She is dedicated to helping women and therefore their children discover that the inner map of birth initiation is something that belongs to them and no one else.

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