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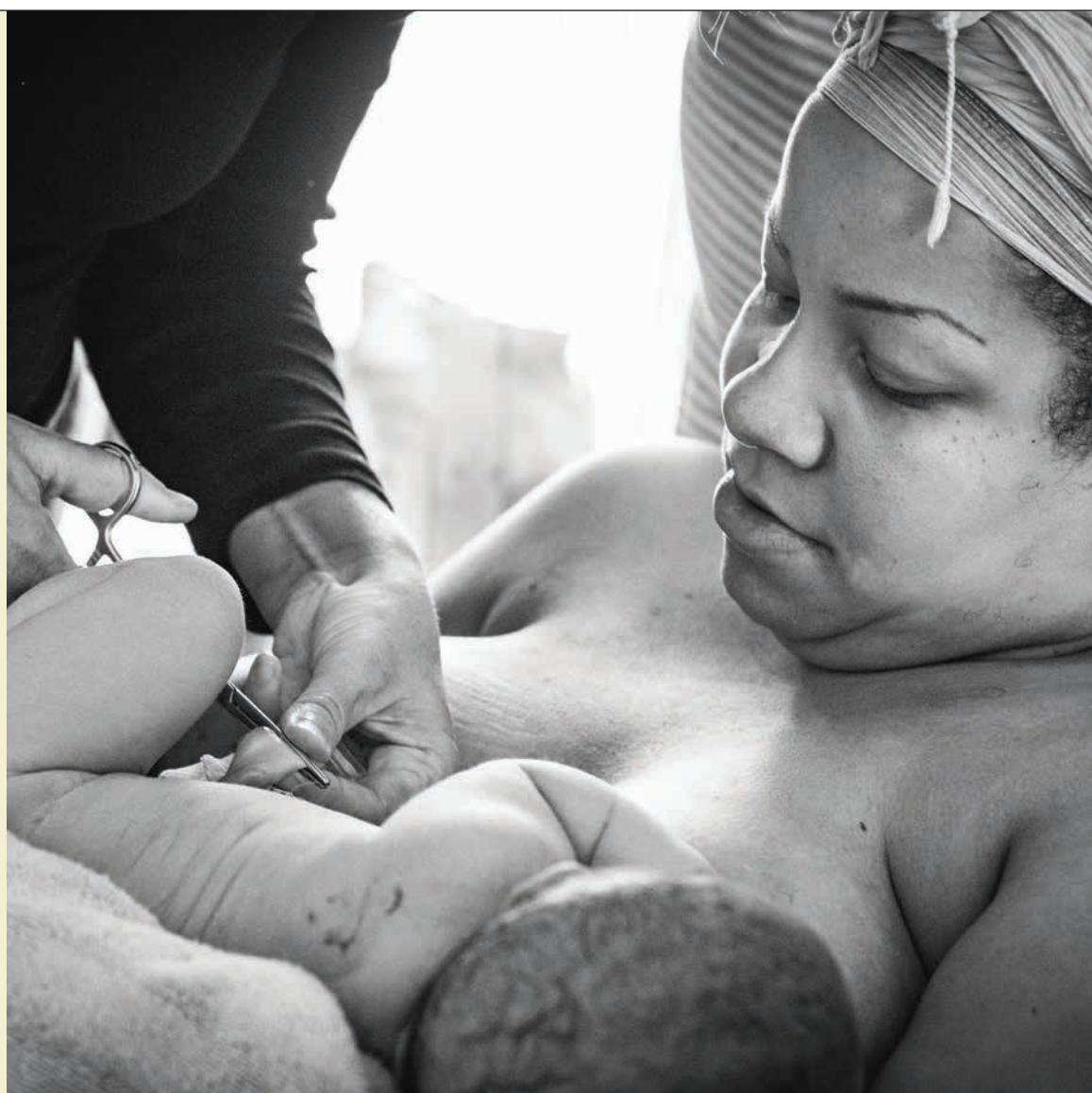
Advancing Normal Birth

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A Lamaze® International Publication

Doula, Sister, Aunt, Storyteller: A Midwife's Retelling of Birth

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ABSTRACT

As a midwife, delivering hundreds of babies a year in a busy city hospital, I rarely have the opportunity to reconnect with what made me pursue the path of midwifery. This is the story of the birth of my niece.

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“We have to study with our warm heart, not just our brain.”

—Shunryu Suzuki

I live next door to my brother and sister-in-law, which for a New Yorker is a rare and beautiful thing. When I tell people this, they think I am being figurative, like he lives in the same neighborhood or the same block, but he literally lives next door. We have a door that separates our apartments, like those old hotel doors that you would press your ear up against as a kid. And with my two children who adore their aunt and uncle, this is blessing for us, and as I imagined, a probable curse for them: a young newlywed couple who are incessantly being visited by a 10-year-old and 7-year-old wanting to play Uno and eat pretzels.

When Laura told me she was pregnant, besides the intense feeling of joy and anticipation of my future as

aunt Mimi, I felt the distinct edges of my “midwife” self emerge like a lioness protecting her little cubs. “I hope she chooses a midwife, I hope she chooses a midwife” became a daily silent mantra. And although I tried desperately to stay neutral and unobtrusive, I shared my own empowered stories as a home-birth mother, who worked with two amazing midwives, and shared my curated stories of catching babies at work, and often, daydreamed of myself being her midwife, catching my own little niece. Now in retrospect, it was a not-so-subtle way of convincing her that midwifery care would meet and surpass her expectations. Ultimately, Laura did choose a midwife, one of the most well-established and well-respected midwives working in New York City. Laura took prenatal yoga, borrowed pregnancy books, was empowered by Ina May Gaskin, and even convinced my doctor/brother to take an informal childbirth class with me. She grew a beautiful belly, and we would often find ourselves chatting over the weird aches and pains that are unique to pregnancy. And then her due date quickly approached—a Halloween baby—my kids hoped, but alas the labor started a few days before. A 5-a.m. text woke me up, and within seconds,

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I was next door. Now is the point in the story where I recount the story of Laura's labor—and what a story it was. But I'll just cut to the end and tell you that she labored hard and fast; pushed for a long, long time; had some twists and turns along the way, with an epidural and vacuum thrown into the mix; and ultimately birthed my beautiful, perfect niece, Neema Anna—with me and my brother as humbled witnesses to this glorious woman and her resilient spirit and powerful body.

When I imagine birth stories, and remember the stories we tell, there is an inevitable linear quality that follows suite; it started at night, my water broke at this time, I pushed for this long, she was born at ____ o'clock. Our stories seem to pick up the clinical narrative, and as a midwife, this is especially true. We chart our exams, the fetal heart rate, the contraction patterns, scratching our heads to remember when active labor started and asking our nurse, "What time did her water break?" As if that tells the "real" story. The chronology of the birth often serves to surpass the messy and nonlinear qualities of the entire experience. I suppose it has become a bit of a crutch in our effort to understand and deconstruct the power of this truly amazing process, to make sense of the rawness and chaos that is inherent to birth. But, in so doing, we potentially strip the retelling of the true turning points in the birth story of their power and legitimacy.

But this birth story is not about that. I am a sentimental and sappy mess when I think about what Laura did over those many hours, and if you ask me, I could probably give you an accurate timeline of what happened over the course of that day and night. My midwife brain would quickly kick in and repaint an accurate clinical picture. But what really matters is that on October 28th, Laura became my sister—no longer any distance, no longer a sister "by law," but a sister by blood, sweat, tears, anguish, and pure joy. That moment, those hours, are ours forever—connected now in a way that birth can often do—in a way that I experience with many women in labor, not just as a midwife, but as a woman and mother who traveled that same treacherous path to arrive at the shores of motherhood. There usually comes a time in labor, a moment of deep, unspoken connection. I have had many of those moments, and it grounds me in this birth work. These are the moments when I stop women from saying "*oh—thank you for delivering my baby,*" when the truth is that I am only there to hold the space for the laboring



Right to left: Mimi (author/midwife/doula), Laura (beautiful new mommy), baby Neema, and D. (brother/doctor/codoula).

mother to feel safe and protected while they do *all* the work. Where I hold my energy as midwife is critical; I keep it steady and strong. By anchoring my own trust and expertise, I am a simply the light on the harbor for women who are traveling, usually by faith alone, through the dense and blinding fog of labor and birth. I have done this over and over, with hundreds of women, women well known to me, and women who I have just met at the moment of pushing. It keeps the dance going, and births not just the child, but the mother as well. It is curious to me that no one ever asks, "At what moment did things shift for you, at what moment did you feel your full power and glory?" Can you even imagine if the labor chart asked us what time that happened? But with Laura, it shifted. My whole being and sense of self as midwife/sister/friend—shifted seismically.

I don't know if Laura felt all these things; I imagine she didn't; she was busy doing the gritty and back-breaking work. She may not know that her gift to me that night was welcoming me to be there as her sister and friend; not as midwife, not as clinician, not as a protector, but just as a loving witness and a humble servant. What is most surprising to me is that it was rare that I wanted to be more. There were a few times during the birth when *her* midwife asked me to step into my clinical mind, and I did so willingly but unattached. The way out didn't matter,

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what Laura needed and my faith in birth kept me rooted. I helped her push, I watched her tracing, I got her into different positions, rubbed her back and feet, fed her water, and wiped her brow. Laura's birth was not easy, not fast, not textbook, and there were a few moments there when I caught a sideways glimpse into my worry and dread, but just few key moments that were starkly clear and even now feel out of place in this retelling.

What I was able to do for Laura are my spiritual bread and butter as a midwife. We soothe, and calm, and explain and get down on our knees if that is what it takes. Don't we wake up sore after a birth, with aching necks and backs and arms? The birth of my niece was a remembrance of things lost. These are all the things that I wanted for women when I first dreamt of becoming a midwife—to provide full-circle care. I dreamt there would be no beginning or end to the care and love I would give. I became a midwife because it means that I can love and care for women through a deeply meaningful and spiritually powerful experience. My life's work is to offer that to other women, at least anyone who will let me.



Tired but happy, aunt Mimi and baby Neema.

For the last 5 years, I have worked in a chaotically brutal urban teaching hospital. We take care of many women simultaneously, sometimes 15 women at one singular moment, sometimes five births in one shift. And the most I can offer on those days is a warm smile, a gentle hand squeeze, a glass of water before having to watch another tracing, do another exam, write another note, and do another admission.

Neema's birth was a gift to me, a reminder of why I do this work—the work of being with women is the work of the *warm heart, not just our brain*. I needed the salve of this birth—the hard work of my niece, my brother, and *my* sister—to awaken a very worn out part of me. When I started writing this story, I didn't think it was going to be about me, but I think any story worth its weight teaches us something about ourselves. The birth story will keep unfolding itself and revealing different layers and moments that don't fit in any timeline or chronological order. Laura has her own story, my brother will remember his version, and I will remember my own. And, I suppose, in the end, that is what makes birth so potent; it calls on different parts of our humanity and our differing understandings, and like Rashomon, we will remember what individually connects us to the collective narrative. Is one more true or more worthy? I don't think so, and whether I write as midwife or doula or sister, its impact on my life and heart is worthy of retelling to whoever will listen.

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Thank you to my neighbors: Laura, for being a loving, accepting, and welcoming presence in my life; my brother, who keeps me inspired and motivated to keep exploring the boundaries of knowing; and my brand new niece, Neema, whom I love like my own child. And of course, thank you to my roommates: my partner David, a rock steady midwife's husband, and to Maitri Dharma and Tenzin Jai, who remind me every day that I have the best and hardest job in the world—being their mom.

MIMI (PAULOMI) NILES is a midwife to the core. She has cared for thousands of women and has attended hundreds of births in New York City. She has also worked internationally with midwives in Haiti, Mexico, and Tanzania. She is currently a doctoral student at New York University College of Nursing, exploring issues of spiritual burn out and compassion fatigue among care providers who work in high-volume, low-resource settings. She also has a private practice where she teaches mindfulness-based meditation.