

THREE STORIES, TWO CONTINENTS, ONE BIRTH JOURNEY

by Indira Lopez-Bassols



Standing here, in this place of unknown,
I can begin to see
Why I was brought into this world.
I can see myself becoming the woman
That I was created to be.

—Cathy Daub

“Morphine! I will have morphine...” It was my childhood, which had been plagued with pain, that led me to this unusual resolution. Just like my grandmother, who had died a few years before, sedated by morphine to prevent the agonizing pain of a cancerous metastasis, I would have more morphine to avoid all pain during labour. At this stage, I did not yet know about good pain, about the role of endorphins and oxytocin.

My mind had its own idea, but my dear friend “Destiny” had other plans for me. Time, coupled with a number of surprising coincidences, helped me let go and surrender my fixation on avoiding pain by any means. In my own defense, I was only 25 years old when I first became pregnant, and happily living in my beloved, native Mexico.

It was then that I met Mireille, an amazingly wise woman and mother of seven children who would play a crucial role in my metamorphosis. Mireille taught antenatal preparation sessions for couples at a lovely low-profile place called Cepapar, and she was one of the few practicing doulas (or rather, “psicoprofilaxis instructor,” as she called herself) and also a La Leche League leader. I met

her while practicing Iyengar yoga, a tool that became pivotal in my preparation for birth, and the beginning of a brand new paradigm to me: the alignment of body, heart and mind.

Halfway through my pregnancy I had switched from a private, male obstetrician who barely had time to answer my “silly” questions to Miriam, a female obstetrician. I just felt I needed someone who had gone through the experience to genuinely support me in this journey.

By the end of my pregnancy, the mixture of all these little coincidences left me feeling assertive about the kind of birth I wanted.

Miriam agreed to most of my conditions: no continuous monitoring, no unnecessary intravenous fluids, no vaginal

examinations unless they were performed by her, no enemas and the presence of Mireille as my doula. The only thing she wouldn't agree to was my request to not have an episiotomy. We had an agreement—and it was, I felt at the time, the best agreement.

I went into natural labour before my due date. I could not sleep at all that night and my mucus plug came out in the morning. I went to be checked in the morning to confirm what I already knew; I was in labour, 2–3 cm dilated, 80% effaced with a soft and ripe cervix. I went back home, where I was well-supported, counting contractions and eating when hungry. I went to my mum's house, got into the Jacuzzi for a bit, ate some more and then made the rocky ride to the hospital.

It was one of the fanciest private hospitals in Mexico City in the 90s. It wasn't the promised land of natural birth, but rather quite the opposite: no midwives, no birthing pools, no natural birthing centre option and no *rebozos*. Instead, epidurals and unnecessary c-sections were the norm. The cherry on top of the cake was a monopoly of *male* doctors using a cocktail of interventions with their ravaging domino effects.

My obstetrician's assistant greeted me, then said, "By the peaceful look on your face you must be *only* 3 or 4 cm." *Grrrrrr!* I was not feeling those strong contractions as "peaceful." I could silently hear them whispering to each other: "*She* is the patient who doesn't want to be assessed by anybody but her doctor." Miriam finally arrived and assessed me.

To the surprise of her own assistant, Miriam declared I was almost 8 cm dilated. Her husband was an anaesthetist who was hunting around, ready to put in the epidural when needed, only to find out that unlike most first-time mums in this hospital, it would not be needed—not for me.

Mireille, my doula, suggested the stairs and a shower instead. Much better than an epidural and with no side effects. I can still vividly remember my mum's warm hands on my sacrum. And when I was fully dilated, Miriam asked me if she could film the pushing stage for educational purposes. Natural birth was unseen in this private, posh Mexican hospital. I agreed.

Despite my husband's shock and his attempt to prevent the episiotomy, Chiara was born after a few pushes with the cord around her neck; I was lying in a semi-reclined position. I didn't suspect that giving birth in a semi-reclined position was far from optimal and an episiotomy probably not needed, as I did tear anyway. My dear guardian angel, "Luck," must have been protecting me closely, since nothing went "wrong." It wasn't until I attended (more than a decade later) Janet Balaskas' insightful training course on Active Birth in London, that I was able to see what I had missed during my first birth.

I had the most amazing high after that birth; I felt like a true superwoman. If I could have a natural birth, I could do anything! I had, against all odds, a natural birth as a first-time mum. My story became epic at the hospital and among my family and friends; I shared it with many pregnant women at prenatal yoga classes all around Mexico City. Some even contacted me afterward to say that my story had inspired them to have a natural birth. I was puzzled as to how something as small, simple and beautiful as sharing one's birth story could have such a ripple effect.

Three years later I gave birth to Paulo, in the same hospital, with the same doctor and the same doula. Same actors in a similar play. That day my Mexican grandmother called to say there was going to be a moon eclipse and that I had to protect myself by wearing some copper.

Was she being merely superstitious? I couldn't understand what she meant, but two weeks before my due date I went into labour under the most amazing and spectacular moon eclipse. I still recall confessing with amazement to my doula between contractions how I felt some indescribable pleasure entwined with the pain I was feeling. (It has taken me more than a decade to comprehend this unspoken taboo: pleasure and pain, one of many dualities we experience in life, can go hand in hand and be felt simultaneously in labour and birth.)

Paulo was very high and I just remember having to squat to bring him down—no time for any episiotomy this time, no anaesthesiologist hunting around. Paulo

was born like his sister, with the cord around his neck.

I went back to my room feeling the same ecstatic high I'd felt after my first birth, unable to sleep, when I heard my neighbour screaming, "Bring me some morphine! Now!" It turned out that she was experiencing the excruciating aftermath of a c-section—much like the 17 other women who underwent c-sections that same night in that same hospital. Was it pure coincidence or the effect of the moon eclipse? No wonder Mexico's c-section rates ranked third in Latin America after Brazil and Chile. I still remember another labouring woman who said to me with amazement, "You are the brave one that gave birth with nothing."

I thought I was done with the chapter of making babies but my other dear friend, "Fate," had other plans for me. Seven years after Paulo's birth, the name of a child was revealed to me in a dream. A few weeks later I knew I was pregnant because I could smell things from miles away. This time I was far from my native Mexico, living in London. I begged my husband to take me back home to Mexico, so I could give birth there in the same "ideal" conditions. But my journey was about to take a detour. I didn't suspect it then, but I still had much to learn.

At my first appointment in the British hospital, a lovely midwife said that given my history, I was the perfect candidate for a homebirth. *A homebirth?! My beloved husband silently stared at me. As we stepped out of the hospital, he said, "I can overlook many of your unorthodoxies, but will not give in to this one."*

If being humble is the art of learning, as master and yoga teacher BKS Iyengar says, then we still had a lot of "growing" to do on this next birthing journey. We read about homebirth and met the lovely team of midwives from St. Helier's Hospital, only to find out that homebirth was absolutely safe and even normal. I took Michel Odent's doula-preparation course in anticipation of my homebirth. Plus, a friend of mine had recently asked me if I would become her doula and I was giving it some consideration. We kept the homebirth a secret from our beloved

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Mexican and Peruvian families, who would not at all approve of it, despite the fact that my own grandmother had birthed several of her eight children at home in Mexico.

My waters broke in the middle of the night. I called my doula, Chamutal. I went into the shower, as I had no birthing pool. Michel Odent had said to me that if I had had two “dry births,” I didn’t need a birthing pool; I was “beyond” needing them.

My husband took the kids to school in the morning, and afterward we called the midwives. I was in my own room with my very “hands-off” doula sitting in a corner. One of the midwives came up to check baby’s heartbeat, which was fine, and said she had to do a vaginal examination to assess labor.

I agreed, only to be reminded by my doula, “Indira, I thought you didn’t want a vaginal examination if baby was okay.” I came immediately out of “labourland” to say I didn’t want one. My lovely midwife got a bit cross, as she had two other midwives downstairs and a full day of appointments and wanted to know how to plan her day.

I was the one having a baby, not her, and as soon as she said she had to plan her day I said I needed to poop. (Was it my good friend “Fortune” visiting this time?) A few pushes and I felt with all my flesh the ring of fire. I groaned and moaned as I reached that point of no return.

For a fraction of an second I hesitated, feeling that perhaps I could not do it, only to be reminded from a higher and greater being that *I could push my baby out*, and out he came. To my naked breast he came, for that first unforgettable gaze, where it all feels like falling in love again. And then came the placenta, the guardian of life. Never had I seen any of my placentas, never had I had a natural third stage!

My journey set a landmark that has taken me years to feel fully humbled by and grateful for. It deeply transformed me as a human being, the way I perceive the world and the way I relate to others. I feel deeply grateful to Mireille, my doula, who taught me so much through her wise presence by just “being” by

my side. I also feel immensely lucky to have escaped an unnecessary c-section in that private Mexican hospital. I am also thankful to Miriam, my obstetrician, for letting me ride my labours on my own terms.

If I were blessed with another baby in this or the next life (and could cajole my beloved husband into agreeing), I’d have an unassisted homebirth with my daughter there so she could witness the sacredness and beauty of gentle birth.



Indira Lopez-Bassols feels privileged to support couples in the miracle of birth as a doula. She teaches Iyengar yoga and supports breastfeeding moms as a La Leche League leader. Although she currently lives in London, Indira’s heart will always be in Mexico. Visit Indira on the web at www.indirayoga.com.

Planned Homebirth in Brazil

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know they have the necessary information to be with me in this moment.

Greta: I felt like going in the middle of the jungle, but the nurse-midwife’s assistance gives a security. Even I want to be connected with my instincts, with them I feel more calm. All this support, I think, is really good.

Privacy is one of the main benefits of a homebirth. Birth is an intimate moment, like making love. In a safe and familiar environment, without interference, the woman in labor can relax, open up, move around and follow her instincts. An unknown environment with unfamiliar people and institutional routines can interfere with emotions and the physiological hormone cascade that happen with the woman during the birth process. Compared with women who planned a hospital birth with a midwife or physician in attendance, those who planned a homebirth were significantly less likely to experience any of the obstetric interventions we assessed, including electronic fetal monitoring, augmentation of labor, assisted vaginal delivery, cesarean delivery and episiotomy (Janssen et al. 2009).

The confidence the women had in themselves and in nature is clear through their interviews. Their experiences were more than a change in the context of