

Invisible Labor

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Reflections from the author

I chose to make a book about motherhood, specifically some of my experiences with childbirth, postpartum, and breastfeeding. In my intersectionality paper for diversity class, I wrote about being a mother as my experiential identity, saying the experiences of motherhood have shaped my identity in many ways. As intersectionality demonstrates, we can't separate out our identities, and I can see how this is true here. Motherhood for me is an impactful experiential identity, but it is also an outer and inner identity. For instance, I get carded at the grocery store less often when I have my kids with me because of how I am perceived.

In this piece, I wanted to explore the inner part of this identity, some of the parts of motherhood that aren't seen and aren't known to the world. I suppose I mean some of the parts of myself that aren't seen or known to the world; the parts that aren't easy or pretty or often talked about; the parts that don't make my Instagram feed or the family Christmas card...the parts that only I know.

The most intense moments of motherhood, the moments that became turning points in my life, haven't happened at the park, or the grocery store, or on vacation. They happened in our home, in a hospital, or at a medical appointment, or in the middle of the night. Moments and struggles that very few people really know about or were present for. These moments taught me who I am and who I could be. These moments scared me, empowered me, and most definitely transformed me.

When I look at these images, I feel the feelings that past versions of me felt. I remember what it was like to be her. To struggle, and cry, and work, and love, and care, and grow, and suffer, and succeed. For me these are the iconic images of my motherhood, all turning points in my life, the moments that were pregnant with my developing identity.

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INVISIBLE LABOR



The birth of a child is, usually, a distinct turning point in the life course of a parent. Although this event effects every aspect of a parent's life it can, specifically and deeply, impact the inner identity and self-knowledge of the birth giving parent. The experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum can be intense and overwhelming, and are so privately and internally experienced.

I have been pregnant five times and have carried to term and delivered four of those times. These experiences for me were so intensely physical, emotional, medical, and mental. Looking back I can see how they were turning points in my life. They happened in my body and to my body. They changed my body's chemistry and rewired my brain, they injured me, and empowered me, and educated me, and changed me. These moments shaped who I knew myself to be.

It is hard to explain how all encompassing these experiences were. The way my heart still races when I think of my fourth baby being stuck in my pelvis for a few minutes and the risk that put him in, or the mental blur of the years when I had three children under the age of 5... and then had one more. It is hard to sum up the feeding struggles, the torn tissue, the sleep deprivation, the smiles, giggles, love, and struggles. It all happened to me, in moments that no one saw.

I started this project in an attempt to make these invisible experiences, and turning points, visible, to demonstrate how a birth giving parent is also reborn as a new person each time they have a child. The experience can be uncomfortable and scary, but also beautiful and always transformative.

Content warning:

This project deals with my experiences in labor, childbirth, postpartum, and breastfeeding and includes pictures of labor, delivery, and breastfeeding.

Please take care of yourself accordingly.

2009



24years old





About 3:30am

As I was in transition and nearing the pushing stage, I remember thinking : "I can't believe this feels like this!"

Nothing can really prepare you for how intense the experience of childbirth is.

I had been awake for close to
24 hours at this point





I had a Certified Nurse Midwife/Nurse Practitioner as my medical provider.

"A midwife is a trained health professional who helps healthy women during labor, delivery, and after the birth of their babies. Midwives may deliver babies at birthing centers or at home, but most can also deliver babies at a hospital."

(What Is a Midwife?, 2012)



Coming home

How do I reenter my life?

I am not the same person I was when we left here 4 days ago.

I don't know what I'm doing.

I haven't slept in days.

Everything hurts.

I'll hold my baby.

We are in this together.



Nipple Shield

"A nipple shield is a flexible silicone nipple that is worn over the mom's nipple during a feeding. Nipple shields should in general be considered a short-term solution and should be used under the guidance of a lactation consultant".

(Nipple Shields, 2018)

Feeding isn't always easy



1 Baby

Miscarriage

""the natural expulsion of an embryo or fetus from the womb before it is sufficiently developed to survive"

"failure to carry out what was intended"

(Collins English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers, n.d.)

About 10 to 20 percent of known pregnancies end in miscarriage."

(Miscarriage - Symptoms and Causes, 2021)

I was pregnant for the second time. I only made it to 8 weeks. The pregnancy wasn't viable, but I wasn't bleeding. I had a D&C, Dilation and curettage, abortion procedure.

I bled, I recovered, we tried again.

For me, having a miscarriage wasn't devastating. It was sad, and a little strange, it felt like a lot for my body to go through but it was ok to.

I was glad it happened early in the pregnancy.

I was surprised how many women, told me that they had a miscarriage when they found out that I had one.

Miscarriage happens often, we tend not to talk about it.

2011



- Water Birth -
"is the process
of giving birth
in a tub of warm
water."

(Water Births, 2021)

While I was pushing I
remember thinking that it
felt like there was a bowling
ball between my hips. it was,
of course, that baby's head.

26 years old





Newborns
smell
like
magic.





2 Babies

All of the things that seemed hard with the first baby felt more natural this time.

I knew what I was doing with a baby now.

But now there were two little ones needing my attention. I once cried while nursing this second baby because I had to tell my first that I couldn't play cars with him.

We eventually all adjusted to this new situation and found our footing again.

Labor

"Regular
contractions of
the uterus that
result in
dilation and
effacement of
the cervix."

(Labor and Birth
Terms to Know,
2022)

starting transitional labor



2013



28 Years Old

I was an old pro at labor by this time.

This baby came so fast at the end that the midwife almost didn't make it into the room before I delivered.

I remember waiting to get into the tub of soothing warm water and thinking "It feels like there is a freight train running through my body"

As soon as I hit the water, baby started crowning.



My
Easiest
feeding
experience





"...parents lose an average of 133 nights' worth of sleep before their babies turn one."

(Survey Shows Parents Lose a Total of 133 Nights of Sleep in Baby's First Year, 2021)



I had 3 babies in 4 years



3 Babies

Home Birth

"The act of giving birth to a child in one's own home."

(Homebirth, n.d.)



2016

31 years old





Shoulder Dystocia

"Shoulder Dystocia occurs when the shoulders of the fetus become lodged behind the maternal pubic symphysis, impeding descent and expulsion."

(Gesner et al., 2022)

He was stuck...my baby's shoulder was stuck on my pelvic bone.
the most uncomfortable part of labor was stretching on for
minute after agonizing minute.

Would he be injured?

Would he come out?

We are at home, not in a hospital.

In this picture my husband still looks happy and relaxed
because he didn't yet realize that there was a problem.

The next 2-5 minutes were harrowing.



These are still hard for me to look at



McRoberts Maneuver

"Performing the McRobert's technique requires two personnel positioned at each leg of the patient.

The assistants grab and push the maternal feet cephalad — this action results in hyperflexion of the maternal hips and knees onto along with slight hip abduction resulting in the superior displacement of the pubic symphysis by 1-2 cm."

(Gesner et al., 2022)

They got my knees up and he came out...he finally came out!

Relief and concern. worry and gratitude.

This is the moment the storm past.

We had all been scared.





Postpartum

"The Period after
childbirth."

(Labor and Birth Terms to
Know, 2022)



One day postpartum;
soaking my stitched-up
perineum in a warm bath.
continuing to bleed from
childbirth and just starting to
leak milk from my sore nipples.



Moving his tongue in new
ways
now that it was released.

Tongue Tie

"A congenital condition that can affect infants and children due to having a short lingual frenulum that restricts tongue movement and impacts the function of the tongue.

Infants...experience feeding difficulties because of the condition." (Issues Feeding With Tongue & Lip Tie | Early Intervention, 2022)

Treatment: laser surgery done by a pediatric dentist

My most difficult feeding experince

He was so hungry but would lose the seal and gulp in air. He worked so hard that he would tire sooner and not get the fatty milk he needed, then be hungry sooner.

He was tenacious and never had a weight problem but we struggled.

He had laser surgery at 3 months.

I wish I had done it sooner.



We did stretches after every feeding for a month.
Babies usually feed every 2-3 hours, sometimes longer stretches at night.

Everything started to change; feeding felt normal, easy, good.



2017



Diastasis Recti

"During pregnancy, the growing uterus stretches the muscles in the abdomen. This can cause the two large parallel bands of muscles that meet in the middle of the abdomen (rectus muscles) to become separated by an abnormal distance — a condition called diastasis recti or diastasis recti abdominis." (Diastasis Recti: How Does Pregnancy Affect Stomach Muscles?, 2020)

Besides my separated abdominals I was struggling with a bulging disk in my back, extra weight and a worn down body. I felt broken. I had to rebuild myself, I had to rebuild my body . It took a few years, some specialized physical therapy programs, and consistency, but I did it.

2019



4 Babies
1 Family

Parents go through intense life changing experiences quietly, privately, invisibly. These can be private moments but are also often seen as taboo. No one wants to hear about bleeding, or tearing, or sore nipples...it isn't polite. We birthing parents then often feel alone and as a society we lose connection to the work and labor of childbearing. The risk, and reward, and turmoil.

Take Aways

If this project leaves you with questions; good!

Go read about the history of gynecological care, America's maternal and fetal death rate, and how much we spend as a country on OB care.

Go ask your grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and friends about their experiences. Go find out what people have been through.

With this project I hope to salute
all the birth giving parents, and
their support people.

Especially those who had
complicated pregnancies,
deliveries, or postpartum. Those
who suffered loses, had surgeries,
and Neonatal intensive Care
stays.

You brought life into this world.
And you became a new person at
the same time.

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