

# MATILDA'S BIRTH STORY

Told by her MOTHER

Matilda Jones Briggs was born at home at 5AM on Monday April 20, 2009. She weighed a healthy 7 pounds 14 ounces and was 21.5 precious inches long. Her father, Lee, Grandma Lynn, Aunt Niki and Midwives Joan and Leah attended her birth. It was a sunny and hot, spring day in Northern California.

Our first ultrasound image of the little bean, at 8 weeks, suggested the baby would arrive on April 13. But the whole pregnancy I had an instinct that it would be later. Every time someone would ask when our baby was due I would say, "around the 18- or 20." Sure enough, April 13 came and went. My sister Niki came to town on the 12, and Mum arrived on the 15 to join Lee as labor support. We spent the week eating and hiking and preparing for the baby. Saturday April 18 I went to a morning prenatal yoga class with my friend Linda, on a long afternoon hike with my Mum, and that night Lee and I decided to go to a party at Brent's house in San Francisco.

During the previous few weeks I had mild menstrual-like cramping, and increased Braxton Hicks contractions, which felt pretty painless but uncomfortable as my belly tightened up at irregular patterns. On the way to Brent's party, I asked Lee to turn off the music playing in the car. The sound of him and Niki talking over the music made me feel extremely edgy and overwhelmed. I felt better when he turned off the music. I was very social and outgoing and hungry at the party. We didn't stay very long. Niki got gum all over the car seat upholstery and it is still there. The smell (spearmint) really bothered me on the way home. I climbed into bed around 11PM and I slept well, waking a few times to use the bathroom (par for the course at that point in the pregnancy!) During the night I felt as though the cramping/BH contractions were getting more intense, but I was always able to fall back asleep.

I woke up at 5AM Sunday April 19th to pee (*again*) and wondered (*again*) if I was actually feeling contractions. They seemed pretty regular, but I drifted back to sleep. At 6AM I woke up again to use the bathroom and as I sat up in bed my water broke. It was about a ½ cup of clear fluid. I ran to the bathroom in case there would be more. Lee woke up while I was in the bathroom and he reached over to find me gone and a small damp spot in my place. I walked back in the room at that moment and he asked "Did your water break!?" He sat up really straight really fast and said "Should we call Joan!?" (Joan Green was our midwife.) Then he grabbed his little brown notebook and pen.

My contractions hadn't started in earnest yet and I knew it would be a long while before things got rolling. I didn't want to tell anyone yet, I wanted to be alone with the information for a little while. I asked him to go for a walk with me. We got dressed and walked down Edison and up Redwood for a while. The air was still cool (for the hottest weekend of the year to date) and all the colors seemed super bright to me. Like the music in the car the night before, my senses were amplified. The sun was beautiful and piercing through the green leaves. The day felt crisp and full of potential. The world smelled like spring and Lee noted in his book that "everything feels wonderful." The neighborhood was still asleep. We walked quietly and he held my hand really tight. I rang Joan when we got home. She said we would have our baby in the next few days and that she would come by to check on me around 4PM!

We ate yogurt for breakfast. My contractions were about 10 – 12 minutes apart all morning. When Niki woke up I told her I was in labor. I ate some more breakfast. I kept drinking a lot of water. Mum came down from the apartment she was staying in up the street and I told her at the door that I was in labor. We all went for another walk. We walked for about a mile around the Christmas Tree Hill streets and hillpath, stopping for contractions. I was getting more and more uncomfortable, especially walking uphill. By Noon, my contractions were about 8 minutes apart. Lee set up the birth tub, and Niki played the guitar and I sang *Wagon Wheel* to the baby and danced over and over again. I lay down to rest. My contractions were never consistently the same interval, but they were getting closer together and they lasted a long time, about 90 seconds to 3 minutes. By 1:30 PM I was pretty focused and they took more of my attention, there was

another little gush a fluid around this time as well. We went for another small walk. And I tried to take another rest. At some point Lee called his folks, and Mum called Dad.

Our midwife, Joan, stopped by at 4PM and could tell by my lucidity that I still had a ways to go. She said I could try to sleep through the night and rest up for labor tomorrow, or I could try to help labor progress with a natural induction technique. I did *not* want to risk a sleepless night and the complications of exhaustion during labor the following day(s). I felt well-rested, well-nourished, energized and ready to have my baby. So Joan suggested I take a very small amount of castor oil with some juice. I did so around 5:35PM, when contractions were around 7 minutes apart, and used the restroom. Labor ramped up significantly. By 7PM my contractions felt far more intense and were about 4 minutes apart, Lee noted that I grabbed him during a few and that I “had to concentrate, they seem quite painful” and I was “totally zoned” during some of them. Lee soon needed all his attention to support me and handed his little notebook to Mum, who took over the book-keeping with zeal. Lee rang Joan around 8PM, after my contractions had been around 4 minutes apart for an hour and lasting over a minute. (Actually, my contractions never lasted less than a minute, typically they were around 2 minutes long from the very beginning, which confused us somewhat in reference to the 4-1-1 rule and when to call Joan.)

Around 9PM I started to focus on the word OPEN to help me through the contractions saying “open... open... open... OPEN... open”. The word helped me cope. The contractions at this stage felt unlike the regular strong-cramp-like sensations all day. They started deep inside my belly and wrapped around gripping, knotting my pelvis and lifted me up as they radiated down my legs, up my chest and out my arms. They would gather speed quickly and suddenly wave over me peaking for long thunderous moments and then ease up, slow down and disappear completely and I would rest. I kneeled upright, in my navy cotton nighty, on the ottomans at the foot of our bed; at the end of each wave, I would rest my forearms, head and chest on the bed until another contraction lifted me upright. I spend most of labor in this position. Joan arrived at 9:18PM, she said my friend Linda was complete and pushing. I was really excited and said “That makes me feel strong!” Then I remembered that Joan was supposed to be assisting Linda’s midwife Diane with her home birth. I asked what Joan was going to do, I was afraid she was going to leave, but she said Linda was going to be fine and they called someone else to assist. She said she was going to stay with me because I was “going to have this baby soon”!

Joan checked me at 9:27PM and I was 3 centimeters dilated and 50% effaced. I could tell she thought I was much farther along than that by the intensity of the contractions and my reaction to them. I knew those estimates meant I had a long way to go. My heart sank because the sensations were so intense and I had so far to go; then I realized that this birth journey was going to be far more adventurous than I imagined and I needed to embrace that and get to work. So I thought “ONLY 3cm?!!?” But I said “OK. Thanks.” I knew in my bones that even one ounce of negativity would only weigh on the experience, and I needed to be as free and light as possible to get this job done.

At 9:36PM Joan administered the first round of IV Antibiotic because I was GBS+ during the pregnancy. I could tell that Mum and Lee were concerned about it, that it would make the contractions worse for me. But, strangely, I liked the distraction of the IV process. It gave me something else to feel and focus on. It took about 15 minutes. Joan continued to monitor me and the baby all night, checking my BP and the baby’s heart rate. By 10:51PM I couldn’t form words through the contractions that were about 2-3 minutes apart. I groaned “ow... ow... OW... ow.” At 11:23PM Joan checked me and I was 6cm. Everyone in the room breathed out, expecting me to be fully dilated. Again, I dug deep and got back to work. Mum noted that my vocalizations did change to “woah... woah... woah...” or “oh god” and back to “ow”. Lee noticed some blood on the sheet I was kneeling on as I labored, he was alarmed and asked Joan about it. She said, “Ohh yea, that is totally normal and this is only the beginning.”

Soon it was a new day, April 20· 2009. Lee ate some cereal. Around 1:10AM Joan said she wanted to check my progress because it would be time for the 2· round of Antibiotic if I wasn’t going to deliver soon and she thought it might be time to call Leah. (Midwife Leah Redwood was Joan’s assist for the birth.) I was 8cm dilated. This meant that I was still far enough away from delivering to need the IV again and that it wasn’t quite time to call the assistant. While this could have been really disheartening, I was proud of the progress that I had made since Joan’s arrival. I accepted the challenge with “ok... ok... ok... OK... ok.”

At 1:33AM I connected to Mum and smiled. I had barely noticed anyone since Joan's arrival. I had blinders on, was so inwardly focused. Thirst would barely dance into my consciousness before Lee would be there with water. Niki would seamlessly step in to relieve Lee now and then, Mum took notes diligently about everything that was happening. I was constantly supported by one or all of them; they were an awesome birth team. During a particularly difficult contraction, I could sense Mum next to me directing all her energy into me. I felt so happy and grateful that she was there, I managed to smile at her (which she immediately noted in her book.) I felt so alive.

The sensations kept getting stronger and lower in my pelvis, I began to bear down as I vocalized through the waves. The second round of Antibiotic was a welcome distraction. In between rushes I would completely collapse forward from my upright kneeling position, onto the bed and fall into a deep sleep-like state. Lee noted that after a minute or two of rest my breathing would quicken, deepen, turn into a soft open vocalization and then I would rear upright to ride out the contraction. The intensity continued to build. At one point Joan said "Melissa, it sounds like you are pushing. Do you think you are pushing?" I said "I don't know, I think so." She said to do what felt right. Then she called her assistant Leah, who was about 20 minutes away in San Francisco. Joan was checking the baby's heartbeat a lot more often now and hearing its little rhythm amplified in the room was reassuring and motivating. I had the distinct awareness that baby was working very, very hard too, pushing through the vice-like tissue-musclebone that had safely kept him or her cradled inside for nearly 10 months. I felt connected to the baby, like we were working together. I wanted to make it as easy as possible for baby and that made me work harder.

At some point, Joan checked me again and said there was a slight swelling of part of the cervix, creating a little lip that the baby's head was having a hard time slipping past. She said to stop pushing to allow the swelling to decrease so that the baby could get by. I was pushing in earnest by this point and trying to stop was like trying not to vomit. Damn near impossible. I had to concentrate fiercely and at the height of each contraction I felt a moment of panic as my body was on the verge of taking over, pushing the baby down in spite of my greatest effort to slow it down. I blew through my lips, stopped vocalizing and tried only to breathe through these contractions to keep from actively pushing. Lee and Niki were especially helpful as I breathed through them, desperately holding eye contact. Sometimes I would also scrape with my fingers or pound with the heel of my hand on the wall or the bathroom counter in rhythm with the thunder in my core. Several contractions later the swelling was still present, and she suggested trying to pee to relieve internal pressure on the cervix. I couldn't pee on the toilet, and the urge to push was getting stronger and stronger. I took off my sweaty blue nighty and got in the shower to try to pee there. I couldn't. (After nine months of peeing every 20 minutes, it was maddening!) During this difficult point in labor Mum noted that I talked to the baby. I said "Come on Baby", "Nice and low" and "My baby wants to come out", "Come out Baby".

Joan suggested I try to relax in the birth tub. I didn't want to get near it. She suggested I stay in the shower to pee. I knew it wouldn't happen. She suggested applying some Evening Primrose Oil to my cervix. I said "Yes!" to that option, because it felt active. Sure enough, she applied the oil and within minutes the baby's head slipped past the cervix and began its descent through the birth canal! Finally, at 3:02 AM I could safely PUSH! I was exhausted but determined to help my baby out. I pushed and pushed with every fiber of every muscle in my body. I put all the physical, emotional, spiritual energy I possessed into each push. I even pushed during the breaks in between contractions and Leah and Joan had to remind me to rest and breathe. I wasn't aware of anyone in the room; in my consciousness I was alone with the baby. I was naked. I pushed standing up holding onto Lee. I pushed squatting on the birth stool. Roaring. Opening.

Around 3:20AM everyone (but me) heard noises out on the gangplank/deck entrance to our apartment (on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of an old Victorian house on Corte Madera Avenue.) Mum and Niki went out to investigate and met two local police officers responding to a concerned neighbor's phone call. We failed to inform "Nice Julie" and her monster dogs next door about our planned home birth. Oops! My vocalizations all night had alarmed her and, like a good neighbor, she called the cops. Mum assured the officers, "This is a planned home birth, there are two midwives inside with my daughter. I am the Grandma!" The male cop said, "That's just fine but my female partner needs to *verify the information.*" Mum and Niki grudgingly allowed the female officer in the front door. She glanced to her left, into our steamy candlelit bedroom to see me, naked, sweaty, squatting over a birth stool, hanging on Lee in between pushes, with a midwife on each side. I looked to my right and

saw her. I looked her in the eyes, maybe smiled, and I nodded. She nodded. And she turned on her heel and high-tailed it out of our home. Both officers warmly congratulated Mum and Niki on their way back to their squad car, wishing us luck! Joan said it was a first in her entire career.

I kept pushing, standing, and then squatting, squatting and then standing, all the while using Lee's strong body, steady eyes, and confidence for support. His unfaltering belief in my strength, courage and ability was the most important method of support I received. Doubt never once flickered across his face. Joan told me my baby would be born soon, today, and I pushed harder still. I pushed through the powerful contractions with all my might. After one contraction, I hiccupped loudly and Lee caught my eye and we laughed, instantly dispersing the tension in the room.

Around 3:45AM I climbed up on to the bed to push. Lee kept trying to see the baby's head, but it was still too early and Leah assured him that he would not miss it. Niki and Mum helped to support my legs as I pushed on the bed, while Lee watched for his child and encouraged me through the contractions. At 4:31 he finally saw the baby's head! He said "I see the baby Liss, I see its head and it's hair, it's curly hair, I see the baby Liss!" (For the record: the baby was *bald*.) Joan urged me "Reach down and feel your baby, Melissa." I didn't want to at first, I was afraid it wouldn't be there, or that I would lose momentum pushing, or something. But I did. I felt a slick fuzzy hard tiny piece of my baby stretching my tissues, so close to being free and in my arms.

I felt extremely ready to birth this baby, the force was enormous and it took an extraordinary physical and emotional effort to keep pushing into and through the burning pressure and firecrushstretch sensation of opening. I got on my hands and knees and continued to push. Every time I felt the baby crown and then recede, I doubled my efforts to help it continue down. I suddenly felt the need to stand and somehow managed to move from the bed to a squatting position at 4:55AM. I squatted over the birth stool, leaned back on my elbows on the ottomans at the foot of the bed. Lee was on my right and Joan was on my left and with one holy powerful push my baby slipped swiftly into the dim, warm, loving world of our bedroom at 5:00AM.

In one smooth rapid motion Joan slipped the cord from the baby's neck after the head was born, as the shoulders were emerging and she caught the baby. I leaned forward and reached down. Lee, Joan and I brought the baby up onto my chest and tummy. The baby's eyes were wide open, and seeking. I saw into my baby's dark blue saucer eyes. The baby was bald, grey-ish pink, and very slippery. It's head was long and slightly curved (like a banana!) from its journey into the world. Leah turned the baby on its back. The baby's head was cradled between my breasts, over my heart. I held my baby's fuzzy head and felt its long lean slippy bony floppy body supported by my tummy. I felt the baby's cord pulse between my legs. I said, "My baby. I love you baby. You're ok. I love you I love you you're ok I love you baby. You're ok. My baby." In seconds Leah put a little white cap on and checked my stunned, wide-eyed child. I kept talking to the baby. Joan gave the baby a breath to help it adjust. Leah put a blanket over the tiny one on me as it squawked tentatively at first and then throatily cried out to us all. And the cord continued to pulse connecting us.

"Liss, it's a girl!" Lee noticed eventually. I said, "Really... really?" And everyone in the room said with joy, "Yes. It's a girl. Yes, a baby girl!" They all had noticed she was a girl baby but waited for me and Lee to discover we had a daughter on our own.

The placenta, her 'tree of life', was birthed with a rush of blood and we were separated. She was on her own as I held her close against my body. The sun was not yet up and the room was still dim. Lee cut the cord. As Mum cleaned, and Niki cooked, we climbed into bed with our new daughter. And as dawn broke we named her Matilda, for the *might* and *power* with which she entered this new day.

