

MY VBAC – A PRAYER ANSWERED, A DREAM COME TRUE

“Next time around, don’t put yourself through all of this. Just book an elective caesarean.” Holding my day-old baby in my arms, I looked up at the obstetrician who had delivered her. I nodded. But on the inside I wasn’t nodding at all. I was slowly but surely becoming even more determined than before to make my dream of a natural birth a reality.

I looked at my tiny daughter and felt blessed beyond anything I could have imagined. She was healthy, she was gorgeous. Already I couldn’t picture my life without her. And yet... how I wished that I had pushed her out!

It all started when my due date, the 17th of February 2004, had come and gone without any sign of our baby making her appearance. My gynae had recommended induction should nothing have happened by one week past my due date, and if at all possible I wanted to avoid that. So I collected tips to try to encourage labour, and I tried them all – except for one. There was just no way I would drink castor oil. Until, by two days overdue, my husband, Neil, decided that now we really had to do whatever it took. He bought a bottle of castor oil and actually managed to persuade me to take some.

A few drops were all I could manage, but sure enough, only minutes later the contractions started! As it was between nine and ten o’clock at night, I went to bed hoping to get some rest while it was still possible. But after lying down for only half an hour or so, the contractions became so intense that I had to get up and move around to cope with the pain. So that was the end of my attempt to sleep. I spent the rest of the night walking up and down in our tiny flat, doing laundry and rocking on my birthing ball. Every now and then I timed the intervals between contractions, eagerly anticipating the moment that I would feel three of them within 10 minutes, as that was when I was told I should go to hospital.

I reached that point around sunrise. When Neil’s alarm clock announced that it was time to get up, I excitedly informed him that he would not be going to work, since the two of us should now be on our way to hospital!

Upon our arrival at the labour ward, I felt my excitement dwindling a little. I was shown into a very clinical looking labour room. I should have known what to expect as I had been on a tour of the labour ward just a few weeks earlier. But now, with the birth of my child imminent, the room felt colder and more sterile than on the day of the tour. The thought of having to give birth in surroundings like those, made me quite nervous.

And as if that weren’t enough, I was handed a white hospital gown to labour in. Very reluctantly I put it on – and now I really felt uncomfortable. The midwife instructed me to get onto the high, narrow bed so that she could attach me to the electronic foetal monitor. Then she tried to make me cosy by putting big pillows behind my back and pulling the covers over me. There I was, exactly how I had not wanted this labour to be – in bed, wearing a horrible gown, feeling like a patient.

After 10 minutes or so the midwife took the straps of the monitor off, and in came the doctor who was standing in for my gynae – who happened to be away for the weekend. The strange doctor introduced himself and proceeded to examine me to see how far I was. I was eager to hear how far I was. After a whole night of contractions, surely I had to be at least four centimetres... maybe even six... or eight?

I was not at all prepared for what I was about to hear. “Do you live far from here?” the doctor asked. “Because if you don’t, and you definitely want to do this as naturally as possible, I’d advise you to go home and wait for another day or two.” *Another day or two? But I’ve been in labour all night. I’ve been up all night. How on earth...* “Otherwise”, he continued, “we could help things along by inserting a prostaglandin tablet in your cervix and then you will have your baby *today*.”

Oh, I wanted the birth to be as natural as possible. I really and truly did. I wanted no induction, no artificial breaking of my waters, no pain medication, no episiotomy... but how was I supposed to cope with another day or two of labour, without any sleep? The alternative sounded so inviting. “You’ll have your baby *today*.” After all, it was only a prostaglandin tablet, not a pitocin drip. As soon as the tablet had been inserted, I would still be able to handle the rest of the labour and birth as naturally as possible. “Alright,” I said, “I’ll take the tablet.”

So the doctor inserted the prostaglandin tablet and because by half an hour later things were still not happening, he broke my waters as well. I found both of these procedures extremely uncomfortable, but I grit my teeth and tried to remember that soon all interventions would be over and my body would be left to do what it knew to do.

I knew that to help my body – and my mind – do the necessary, I would have to make myself as comfortable as possible and not let the clinicalness of my surroundings get to me. An important step towards this end, I felt, was changing from the hospital gown back into my own tracksuit. After all, I was going to move about as much as possible...

Then another contraction came. And suddenly I could hardly move. I could not remember how to breathe. All I could manage, was clenching my teeth, moaning and wishing it would end. I had always believed women who described labour as one of the most painful experiences of their lives, to be exaggerating. Now I knew they weren’t!

Another contraction came. And another one. I was in agony. I just wanted to escape. From the pain, from this sterile room, from the midwife and the doctor whom I hadn’t known until three hours ago... *Gosh, has it already been three hours? How many hours of this must I still endure? This is so totally different from what I had imagined...*

“Three centimetres,” the doctor announced, after yet another terribly uncomfortable examination. “That’s great; you’re making progress.” *It’s not great! I still have another seven centimetres to go. At the antenatal classes we were told that when you feel you can’t handle it any longer, you are in transition. In other words, at least eight centimetres. I’m three centimetres and I already feel like – no, I know that I can’t do this any more.*

“I can’t do this any more,” I confided to Neil during a break between contractions. I was sitting on a chair in the sterile room. Rocking on the ball wasn’t helping me to cope with the pain any more, and I simply could not manage walking. So I decided to try out the chair.

“Remember what it is you really want,” Neil replied. “Remember the video of the water birth we saw at the antenatal class. *That* was what you said you wanted; and you will have it in a little while. Just persevere.”

“I don’t want this any more,” I groaned as another contraction began.

When the midwife came back, she suggested that I got into the bath as that should give me some pain relief. But even though I had really wanted a water birth, at that point I had absolutely no inclination to get into the water. Besides, at the antenatal class we were told to stay out of the bath until we were at least six cm dilated. Otherwise, our instructor had said, the water could stall labour. And that was the last thing I needed now.

So no, the bath was out. “Shouldn’t we give you an epidural?” the midwife offered. Before I could say anything, Neil stepped in. “She specifically asked me to make sure that she doesn’t take an epidural even if she asks for it.” I was grateful for his assertiveness because I really wasn’t in a state of mind to explain to or reason with anybody. Not that it was obvious to the midwife. “Why don’t you want an epidural?” she asked me.

Why don’t I want an epidural? Because I fear being out of control. I fear having no sensation even more than I fear having to endure this terrible pain for several hours yet to come. “Because I’m scared that I won’t feel enough to know when to push,” I muttered.

“But we’ll tell you when to push.” She clearly had no idea what was going on in my mind. I was already feeling out of control. So many things so far had happened in the complete opposite way to what I had wanted, planned and imagined. And now I just wanted to escape from this whole experience. An epidural wasn’t going to help me do that. It would be yet another intervention and I knew it could lead to even more interventions.

I said nothing. I just grabbed the entonox mask and tried – in vain – to breathe the pain away. The midwife tried to persuade me to change my mind about the epidural. I was not to be persuaded. I wanted no epidural. I wanted escape.

In walked the doctor. That the discussion was centring around whether or not I should have an epidural, seemed to spark a burst of excitement in him. Within seconds, he was actively joining sides with the midwife, passionately arguing in favour of the epidural. But there was no way I would budge.

“Look,” I ventured, addressing both the midwife and the doctor, “what are the chances that this will end in a caesar?” “There’s always a chance,” the doctor replied. “And because you haven’t been progressing that well, the chance is slightly higher in your case. But things are still looking good, so why don’t you take an epidural now and we’ll see...” “But can’t you just do a caesar *now*?” I interrupted.

That shocked the whole room into silence. “A *caesar*?” gasped the midwife. “Well,” said the doctor, after regaining composure, “I’d be happy to do a caesar now if that’s what you want.” “Yes, yes, that is what I want,” I groaned as I tried to breathe through a contraction. Deep inside, though, I knew that it wasn’t. But the excruciating pain of labour and the irritation of having to fight against the system for everything I want, were doing an excellent job stifling anything I knew deep inside.

So I was prepped for surgery. *How ironic*, I thought, as I was put in a hospital gown – again! – and given a drip. *My fear of interventions is so great that I’m prepared to choose the biggest intervention of all, just to avoid any further – but lesser – interventions. My fear of feeling out of control while pushing my baby out is so great that I’m choosing, instead, to relinquish all control and have the doctor take the baby out instead.*

Meanwhile the contractions kept intensifying while I sat propped up against the pillows, waiting for the anaesthesiologist to arrive. A full 90 minutes I waited. I knew exactly, as I was watching the clock on the opposite wall. How many contractions did I have in that time? I have no idea, but it seemed like a thousand. Though the pain dominated in every aspect of my being, I was also becoming excited at the thought of meeting my baby very soon.

And then the moment arrived. The whole medical team was ready and they wheeled me into theatre. Neil got his camera ready. When the anaesthesiologist approached me with the long needle that was needed to administer the spinal block, I wasn’t even scared. For the first time in several hours I relaxed completely as all sensation vanished from my lower body. Now I was ready to lie back and watch my baby come into the world!

And what an awesome moment it was. As the doctor cut me open, I thought to myself, *I can’t believe there’s a real baby inside me. No, it can’t be. He’s going to tell me it was only a lot of gas, then sew me up again and send me home.*

But lo and behold, there emerged a perfect little head with the cutest little face. And the rest of the body followed – arms, legs, everything. “It’s a perfectly healthy little girl!” announced the doctor. I couldn’t believe my ears. I had chosen not to find out the sex of the baby beforehand, but I had always

wanted a little girl. And here she was. Neil and I decided right there, in the theatre, to name her after my mother, Colleen – meaning *girl*.

Our little Colleen gave us endless joy. Right from the start she was healthy, vibrant, alert and energetic. People commented on how happy, peaceful and glowing I looked since she came into my life. And I, in turn, never tired of watching Neil hold her, carry her, dress her and play guitar to her. I often thought back on the moment of her birth, and it was a fond memory.

But still.

I knew that both Colleen and I had missed out on something, and possibly even without good reason. She was only a few months old when I started my research on VBAC – vaginal birth after caesarean.

Over the next several months my desire for a natural birth became almost obsessive. I remember so well waking up one morning after dreaming – for the umpteenth time – that I was about to give birth in water. As I woke up, I thought with irritation, *Why am I so obsessed about this? It can't be healthy!* And immediately I recalled having read in a book by Catherine Marshall, *Adventures in Prayer*, about making your dreams the object of your prayers. *That's it! This won't be an obsession any longer. I will leave it in the Lord's hands.* And immediately I had His peace about it.

And then one day, when Colleen was two years and nine months old, a home pregnancy test confirmed, to our excitement, that an addition to our family was on the way!

This time I wanted a private midwife, instead of an obstetrician, to be my primary caregiver. Number one, I wanted to be in the care of someone who had lots of VBAC experience and knew what to watch out for. Secondly, knowing now that a traditional hospital setting was just too clinical for me, I preferred the idea of having my baby in the more relaxed, homely atmosphere of an active birth unit, which is what midwives also tend to prefer.

So I started seeing the midwives at Midcare – at the time Marinda Taha, Lesley Rose, and Linda Viljoen. They referred me Boris Jivkov as backup obstetrician. I felt very comfortable with all four of them right away and actually looked forward to each check-up.

My pregnancy progressed wonderfully and somewhere between the end of the second and the beginning of the third trimester Lesley confirmed that the baby was already lying head-down! On my way back home from the appointment I felt like shouting praises to the Lord. I switched the cassette player on and a song by David Meece started playing. My heart leapt with joy as I listened to him sing, "God's promises are rainbows in the night..." And I simply knew that God was going to do it, that He was going to give me my heart's desire. The fact He had the birth of this baby under His control, was

radiating like a magnificent rainbow in a night of uncertainty over what might still happen and go wrong.

And thankfully the uncertainty was mine, not His. He knew exactly what lay ahead and knew about all possible obstacles, even those that I may to this day be unaware of. That is why, I believe, He laid it on so many people's hearts to offer to pray for the birth. I am still amazed when I recall how people just approached me of their own accord. My aunt e-mailed me from Belgium, asking me to please SMS her the moment I go into labour, as she wanted to pray for me. So did the leader of my La Leche League (breastfeeding) group, as well as one of the moms at Colleen's playgroup – whom I didn't even know well at the time. When I was about 37 weeks, I went to see the senior minister at the congregation we were thinking of joining, to discuss some spiritual matters. After our discussion he asked me whether I wanted to have a natural birth, and then he prayed that God would make that possible. A week or so later, one morning after the church service an invitation was given for everyone who needed prayer, to go forward. As I was battling with a minor health concern, I decided to make use of the opportunity and approached the junior minister (not the one I had seen the week before). Although I only asked for prayer for the health problem, he proceeded to ask God not only to heal me, but also to send a host of angels to the birth of my baby.

One challenge of which I was very aware, was that I had to go into spontaneous labour. Induction was out of the question as it would cause contractions too strong for a body that had previously been caesared and increase the chances of rupture of the scar. But again I reached my due date with absolutely no indication that labour was near. I started doing what I could to encourage my body to start labour by itself. The only thing I did *not* try this time, was castor oil – not only because of my past experience, but also because my doula told me that being a laxative, castor oil could cause the baby's tummy to work in utero! With each day that passed, my chances of a natural birth decreased slightly. I was experiencing a peculiar combination of doubt and faith. Something in me refused to believe that this time I was actually going to do it. Not only had I ended up with a Caesar the first time round, but also my mom had had only caesars despite a deep desire to give birth normally, her own mom had had a horrendous 36-hour labour with serious complications when giving birth to her first child, and *her* mother actually died in childbirth. Who was I to think that I could do it? The further overdue I went, the more I was pestered by doubts: *last time I didn't manage to make any progress on my own; why on earth would it be any different this time? Besides, the further overdue I go, the more difficult it becomes...* But I didn't allow these thoughts to get the better of me. I knew God had heard my prayers and with Him anything was possible. His rainbow was shining.

And yet I refused to get excited when, at eight days overdue, contractions woke me up in the wee hours of the morning. They felt a lot like period pains and they came and went at fairly regular intervals. It was Thursday, the 30th of August, and I was due for a check-up with the midwives at 13:00 that afternoon. *Even if this is the start of labour, it is probably going to be a couple of days before things really begin to happen*, I thought. And quite frankly, at

that moment I would have preferred it like that. I didn't feel up to labouring and giving birth right then – I was battling with a chest infection and had a fever, no appetite, and very little energy.

After I had got out of bed, the contractions became less regular. I phoned Neil, who was already at work, to tell him what I was feeling. But I didn't say a thing to anyone else, as I didn't want to get everyone excited for nothing. After all, the past three weeks had been a time of being bombarded with phone calls from well-meaning friends and relatives wanting to know when the baby's coming – as if I would know; and if nothing's happening yet – as if I wouldn't have told them!

When I dropped Colleen off at playgroup, the teacher expressed her concern at how ill I looked. She told me to get back into bed the moment I got home. She herself had had two completely natural births and, knowing that I could go into labour at any time now, she was worried that in my condition I just wouldn't be up to pushing a baby out.

I did manage to get some rest, but by that afternoon I was still not feeling great – so much so, that even the midwives were seriously concerned and arranged with the gynae to prescribe medication for me. I was also attached to a monitor, which confirmed that indeed I was having contractions. After that Marinda did a stretch and sweep to try to encourage my body to get things going. She was quite confident that I would go into labour within the next two to three days.

Driving home, I could feel the contractions coming fairly regularly. Still, they were no more intense than moderate period pains. I was looking forward to some more rest – my mom had finished work early and was going to come to my house to look after Colleen while I took a nap.

My mom and I arrived at our house around the same time. After a quick cup of tea with her, I decided to take a relaxing bath. I opened the taps and took my pyjamas from the wardrobe. As it was already almost five in the afternoon, I thought I might as well call it a day; besides, Neil would probably come home within the next hour or two and then he could take over from my mom in looking after Colleen while I slept. *It's going to be so lovely to sleep for a good 14 hours*, I thought as I stepped into the bath. *By tomorrow I should feel much better.*

But wait! What was that? A sudden contraction forced me to sit up straight and breathe deeply. *This doesn't quite feel like period pains any more. This is more like...labour!* I was in denial. I wasn't ready for this! Why, for the past two days my appetite had been so weak that I had hardly eaten anything. Where was I going to get the energy to go through labour and push a baby out? I finished bathing, breathing through every subsequent contraction. I got out and started drying myself. Another contraction hit. And what a contraction! I went down on my hands and knees, rocking back and forth on the bath mat, breathing until it had gone.

Now I wasn't quite in denial any longer. Realising that I wasn't going to get to sleep now, I put the pyjamas back into the wardrobe and put on a tracksuit instead. Another contraction came and I ran into the living room and jumped onto my birthing ball. My mom looked on in obvious alarm as I started rocking, breathing deeply, and groaning. "What's wrong?" she asked. "It's...a...contraction," was all I managed to get out. "But then Neil must come immediately!" my mom cried. "He must take you to hospital!"

I didn't argue. I had planned to labour at home for as long as possible, but here my contractions were already about three minutes apart. I phoned Neil and asked him to get my medication at the chemist on his way home. I breathed and rocked through my contractions, and in between I SMS'ed everyone who had promised to pray for me, as well as everyone I could think of who wouldn't mind praying for me. I was in desperate need of prayer now – I was sick as a dog, exhausted with no energy reserves, and had to push a baby out in who knows how long.

My mom started to panic. "Why is Neil taking so long? You need to get to hospital!" "Relax, there's still more than enough time," I reassured her. But things were indeed happening quite fast, especially in comparison with my previous labour. I phoned the midwives and it was arranged that Linda would meet me at the hospital. Then I phoned my doula, and I was still talking to her when a contraction started. Immediately, on the other side of the phone, Rosalia could hear what was going on, and she coached me through it! If I had been in any doubt about her capability, this mini long-distance support session would have assured me!

Not long after, Neil arrived. When he saw me rocking on the birthing ball and breathing deeply, he was obviously surprised. "Oh, *that's* what's going on!" he exclaimed. Since he had known that I was not feeling well, and seeing that I had simply asked him to come home and bring the medication, he had concluded that I was now so sick that I needed his help at home. He had no idea that he was to take me to hospital as our baby was now on its way! But, here he was, and we proceeded to pack the car. My mom helped us get everything together, and then drove off to her house, taking Colleen with her. It had been agreed that the two of them would later join us at hospital, for the actual birth.

Neil and I headed for hospital. As it was already about quarter past seven, we didn't get stuck in any traffic – a blessing, seeing that a car is not the most comfortable place in which to work through labour pains. Still, it took us about twenty-five long minutes to get there.

We had barely parked the car and climbed out, when another contraction came. I immediately crouched down, hanging on to the bumper. A concerned porter came running up, offering to bring us a wheelchair. "No thanks, please, just not a wheelchair!" I replied. The poor man. Even if he did realise what was going on, there was no way he would know what it felt like, or understand why, at this moment, I preferred almost any position to sitting in a chair.

When the contraction was over, we walked to the front door, where Rosalia greeted us. I had barely said “hello” when the next contraction came. Rosalia immediately started massaging my lower back – it felt amazing and took about half of the pain away.

Up the stairs we went, and in through the doors of the labour ward. Linda met us in the passageway and took us to the active birth unit. There I was attached to the electronic foetal monitor for about 15 minutes. Of course, this entailed sitting relatively still in an upright position – but because I knew that all subsequent monitoring was going to be done by a handheld instrument, and because Rosalia was at my side helping me breathe through every contraction, I didn’t mind the discomfort that much. And in between contractions, Rosalia made the already homely active birth unit even cosier by dimming the lights, lighting candles, and getting an aromatherapy burner going.

The monitoring session was over and Linda was satisfied with the reading. Now it was time for the big moment. Linda would do an internal to see how far I was dilated. She examined me and with a poker face asked, “How far do you think you are?” I was too scared to guess. What if I said I thought I was five centimetres dilated, and meanwhile it was only three? “Six centimetres!” Linda said with a big smile. “Six centimetres?!” I cried out. I was over the moon. It was becoming real now. Up to this moment, I had been taking this journey only in faith. Now, for the first time, I had something tangible. My body had actually dilated six centimetres without any prostaglandin tablets or breaking of waters or induction. Just as part of me found it difficult to believe that I was really capable of giving birth any other way than by caesar, part of me also had a hard time believing that I was capable of dilating any further than three centimetres.

The next hour or so I spent on and off the ball, going to the loo a couple of times, having a few sips of water, and chatting to Neil, Linda and Rosalia in between contractions. At one stage Neil remarked that I seemed to handle this labour so differently to the previous one. “She’s actually smiling!” he told Linda and Rosalia. And I was. I was smiling, I was happy, I was comfortable, I was excited. I was surrounded by people I knew and felt I could trust – and God was right there, with the host of angels my minister had asked for.

Sooner than I expected, Rosalia started running the bath. I really didn’t want to stall my labour by getting into the water too soon, and Linda hadn’t done another internal – but both Rosalia and Linda seemed sure that I was far enough along. Because I knew by now that midwives and doulas can tell how far a mom is merely by watching her, I was satisfied. I took my clothes off, leaving just a crop top on, and climbed into the lovely, deep birthing bath.

This was amazing. Not only was the warm water incredibly relaxing, but also it brought pain relief beyond anything I had imagined. I had known that warm water was said to dull labour pain, but I had expected it to make only a tiny difference. This was no tiny difference – it was as if I had been given a super strong painkiller to swallow! Again Neil was mentally comparing the two

labours. “Which would you say works best – the water, or the gas that you tried last time?” he asked. “Definitely this!” I replied without hesitation. “The gas did nothing; the water is amazing!”

It was not too long before I could feel the contractions becoming quite challenging again. At the same time, I was becoming less and less communicative, and more and more focused on simply coping with the contractions. Linda examined me again, while I was in the bath, and announced that it was time for Neil to let my mom know that she and Colleen should come.

By the time they arrived, I was so inwardly focused that I didn’t even say hello to them. It was only me and the contractions, and each one seemed like a mini-marathon. I was, however, aware that I was moaning and groaning a lot, and wondered how my mom was coping seeing me in such obvious pain.

There was only one position that was remotely comfortable – or should I say *manageable* – now: kneeling in the deepest part of the bath, hanging over the side with my head rested on my arms. At some point Rosalia brought me a pillow and balanced it on the edge of the bath. In between contractions I rested my head on the pillow, but when the contractions peaked, I found myself biting the pillow as hard as I could. Rosalia was right there with me, talking me through everything, moaning and grunting with me, and reminding me to breathe. Next to her was Neil, and at one stage Colleen came and stood there with him. That I remember as one of the most precious moments: Neil stroking my arm, saying to Colleen, “Stroke Mommy like this. Tell her, ‘Shame, Mommy’” ...

I gradually became aware of a sharp pain that was unrelated to the contractions and just kept growing more and more intense. The contractions I could still handle – they were very painful, but at least they came and went. But this new pain was constant, and didn’t feel normal. I felt unable to cope. I was scared. And I wanted to escape. Rosalia immediately saw that something was not right – she asked me what I was scared of. *I’m scared I can’t do this*, I thought. *I cannot handle this pain. Something must be wrong. What if it means I’m going to end up with a caesar again? And then again – maybe they must just caesar me and get it over with. I honestly cannot handle this pain!* But I said nothing to Rosalia. *I fear that I can’t do this. But I cannot voice my fear. What if I tell them how I feel, and they simply reply, “Of course you cannot do it. Let’s caesar you”?*

“There’s only one way to get through this,” Rosalia said. I knew exactly what she meant. I had to work through the contractions and push the baby out. But this other pain was getting so overwhelming, that I simply couldn’t see myself dealing with it for another minute. I realised I had to tell Linda. At this stage I found it extremely difficult to communicate, so it took me a while to persuade myself to formulate the simple sentence: “I feel a sharp pain here all the time, and it’s not a contraction – is it normal?” Linda didn’t say too much – she obviously knew very well that in my state I wouldn’t hear or understand any lengthy explanations. What she did tell me, was that I would have to give birth

lying on my back. She must have noticed that I was extremely reluctant to switch positions, because she added, "It might not be the nicest position for *you*, but it will definitely be best for the baby." So I forced myself to lie back in the bath, and immediately the sharp pain subsided.

Then Linda informed me that because I was so far overdue, she had to break my waters to see if the baby had passed any meconium. If meconium was found to be present, I wouldn't be able to give birth in the water. She broke my waters – not quite comfortable, but definitely not as horrible as the previous time – and indeed, there was some meconium. I was so disappointed. My heart sank as Rosalia started to empty the bath. I was given a choice – I could either stay in the empty bath, or get out and get onto the bed to give birth. Initially I thought I would be more comfortable staying where I was, but then I realised that the empty bath was actually quite cold and hard. So I moved to the bed.

I assumed a semi-sitting, semi-lying position, propped against some pillows. Linda put her finger inside my cervix and when the next contraction came she instructed me to push against her finger. I had absolutely no urge to push, but I did as she said. And soon enough I found that pushing actually made the contractions virtually painless. That was a bonus! By now I was exhausted, but Linda and Rosalia cheered me on. "You're doing so well. Come on Ena, every time you push, I can see the head!" *She can see the head. That means the baby is coming! The baby is actually coming!*

I pushed and pushed with every bit of strength. And suddenly Linda instructed me to reach down and feel my baby's head! I put my hand between my legs and...wow. I could actually feel my baby's hair! By now I was completely drained, but feeling that head somehow invigorated me, and I pushed even harder than before. Then Linda said, "When you push now, you will feel a burning sensation." That really excited me. I knew that the burning sensation would be caused by the crowning of the head. I also knew that that sensation should only last a second or two – as someone had told me, "you push through the pain and you push the pain away". I was determined to push through this pain, so I *pushed* ... and suddenly I just saw cameras flashing. *This is it! I thought This is really it! The baby's being born!*

And before I knew it, Linda was pulling the cord over the neck, and the rest of the body just slipped out. My perfect little baby was placed straight in my arms. It was so overwhelming, Linda had to remind me to find out the sex of the little person! I lifted the cord from between the legs, and to my astonishment and great joy, found that it was another little girl. Neil and I had been hoping for another daughter, but somehow I had been convinced that we were having a boy.

Linda and Rosalia agreed that this had not been an easy birth. Linda explained that already at my prenatal check-ups, she noticed that I had an irregularly shaped pubic bone. The sharp pain I had felt, was the result of the baby's head pushing against that bone. That was why the pain disappeared as soon as I lay on my back.

Neil had the honour of cutting the cord. My mom shed a few tears of joy, then took Colleen and went home to get some sleep. Rosalia told me I had really done well, then went off to the home of another woman who had meanwhile gone into labour.

Linda then started stitching me up. I had suffered a second-degree tear – probably because of that extra-hard push to get through the burning sensation as fast as possible! While he was dressing little Melissa, Neil mentioned that his family name would stop with him, unless we had a son. *Unless we had a son? In other words, I must go through this again?* “There will be no more sons or daughters unless we adopt!” I emphatically stated. Linda laughed. “You will forget about the pain,” she assured me.

And she was right. I have long forgotten about the pain. As I am sitting here writing, my VBAC baby is already 20 months old. And I still have to pinch myself when I think back of her birth. Yes, Ena, you *really* pushed her out!

And I still wonder what Colleen’s birth would have been like, had I not become so adamant that I wanted a caesar. Yes, her birth *was* beautiful – but maybe I would have been able to push her out as well. In fact, I allowed *maybe* and *what if* to haunt me for three and a half years. And then....just like warm water taking the edge off labour pain, my VBAC took the edge off my feelings of regret. I am now much more able to simply savour the memory of both my births. Each birth was special, each was unforgettable...and each left Neil and me with an absolutely amazing daughter. God is faithful beyond anything we can ever imagine.

Written in May 2009 by Ena du Plessis