

My Journey to Homebirth
by Sophie Messenger

Over a year ago, before I became pregnant, I was very scared of childbirth, expecting it to be a very painful and unpleasant experience. I also thought that people who chose to have their baby at home, especially the first one, were crazy and irresponsible. Yet, in February 2006, I gave birth to my son Sebastien at home in Cambridge, and this was the best experience of my life. This is the story of how I came to choose to have a homebirth. It was a long, winded path, and lots of people I met played a role in it.

I am a scientist, with a PhD in physiology of reproduction. I was trained to think in a very rational, scientific way, and therefore I thought I was not a typical candidate for a homebirth. In my view this choice is usually associated with people with a more "alternative" background and/or lifestyle. This is one of the reasons why I am particularly keen to write this story, because I feel that I have a message to pass on to future mothers, and I hope my story might help them make the best choice for them.

If a year ago I had been told I'd give birth at home I would have laughed. I was very scared of labour pain. I thought that women who chose to give birth without an epidural were masochists. I guess I viewed it in the same way as having anaesthesia at the dentist: why endure pain for nothing? I still had these ideas on childbirth until the 5th month of my pregnancy. Then several things happened. I attended a Birthlight childbirth preparation course, and I hired a Doula.

Originally I was going to only attend hospital childbirth preparation (antenatal) classes, but a friend told me they weren't so great and recommended the NCT (National Childbirth Trust) classes. The NCT classes were full, but they recommended Birthlight (I had never heard of it before). Birthlight had classes available starting either in September or December 2005, and I am so grateful to Carole Meads, who suggested I might want to start sooner than later so I could be better informed about which decisions to make. Originally, I was set on having the classes in December to have them nearer the birth, and if I had attended them so late in my pregnancy, I probably would not have had the time to "mature" my decision to have a home birth.

At the Birthlight class I meet a couple who wanted to have their baby at home. A girl told them they were brave and that's what I thought too. During the classes, we were told the pros and cons of various interventions, and in particular, the risks associated with an epidural. I remember thinking that the class was probably highlighting this because Birthlight teachers were wishy-washy hippies who thought one should give birth with aromatherapy oils and chamomile tea for pain relief! What was very useful, was that we were shown what was entailed in an epidural or a c-section, complete with role-playing by a group of volunteers. This helped a lot to visualise what would happen. On the whole, even if I thought some of the views were biased, I enjoyed the classes very much, gained more info than I thought (I'd already read a lot of pregnancy bibles by then and thought I knew everything!), and made great friends

I think I only started to fully appreciate the Birthlight classes when I attended the Rosie (the local maternity hospital) ones in December. The hospital classes were completely different: there was very little time for discussion with other couples, so we did not make any friends there. The classes were very short and matter of fact, there was little time for discussion and questions, and the setting did not encourage people to do so. They were useful in that I got to know what was available at the Rosie (for instance, no mobile epidural), and got a tour of the birth and postnatal wards and Midwife led unit. Having had the Birthlight classes before, I was able to ask a lot more questions than I would have otherwise. On the whole I found the two classes very different but complementary to one another.

In September 2005, I met and hired my birth Doula, Maddie McMahon. I wanted to have a Doula because, although I wanted a hospital birth then, I was very conscious of the fact that going to hospital (a place where I associate you go when you're sick) and being looked after by midwives that you had not even met before, was not exactly a good setting to make you feel relaxed (and I understood very well how stress could affect labour progress). My decision was also influenced by the fact that in January 2005, I had had a missed miscarriage. I was 'chemically induced' at the early pregnancy unit at the Rosie, and what was already a very upsetting experience both mentally and physically was made worse by the fact that I felt totally unsupported by the staff there.

Maddie was great from the start. She provided me with a lot of info and support. At one stage when I was feeling stressed and overwhelmed she lent me her copy of Ina May Gaskin's Guide to Childbirth. That was a turning point for me. In her book, Ina May talks about childbirth in a very positive and empowering way, and she describes all the problems associated with intervention. The book was so great, with lots of great birth stories, some of it made me cry. It was the most positive outlook I had read on birthing, and it gave me a different perspective that it was not all just pain and a horrible experience. This led me to start reading more on the subject, and in particular, Michel Odent's books, including "birth reborn".

As I learnt more and more about natural birth, I began to have doubts about hospital birth. In particular, I started to picture myself having a fight with the medical team at the Rosie if my views and theirs differed during labour. I decided I would go to the midwife led unit (MLBU) instead, but I was scared of several things: what if there was a shortage of midwives and the unit was closed? What if they decided to transfer me to the actual ward? But also: what if the pain was too much (I was still scared at the time) and I wanted an epidural after all (which was not available at the MLBU).

As I started to write my birth plan I felt: hey, I've never been in labour proper in my life, and how on earth am I supposed to make decisions about it when I don't know how I will feel then? So I expressed my doubts to Maddie, who told me I could decide ON THE DAY of labour where to I wish to have my baby delivered. Maddie also helped my husband to put words to his fears when he said he was scared about me having a home birth, and she explained to him what the risk were and answered his questions.

I am also very lucky to have had a great, supportive and understanding midwife. I told her about my birth plan and she respected my choices about deciding whether to have a home birth at the last minute.

By Christmas 2005, when I went on maternity leave (my due date was 6th February 2006), I had still not made up my mind about where I would give birth. Was it reading "pushing for primips" an essay by Gloria Lemay that Maddie gave me? Or was it reading yet more books by Michel Odent? Was it hearing such positive experiences from home births at the Birthlight antenatal yoga and discussion classes I attended in January? Or was it using a device to prepare the perineum for childbirth (the Epi-No) that freed me of my fear of tearing? Or was it the pregnancy hormones? I don't know what gave me the final push (pun intended) I needed, but sometimes in the last few weeks of my pregnancy started to loose my fear of birthing and I made a firm decision to give birth at home.

I was due on the 6th February 2006. I ended up giving birth on the 21st of February, 42 weeks and 1 day after my due date (after a couple of sessions of acupuncture to help things along, as I really wanted to avoid being induced). This also helped I guess because I was getting so impatient that when contractions finally started, I was very excited and not at all fearful! Again I am so grateful for Maddie's support during that time, and also for my midwife's support: she knew I really did not want to get induced, and respected that, and reassuring me that everything was fine when I got scared about my baby's wellbeing.

When my son was born, at home, he was able to come gently into the world: his cord was left intact to finish pulsating before being cut, the lights were dimmed and the voices hushed, so he did not cry for a good few minutes as he recovered from the birth on my chest. I was not worried, as the midwives told me that he was a good colour, and he was left to lie undisturbed on my tummy for an hour after birth. It was the most amazing experience of my life.

Reflecting back on this, 3 months after the birth, I realise now that my experience could have been very different had I not had such a great and understanding midwife. When I gave birth there was little, almost no amniotic fluid. If my midwife had wanted me to have a scan at that time, I would likely to have ended up being pressured to have an induction, and my birth experience would have probably been very different indeed. I had a long labour (30h) which I think was due to my having had an operation to remove dysplasia on my cervix 3 years ago (the scaring making dilation more difficult). Again, had I been in hospital, it is very likely I would have ended up with an oxytocin drip for "failure to progress", and then maybe fetal distress would have meant an emergency c-section. What I am almost certain of is that my son would not have been born in the cosy and quiet environment of my home, and that I may not have

been able to keep him undisturbed on my chest for an hour after the birth. Not at all what I wanted for my first baby and not for me.

The few days after the birth were so special at home with just me, my husband and our new baby son. It was so precious and peaceful I feel blessed to have had them, and am still on a high when I recapture the feelings of the birth itself and the week that followed. I realise a home birth is not for everyone, we each have our reasons and hospital births are necessary for those who need special attention, but in my case I think I made the right decision.