AIMS For a better birth...

Joanna Joy shares her birth story

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Holly Elfin was born at 6.55am on Saturday the 11th of August 2012.

If you follow the astrological significance of birth, this means she is a Leo, born in the Chinese year of the Water Dragon. She was due at the Full Moon, on her father's birthday, but was a week and two days late, and so was born on her grandfather's birthday instead on a waning moon in Pisces.

She was delivered by me into the waiting hands of her father, Dan, on our boat, with the support and lovingpresence of our friends Lisa and Sara. We were moored up in a small wooded copse, in a beautiful wilderness valley in Yorkshire, where the foxes howl, the owls screech and a panther prowls its realm.

On the bank, within the Aspen trees was a firepit, and an altar to the beauty and power of woman, motherhood and birth. My firekeeper and guardian of the outside birth space was Lee, Sara's husband, who lit and tended the fire each night for us, for the three nights that I laboured before the night I actually gave birth.

Inside the boat, the wood burner is lit, my altar brightened by candlelight, reminding me of all the candles that my sisters would be lighting for me for my labour and birth. Reminding me of the strength and love that held me, the energy that we had collectively conjured to fuel me through this journey, when we held my Blessing Way Ceremony. My Rite of Passage into Motherhood. Upon the altar, many of their gifts, candles galore, incense, flamingo feathers, beads brought from near and sent from afar, joined into a necklace of power, a bottle of freshly homemade elderflower cordial, a handmade felted mama holding her newborn babe, healing herbs and flowers for my bath, chocolate 'celebrations' in a sheer pink bag, words of affirmation. Gifts of love and symbols of power, from maidens, mothers and crones, this ancient female magic was all the midwife I needed to help me on this journey that I had not made before. To instill within me the confidence of all the women across the ages who had birthed their babes in trust and knowledge that their body was built for this job, and that all would be well.

Dan had been frantically trying to finish building the boat and fitting it out, so that we could move on to our 117 year old Dutch Barge, Cornelia Adriana, before I gave birth. We left our home mooring on the day that I was due and did the five or six hour cruise up to the spot that I had chosen to give birth. Dan did all the heavy work of winding the five locks and pushing the swing bridges, while I got the easy job of sailing the boat atexactly nine moons pregnant! We reached the winding hole that I had decided to commandeer for my birth at about the same time as Sara arrived on their boat Calypso. But shock horror, there were already a gang of lads camping in my spot that I had so carefully chosen for it's seclusion,

inaccessibility, and raw natural power and beauty! So we moored up a little further down and settled into our new spot.

During the following days, I continued to nest and prepare myself for birth. Sara and I hung out and drunk tea and ate cake, and generally reconnected after a summer of them having been off cruising around Yorkshire. At this time, the midwives who I had been having ante-natal checks with came to see where we were just in case I wanted to call them. I had made it clear to them, however, that I would only be calling if I really felt like I needed them for some reason. But that most likely we would be fine, and that we would call them out after birth for post-partum checks.

After two days, the lads were still camped up in my spot! So Sara and I went over to have a natter with them, and find out when they were planning on leaving. When I told them that I had wanted to give birth there, they graciously agreed to pack up and leave the next morning, setting themselves up a little way down the valley instead. And so we moved the two boats over, and set about tidying up and preparing the space for this awesome event. When all leftover rubbish had been bagged up, and the area cleansed with burning herbs and songs of power, Lee rebuilt the fireplace and Sara built us a beautiful alter. Dan and Lee prepared the wood for the fire and we were all set to go.



That night, Lee lit the fire and we had a lovely evening, sitting around the blazing logs, eating curry and reconnecting with our very dear friends who had lived next door to us for several years, but had been off cruising all summer. That night (which was a Tuesday), Dan and I had some gooood loving! We knew it would probably be the last time for a while, and I also think he was trying to induce me, as he didn't want

to have to go back in to work, and wanted a holiday after all the hard work he'd been doing on the boat, as well as his full-time job as a ranger! He had a month of paternity leave booked off, and hadn't banked on having to wait past my due date for it!

Well, sure enough, his plan worked, and half an hour after we nestled down in the quilt, bathed in the fuzzylove haze of post-coital bliss, the contractions started. They began at 1.30am and after half an hour of regularcontractions, 3-4 every 10 minutes, I woke Dan up and said. 'I think we're on!' They continued all through the night at that regularity and intensity, finally easing up and stopping into Wednesday morning, about 9am. I had called Lisa, who was going to be supporting me in my birth, in her capacity as a doula, and she warned me that they may stop during the day and pick up again later that night, recommending I get as much rest as possible through the day. Sure enough, as the sun went down and we sat around the fire on Wednesday evening, they started up gently at first. Labouring on my hands and knees, on a sheepskin next to the fire, in a dark wooded copse under the waning moon, who was kissing us with her moonbeams. This is one of my fondest memories of my birth. Then at around 2am, snugged up in my bed, once again the contractions kicked in again properly, with greater intensity than the night before.

Once again, I laboured through the night, and once again as morning came, they died down and stopped at about 10am on Thursday morning.

Exactly the same happened on Thursday evening, I laboured through the night into Friday morning, except this time the contractions didn't stop, they continued all through Friday and into the evening, gradually building in intensity. I knew that this was it now. Tonight was the night, and if the previous night's patterns were anything to go by, come 1-2am in the morning, we were going to be really cranking it up!

During these three days of labouring at night, and trying to rest during the day, I had been drinking lots of good herbal tea (Mama Tea, as I called it, a mix of raspberry leaf and nettles, comfrey leaf and catnip, calendula and chamomile, rose petals and elderflowers and lavender), to calm and soothe me, but also energise and strengthen me, assisting and preparing my womb during this warm up for the main event. I was also taking several herbal tinctures for pain relief, as well as to prevent post-partum haemorrhage. I had set up a crystal grid around the boat as well, to help all of us to maintain a calm and focused strength for this birth. I wanted not a single shred of fear to be present that could put me off my course. Not my fear or anyone else's. I was also taking regular doses of Bush Flower essences, to keep me emotionally balanced and to help me release any unhelpful emotions, quickly and efficiently, that may surface during my labour.



These were my medicines. My spiritual allies. These were the ones I trusted to get me and my babe safely through this momentous event. And all this preparation seemed to me to be an essential part of the whole process of labour. Steadily preparing my body, my mind, my emotions and my spirit, for the relinquishing of my baby into this world. Gently guiding me ever deeper into the depths of my primal self, into my animalistic and instinctual self. Those parts of me that knew exactly how to give birth, as it is imprinted into the very essence of our being, as women.

We had been keeping Lisa updated over these few days, and we finally asked her to come over at about 1.30am on Saturday morning, almost exactly three days after my contractions first started.

By this time I was adopting an on-all-fours position, hanging over the back of the sofa for each contraction.

Dan started gently holding me and tickling my big belly during each contraction, and I was amazed that the tickling really reduced the pain of the contractions massively, and shortened them as well, so I summoned him to tickle me for every one after that!

Lisa texted us to say that she had arrived, and Dan and Sara went to meet her at the road, and bring her up the towpath, and ferry her over to the other side of the canal, where our boat was still moored up. When she arrived, I was just lying down having a little rest on the sofa, and I got this huge wave of love and bliss, a massive oxytocin rush, that was better than any ecstasy pill you could ever get (and I've had a few, so believe me, I know!) That was certainly the emotional peak of my body's naturally produced chemical and hormonal drug cocktail, and it was fab! Bottle that 'n' sell it and you'd make a fortune! I

vaguely remember gushing a load of 'I love you's at everyone, and then the contractions ramped up again another notch. I decided to adopt a standing position, and ended up hanging out of the side hatch with a brandy (medicinal you understand!)and then moved again to hang off the central roof beam of the boat. I was just moving around, letting my body be instinctively guided into positions that felt good. Doing a lot of circling of my hips, and walking on the spot motions.

Then, out of no-where, came a huge emotional release, and I felt a deep sadness well up inside me. This grief just poured out of me as tears started spilling down my cheeks. I let them flow, letting go of this intense sorrow, about what, though, I had no idea. I understood that this was simply a part of the process of labour. An energetic release of emotion that no longer served me and was ready to leave. I can only imagine that this was transition.

At this point, I felt my energy wane. I felt like I needed a rest. So I got a large piece of amber and held it over my Solar Plexus for a few minutes, in order to re-energise myself for whatever lay ahead.

It was at this point I went back onto my hands and knees over the back of the sofa and my body started pushing. The mooing sounds that I had been making during each contraction now turned into roaring, as I used the sound to channel the pain of the contractions through and out of me. I felt like a lioness! I don't know how long my body was pushing for, but I was acutely aware that I didn't actually need to do anything. I didn't need to push. My body did it for me. Just the right amount and not too fast. I also really didn't want to tear, and so was happy to let this happen gradually and slowly so as not to force this baby through a passageway that was not ready for it. As her head crowned, it rocked in and out over several contractions, slowly easing it's way out, until finally on the encouraging cries of 'come on Jo, it's time to push this baby out now', I gave one mighty push and her head was out. The next contraction brought her body quickly and easily into the waiting hands of her father, who swung her straight underneath me, between my legs, and plopped her onto the sofa below me!

She was so small and slippery, and we were immediately wrapped in a big fluffy towel, placing her on my chest, skin to skin, and she let out a good hearty howl to announce her own arrival!

We spent the next half an hour gazing at and loving our new Little Elf and she nuzzled around until she found what she was looking for, and latched on. I had completely forgotten that I also had a placenta to deliver, until a gentle contraction reminded me there was still a little work left to do. I could feel that I needed to get into a squatting position, and on the next contraction the placenta came straight out and Dan caught it in a bowl.

As we were having a lotus birth, we were not cutting the cord, and so while I had a bath and cleaned up, Dan and Lisa dressed The Elf, and cleaned and prepared and placed the placenta into a pouch that I had made for the occasion.

The last thing I remember is drifting off to sleep with my baby wrapped in my arms, exhausted but happy, as I listened to Dan making all the phone calls to new grandparents, every so often popping his head into the bedroom to look at us with tears of amazement running down his face!

And my greatest heartfelt thanks go to all those beings, physical and metaphysical, present and absent, human, animal, plant and mineral who helped me. You all played your parts beautifully to support me just enough and not too much, to do what I needed to do in order to have as empowered a birth as it is possible to have.

FREEBIRTH

I AM FREE TO BIRTH

Joanna Joy