

I Will Survive (Thoughts on Survivors Giving Birth)

This article, written by Katie Wise (about whom you can see more below), was originally created for and published by the [Mother's Advocate Blog](#)

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There is a club that no one wants to join. Yet, more than half of all women will join this club at some point in their lives. There is no mark, no mascot, and no handshake. In fact, you could be standing next to another member and never know it. But every once in a while, in the right setting, a woman tells another woman her story. And then there is the knowing moment, the held eye contact, the smile to say, "I know, I'm a member too." The members of this club are sexual abuse survivors. Every member's story is different, but one thing is the same. You cannot turn in this membership card. This story is now part of your life.

Somewhere along the way, survivors miraculously open their hearts (and bodies) again —to love, to partnership, and sometimes to pregnancy. For many sexual abuse survivors, preparing to give birth is a moment of truth. Their healing is about to be put to the test. A full-grown newborn baby is going to come through their body, through their pelvis, and through their most sacred places, to make its way into the world. This shy, sexual place — with all its hurts, secrets and stories — is about to be turned inside out, opened to a profound, chosen *violation*. I use the word violation here for a reason. Our baby is not truly "violating" us, but I can think of few things in life that provide such an intense opening, tearing, out of control feeling as birth. And for members of the club, birth can easily trigger the feeling of violation.

I am a member of this club.

My story is unimportant here — better than some, worse than others — a story of being manipulated, being controlled, and having my body used by someone else without my permission. By the time I was pregnant, I felt I had done my

due diligence on my story. I had packaged it up in some deep closet of my being — safe, sound, sleeping. I had supported other survivors giving birth as a doula, and knew all about the questions to ask them. I would make sure they had talked to their partner, their care provider, and anyone else who would be at the birth. I helped them identify potential triggers, and ways to cope if things came up. I, however, had done none of this for myself. During my own pregnancy, my story seemed far from my mind.

I did notice, however, that I was preoccupied with avoiding a cesarean birth. Having seen 130 births before having my own, I knew this was common. Most women feel strongly about avoiding a cesarean. I also knew this fear could be a barrier in my birth process. With a keen guide and the powerful tool of art therapy, I was able to dive deeper. Near the end of a session one day, we decided to tackle my fear of cesarean birth. Having supported other women, I knew the play-by-play and setting exactly. I carefully drew the details: the blue sterile drape, the medical instruments, my arms strapped to the table with restraints, doctors in masks. My therapist then gently pressed me to look closely.

“What about this image is the *most* scary for you?”

And there it was ... the restraints. More than the incision, more than the blood, the anesthesia, the scalpel — it was the restraints. And like a time traveler, I was thrown back to another time and place — my wrists bound, my scared naked body, and the eyes of my perpetrator looking cold and devious. A flood of tears erupted, and suddenly I remembered: I was a survivor.

I needed to treat myself as I would my clients — with care, gentleness and awareness. In that moment, I was waking up to what it meant to be a survivor giving birth. This was a time for opening to the softness, the feminine, the mystery, and the hurt inside of my core as a woman. Needless to say, our session went a little over. When the tears subsided, we returned to the art, to the image — adding light, adding God, taking the masks off the doctors, and giving them humanity. Taking one hand out of the restraints, and adding last, but not least, the miracle of the day — the baby. My baby.

As I walked home that day, I knew that I was healing. By looking the dragon in

the face, I felt my whole being soften. I knew I would no longer need a cesarean birth, or any other specific birth outcome to teach me something. Nor would my fears cause my body to shut down. And I knew if a cesarean birth was what my baby truly needed, that I could meet it with grace and consciousness.

I also knew I had a lot of work to do.

I needed to talk to my care providers and my husband about my past, and more specifically about how it might affect my present. Perhaps the most important thing we can do as survivors preparing to give birth is to tell our story. Working with a midwife or a very compassionate doctor who will take the time to listen is especially important for survivors. You may choose to have your partner join you for the conversation and focus on the facts: "I'd like you to know this about me. You don't have to fix anything, but here are some things that I need you to do. Tell me before you do anything physically to my body, so I can be prepared for what to expect. Avoid the following words: 'Trust me,' 'relax,' etc." If you are closer to your care provider, you might choose to really let them into your story, to open yourself to their healing words and experience.

If there are certain words that your perpetrator used, advise everyone who will be at your birth to avoid those words. If you'd like to avoid unnecessary vaginal exams, communicate that. If you need to have one hand free from the restraints in a cesarean birth, put that in your paperwork. With preparation, compassion and communication, your birth can be a profound place of finding your voice — and speaking up for that little girl or young woman inside of you.

Next, I explored the differences between abuse and birth.

If birth could feel like a violation, how would I tell my body that this was different — that there was a *purpose*? I looked at the differences.

Permission: I will be *choosing* to allow this baby to spread my pelvic bones wide, as I welcome him into my arms.

Love: This baby was created from an act of love, as is giving birth.

Protection: The people around me, as opposed to my perpetrator, are there to

protect and support me.

Power: I will *give* birth. I will actively work with my baby to create a miracle. Very different, indeed.

I am happy to say that when I did give birth — although it was not easy — it was not violating. And although I felt forces much bigger than me at work, I never felt out of control. In contrast to what I feared, the moment of pushing and helping my baby navigate my pelvis was the most powerful moment of the whole experience. As my baby pressed into the walls of my being, pressing impossibly wider with every push, the old story seemed to be forced right out with him. There was no room for the story of a small, voiceless victim. A new story was being written, cell by glorious cell. This part of my body was a place of power, of divine strength. This was a place where miracles happened. This was a home, the beginning of another person's life. This small, perfect boy was remapping the way for me, showing me what femininity was all about. He was teaching me about trust. He was showing me that I could be violated, could give way, could tear in two — all in a glorious celebration of life.

Through this act of love, I deepened my healing.

After the birth, the small tear healed, the bleeding stopped, and I was new. Something had shifted — so powerfully that I knew my membership status had changed. Of course, I was still a member. I always will be. But I could feel that the shame was gone, and in its place was a desire to help others find this “reset.” I wanted to help other survivors approach their births as more than just an ordeal to manage, more than the avoidance of their triggers. I wanted to help other survivors realize that birth is an opportunity to dismantle the entire trigger itself. And as I held my perfect little man in my arms — both of us tired and weeping — I wanted to thank him, over and over again, for showing me love, for showing me my strength, and for being part of my healing.

Katie Wise is a doula, childbirth educator and birth advocate, as well as the owner and founder of [Yo Mama Yoga and Family Centers](#). Her work and writing have been featured in "Whole Life Times," "Yogi Times," "Los Angeles Daily News," "Special Delivery," the "Boulder Daily Camera," and on NPR. Katie

believes that women's bodies have the wisdom to give birth. Her purpose in supporting and educating pregnant women is to uncover and foster that instinct and faith. Katie is also the host of the Mother's Advocate "[Healthy Birth Your Way: 6 Steps to a Safer Birth](#)" video series. Please visit [Katie's site](#) to read her blog or find more information.