I needed a nap. It was spring 2004, and my body felt a deep-in-the-bones exhaustion. My boys were 3 and 4 years old, I had been rising at 5 a.m. with my older son for more than four years, and I had just spent a year interviewing more than 100 women about their childbirth experiences for a possible book about why so many healthy, educated mothers in America were having an unusually high number of medical interventions and complications when giving birth. I deserved a nap, right?

I told myself that, to unwind, I should take a “bendy/stretchy” yoga class, as many mothers do. But when I read the description of the yoga nidra taught by Robin Carnes at Willow Street Yoga in Takoma Park, Maryland— that all you do is lie down and rest for an hour— I thought, Forget about twisting my body into the boat pose—yoga nidra is exactly the kind of yoga I need. Little did I know that a yoga-nidra nap would change my life.
“That’s not serious yoga,” commented my mommy friends.

Part of me agreed. Paying for a yoga class was an investment, and paying to nap at a yoga studio seemed a little nuts. So when I stepped into Robin’s class for the first time, even though I desperately needed rest, I was somewhat skeptical that this expensive nap in the middle of the day was a good idea.

“How many blankets do I need?” I asked Robin, a striking, middle-aged redhead who appeared less earthy-crunchy then the average yogini.

“At least four underneath you, one for your head, and two to put on top of you,” she said. “Oh, and you may want a bolster and an eye bag.”

As I made my bed, I watched the room fill with women of all ages, some of whom had brought their own eye bags. By noon, the room was packed. I guess I wasn’t the only one who needed a nap.

“Is there anyone here who has never done yoga nidra?” Robin asked. Up went my hand. “Great. Your mind may not know why you are here, but your body does.”

I didn’t know it yet, but my yoga-nidra journey began right then.

Discovering My Sankalpa
As I lay down on the four folded blankets and tucked myself in with another blanket on top, a sigh emerged from my mouth that was more like a roar. This mama was tired.

“We’re going to focus on your sankalpa today,” Robin said. “Sankalpa in Sanskrit means will or purpose. Every yoga nidra session begins with focusing on what your intention, or purpose, is for the practice. It could be to simply relax, or it could be more focused on something you want to manifest in your life.”

I want rest, my mind told me in an instant.

“Don’t let your mind answer this question,” Robin urged a second later, ruling out the immediate answer my brain had in mind. “Let your intention come from your body.”

My body? I was ashamed to admit that, after two powerful homebirth experiences, I no longer felt intimately connected to my body. Pregnancy and giving birth were all about every little feeling in my body; mothering felt like a marathon of meeting everyone else’s needs and rarely my own. My life was too busy to focus on my body. I was consumed with interviewing mothers about their birth experiences and caring for two small toddlers born 18 months apart, the elder a constant screamer. Most days, the question I asked was, “How are their bodies?” My body was in the back seat, unattended, without a seat belt.

“If you don’t know your intention now, don’t worry,” Robin assured us. “See if it comes to you during the practice, once you’re sensing your body.”

And off we went. Robin’s sweet, melodic voice, with a hint of high school history teacher, took me through my body: mouth, tongue, ears, eyes, forehead, scalp. She even led me into the “hollows of the brain cavity,” a place I had not ever imagined.

“Sensation flowing in the back of the neck…in the throat…in the shoulders and arms…” her voice continued, as tingling electricity pulsed through these parts of my body. “Radiant sensation flowing down the left shoulder…into the left upper arm…left elbow…left forearm…wrist…left hand.”
After 45 minutes of guiding me in the exploration of my every body part, right down to the phlegm, while breathing deeply and sinking into awareness of my feelings and thoughts, Robin invited us to feel our bodies as spacious, open, without boundaries. Ten minutes later she returned us to our sankalpa. At that point my body felt deliciously empty, as if an abandoned lot in my brain were now displaying a big “vacancy” sign. From this space emerged my sankalpa: I will turn the 118 birthstory interviews I did into an important piece that will help make childbirth more mother-friendly. Four classes later, I began to hear the voices of birthing mothers.

The first time the symphony of mothers’ voices emerged, I was driving my boys to a park. Raffi was playing in the car’s CD player, and an argument about a blue ball was brewing between them. Suddenly, I applied the brakes and screeched to a halt. Both boys went silent, waiting for my scolding. Instead, I pulled out a napkin from the glove compartment and started writing down dialogue. For the next five minutes, I wrote on every napkin in the car.

“Are we going to go to the park, Mommy?” Jacob asked.
Feeling guilty, I quickly wrote one word on my hand: play. Then I drove them to the park.

*Play?* I had never written a play, never thought about writing a play. I could not imagine, with two small children and a husband who traveled overseas all the time, how I could ever write a play. Sure, I was a writer— I could see writing a book about childbirth—but plays were definitely not my genre.

Back in yoga nidra class, I continued to focus on my sankalpa. By the end of the practice one day, again feeling open, my body lying there like a limitless blue ocean, serene as a morning mountain mist, this sense— not in my mind but in my body—came to me: Nobody’s going to buy your book, Karen. Write a play about childbirth and change the world.

The next morning, as I walked my kids to a nearby park, I asked a neighbor, who wrote grants for a local prominent theater company, where to go if I wanted to write a play.

“The Playwright’s Forum,” Gary responded. I went to playwrightsforum.org and signed up immediately.

The voices of the mothers I interviewed now flooded my head every day, and especially just after I practiced yoga nidra. I remember a session with Robin in which she had us dive into awareness of our thoughts and images, and I had explored my belief that I could not write a play because I was not qualified. She invited us to “locate a belief about yourself that you are working with in your life. Where and how do you feel it in your body when you take this belief to be true about yourself?”

I felt the belief that I could not write a play deep in my throat.

“Now bring to mind the opposite of this belief,” she suggested. “Where and how do you feel it in the body?” I felt I can write a play in my heart.
“Alternate several times between these two opposites of belief.”

I cannot write a play. I can write a play. I cannot write a play, I can write a play.

Like magic, I entered that scrumptious feeling of emptiness again. I was totally open, a boundless ocean, my beliefs morphing into a completely unexpected place where my thoughts were unchained and neither belief was true.

That evening, mental handcuffs now off, I went to my computer and began to write a play about childbirth.

Over the next six months I wrote Birth, a play about how healthy, educated mothers were giving birth in America. I wanted to present a portrait of real birth stories from the mother’s perspective because there were so many statistics on childbirth that showed cesareans were rising rapidly, for example, but few stories from mothers. My intention in writing Birth was to make sure this period in history did not go by without clear documentation on how mothers are giving birth and to raise awareness about the current birthing climate so mothers know their birth options. It
seemed unbelievable to me that so many important plays have been written on women’s history and the politics of women’s bodies, like Eve Ensler’s The Vagina Monologues, but no serious plays existed on childbirth, an act that an average of 4 million mothers in the United States participate in every year.

I chose eight birth stories from my interviews of mothers and fictionalized some stories to make the piece work as a play, but I primarily wrote the exact birth story of each woman. The stories in the play range from a planned cesarean, to a mother who wants natural childbirth, to several mothers who want epidurals. Jillian, a character who tells all four of her births in the play, starts off with a birth she did not want and ends with exactly the birth she always wanted. Showing the audience how she got there—that one bad birth experience does not have to define your entire birth history—is what I love about her story and the message I want every pregnant mother to take home. I think the message in the play of the importance of knowing your birth options and rights is why since 2006 so many communities around the world have been using the play as a theater for social-change piece to raise awareness and money to make maternity care better for mothers. Similar to V-Day’s mission, Birth is being used to revolutionize the way communities view childbirth and respect women’s pregnant bodies.

Every week while I wrote my play, I attended Robin’s noon yoga nidra class, moving from a mommy busyness in which, some days, I felt completely out of my body, to a yummy state of bodily presence I had never been able to sustain before. I wrote while the boys napped, and in the evenings I workshopped my play in a church basement with a group of playwrights from The Playwright’s Forum who, though completely dumbfounded by the topic of childbirth, often refusing to believe the scenes I wrote of mothers’ firsthand accounts of being coerced into having cesareans, began to profoundly hear the voices of the women I was writing about, and to cheer them and me on to completion.

On tougher parenting days—for example, when the entire family came down with flu and high fevers while my husband was away on business—my sankalpa anchored me.

Write a play and change the world of childbirth, Karen.

The play had its first reading on a frigid evening in December 2004, in a small rehearsal hall on the campus of George Washington University. The purpose of a first reading is to get feedback on your play. With this in mind, I printed fifty invitations and posted them around Washington, D.C., at mother-related organizations and yoga studios. I hoped to see 20 people in the
audience. To my surprise, the place was filled with more than 70 mothers, many with babies in slings. A mystery was unfolding, and I soon realized that not even I was in control of its power.

Eighteen months later I started Birth On Labor Day (BOLD), a global movement to inspire communities to use my play, Birth, and BOLD Red Tent birth storytelling circles, to raise awareness and money to improve maternity care. Our slogan was “Be BOLD”—a shout-out to mothers everywhere on the importance of knowing all their birth options, not just the traditional hospital choice. In addition, I created a School for Birth Visionaries, which includes a certification program for birth workers teaching pregnant mothers empowerment tools like yoga nidra to help them connect with their bodies, find their authentic voice, and take action to have their best birth.

These days my passion for yoga nidra has developed even further. In 2010 I got trained as an Integrative Restoration (iRest) yoga nidra instructor. I am now what I like to call a Nap Activist, showing women and especially busy, overwhelmed mothers how to use yoga nidra to live a conscious, vibrant, sexy life that matters.

My yoga nidra practice led me into my body to my true self, and out popped a play, a movement and a mission. Not bad for an expensive nap.
My Body Rocks: A Playwright, Mother and Activist Discovers Her Power

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