I don't tend to get nostalgic. Maybe it's that I have enough not-so-nice memories of times past that I'd rather poke holes in myself with a pickle fork than go back in time. Or maybe it's that I am perfectly happy in the present. In any case, I don't spend a lot of time thinking wistfully about the past…until recently.

My children, Dan, Lucy and Grace, were all born in the spring. My husband and I sometimes jokingly refer to the time between March 26 and April 21 as lambing season. Dan will turn 15 soon, and Grace will be 11. In a few more weeks, my middle child, Lucy, will become a teenager—she's turning 13. During the last couple of days I have been remembering their births; well, more accurately, I've been remembering labor. And remembering labor has me remembering our midwife’s presence and support during all three of my children’s labors.
Here’s what I remember:

For those of you who don’t know, there’s sometimes this stage in labor when women get really angry or short-tempered. In fact, one of the ways you can read where a woman is in her labor—how close she is to birthing—is by taking notice of her emotional state. In any case, when Dan and I were laboring together during his birth, I hit the grumpy stage. And I remember looking over at our midwife, Pam, who was sitting by my bed, leaning forward, very, very still. I remember thinking, “What the BLEEP is she doing? Why isn’t she helping me?” And then I had this epiphany: She was helping. She was listening to me. I mean, she was listening to me so deeply—to my body, to the sounds of my labor, to my feelings. She was absolutely, without reservation, tuned in. And that, I realized, was exactly the help I needed. I could labor on my own with her attunement to sustain me. That realization was so powerful. To be listened to in that way was an extraordinary gift.

There was nothing forced in her treatment of me, nothing pressured, no sense of hurry—just an exceptionally mindful presence beside and with me. And that presence was an extraordinary gift.

When I was pregnant with Lucy, my husband and I asked Dan what we should name the new baby. He thought about it for a while, then said with great conviction, “Spoon Cake!” We laughed and asked him why and he said, “Because that baby’s going to come out of your tummy like cake on a spoon!” We laughed some more, but the odd thing was that he was right. Lucy’s birth was hard work, but toward the end of labor things became very quiet, calm and smooth (especially after the midwife kicked the nasty, loud nurse out of the room). I remember one particular moment when I turned to Pam and said, “I think I’m going to push now.”

Pam, who was sitting by my bed, said quietly (and I think she was laughing a little), “Okay.” And I did. She let me lead and she trusted me to know when the time was right. There was nothing
forced in her treatment of me, nothing pressured, no sense of hurry—just an exceptionally mindful presence beside and with me. And that presence was an extraordinary gift.

Grace’s labor was the hardest. Not surprising to those of us who know Grace, she was all catawampus in there—facing backward and just generally bucking tradition. That labor seemed to go on and on. While my labors with Dan and Lucy were hard work, there was no denying that Grace’s was downright painful. At some point, Pam turned to Mike and me and asked us what we wanted to do. I was pretty out of it, but I thought at the time that she was asking us if we wanted intervention. Mike and I had talked a lot over the years about wanting to do things naturally, about my desire to have joyful labors rather than fear- and pain-filled ones. We’d talked about how, if I got into trouble, the question would come. We knew that if the baby or I were really in trouble, we’d be able to tell by the way the question was posed to us (if a question was posed at all). So, we just kept going the way we had been, with the hard work and the pain. And Pam stayed with us. She respected our choice and supported us when, I know, lots of other medical professionals wouldn’t have.

Grace was born in her caul (a sign of spiritual significance, good luck, and often, as legend has it, future greatness). Only one in a thousand babies is born in its caul (mostly premature babies) and often doctors puncture the caul before the baby is born. Pam didn’t. And I remember—rather dimly from my exhausted fog—listening to her talk with Mike about what it might mean that Grace was born in hers. Pam stayed with us when we made the choice to take the hard road on principle rather than the easy one for expediency’s sake. She respected my right to make choices about my body and my life. Moreover, she was peaceful and calm during a difficult time and willing to let Grace come into the world within the protective membrane of her caul without trying to fix or correct what was, I really think, meant to be.

I hate watching movies and television shows that contain scenes of women giving birth. I think they’re so bogus, so stereotyped; they play so coldly into the hands of interventionist (sexist and patriarchal) Western medical traditions. I am feeling nostalgic for my babies and, while I have no desire to have more of them, I’m remembering with great fondness and a deep sense of wonderment, our labors and the deep matter you really can learn from midwives.

There are ways of being with and for others in the world that I think I wouldn’t be able to conceive of were it not for Pam. I think I learned the power of attunement and the power of deep listening from her. I think I learned to trust the instincts of my friends, loved ones and students, and to be willing to follow when the time is right. And I think I learned that not everything that is happening needs to be controlled or fixed. Sometimes people need to choose the harder way, and when they do, I want to go with them as friend and ally rather than trying to make things
Today and for a very long time to come, I’ve decided I’m celebrating midwives and the amazing, empowering work they do for women who choose labors liberated from the lies and excesses of Western medicine, who treasure the right to choose when, where and how their bodies will be treated, and who hope for labors and births that are spiritually enriching experiences and not merely clinical ones. We haven’t seen Pam in almost 10 years. And yet, we remember her very, very well. And, I really think, somewhere in their bones, Dan, Lucy and Grace remember, too.

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