

CARA MUHLHAHN

labor of love

A Midwife's Memoir



Foreword by Abby Epstein and Ricki Lake

Filmmakers, *The Business of Being Born*

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*To all the women who dare to
listen to their instincts and triumph*

FOREWORD

IN THE SPRING OF 2005, we were looking for homebirth midwives to interview and follow for our documentary *The Business of Being Born*. One of Abby's friends had recently delivered at home with a midwife named Cara Muhlhahn, whom she raved about.

It turned out that Abby and Cara lived only a few blocks from each other in New York City's East Village, so they met for coffee at a local café to discuss the film. Abby had never been pregnant and had met very few midwives at this point in the process.

Abby was struck by how articulately Cara described her work and her birth philosophy. She was immediately drawn in by Cara's sense of humor and open persona. Cara was downright sexy, which is not the first image that comes to mind when you say "midwife." One normally tends to picture a graying, matronly woman with loose batik clothes and Birkenstocks. But Cara not only wore low-rise jeans and high-heeled boots, but also intuitively felt like a person you could really trust and confide in — like a sister you never

had. Even more impressive, she was a single mother who managed to be on call 24/7, speak three languages, and burn up the dance floor at a weekly salsa class. Was this woman for real?

Everything about her subverted the expectations and stereotypes one has of midwives. Right away, it was clear that she'd be a perfect character for our documentary. Upon returning home from the meeting, Abby called up Ricki and said, "We've found our homebirth midwife! You're going to love this woman." Thus began a relationship that has taken us on a two-year journey of filming, friendship, and many beautiful births, including Abby's own.

One of the first things you realize when talking to midwives is that each of them has a definitive story referred to as the calling. It's a moment in their lives when they discover that they need to be with women in labor and empower them to deliver their own babies. On our first interview with Cara, she described the defining moments that led up to her decision to become a midwife, which you will read about in *Labor of Love*. It is so fascinating to see how this work chose her and that she was destined to become a midwife. It's an almost spiritual calling, much like becoming an artist or a priest.

It's not a vocation that you can succeed at without passion and a calling. The demands of the profession are too intense compared to the material rewards. You have to be willing to leave your own child in order to help another woman bring her baby into the world. As a solo practitioner,

Cara has no back-up team that can swoop in for her if she has a family emergency or is feeling under the weather.

All her clients choose Cara for her unique combination of clinical skills and intuition. They build a relationship and trust with her over nine months of pregnancy. She attends each birth fulfilling the roles that four or five people might cover in a hospital setting. If the labor is five hours or thirty-five hours, Cara is there. It's an unimaginable amount of pressure and responsibility for one individual.

Beyond the crazy hours, she also has to contend with the politics that have plagued the birthing community for the past hundred years, when midwives were forced out of practice. She has to be able to work both inside and outside the system, which means finding physicians to collaborate with her if a patient develops complications or needs a cesarean section. This is no easy feat in today's litigious and fear-based birth culture. It takes a unique gift to encompass both the technical and natural worlds so seamlessly.

Watching Cara at a birth is an amazing thing. She is the epitome of grace under pressure, so intensely focused and serious about the safety of the mother and baby, while knowing exactly when to intervene and when to back away. But the most profound and moving aspect of getting to know Cara through our film is discovering the depth of her humanity and her willingness to put a client's needs above her own.

In today's system of defensive medicine, where many physicians and midwives are forced to practice as if a law-

FOREWORD

yer were looking over their shoulders, Cara operates by her own principles. She is truly an endangered breed. Our lives are richer for having known Cara. We hope that you are entertained and enlightened by her journey as much as we have been.

Abby Epstein and Ricki Lake

PROLOGUE

ON A LOW-KEY SPRING AFTERNOON, I walked my then-ten-year-old son, Liam, home from school through Tompkins Square Park in New York City's East Village.

I always look forward to this daily ritual with Liam. It's one of the few times that I get to be completely present for my kid without the distraction of my usual work demands. As a homebirth midwife in New York City, I attend up to ten births a month. So my life is highly unpredictable and forever dictated by the pager.

As Liam and I walked home together, we caught up on each other's days. He rode along beside me on his skateboard, as usual, showing me his latest tricks. We traveled through the park, past the dog run, through the basketball court, then to 11th Street, our block. Breathing in the fresh spring air added lightness to my step.

And then my pager went off.

This time it was Aileen, an illustrator and first-time mother in Brooklyn — a primipara, or “primip” in midwife-speak. Labor had started. Her doula, Jenna, was already on

the way to help her navigate the early stages, when I'm not really needed. But this was the second page in the space of an hour.

I wasn't entirely surprised. First-time mothers almost always think the baby's coming sooner than it is. This is natural. It's their first time facing an incredible unknown — at once the most beautiful and most frightening event they've experienced to date. My patients, especially the primips, look to me to usher them through this unknown. To them, I am not only a midwife, but a mother who has been through what they're going through. I am their trusted guide. Even if they're just in the early stages of what we call latent labor, I often need to pay a visit and reassure them. That's the deal: if someone needs hand-holding, they get it.

Aileen paged me for a third time. When I called her, she said she had to push — a lot sooner than expected for a primip. I could sense in Aileen's voice that maybe it really was time to push. But there was also a voice in my head saying, "The shit is going to hit the fan." Later on, after one of the most challenging births in my 12 years in private practice, I will realize that this voice was right on the money.

I hurriedly called my babysitting forces into action. I have an elaborate network of sitters set up for times just like this. But no one answered. And then when I got to my car, the engine wouldn't turn over. I immediately needed alternate transportation to Brooklyn. It was time for Plan B.

I hailed a cab for Liam and me. I had never taken my son to a birth before, and had never imagined that I would.

As Liam whined about being dragged to the birth, I was torn between maternal guilt for taking him with me to work and a strong feeling that he just needed to suck it up and stop complaining. As the only medically trained person who would be at this woman's side, I needed to get there and make sure she wasn't in danger.

No one wanted to take us to Brooklyn at the height of rush hour. We got in and out of one taxi and then another. Finally, I stuffed all the cash in my pocket — about \$40 — into the palm of a driver. I looked him squarely in the eye and implored him, "You have to take me to Brooklyn. Someone's life depends on it."

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CHAPTER 1

A Portrait of the Midwife as a Young Girl

AS A MIDWIFE, I CAN'T RESIST starting my story with my "forelife," or my time in the womb. It's when the struggle between nature and science entered my life. I've patched the events of my forelife and birth together from stories my late mother told me and from the birth records that I sent for years ago. I was born in Englewood Hospital in New Jersey in 1957, the second of five girls. I was cared for by my great-aunt, Marie Boehme, who was a nurse at the hospital at that time.

It probably figures that I had an interesting birth. Not only did I come out breech, but I was what the doctor referred to as a crucifixion breech, which means that both of my feet came out first. In medical terms, that's probably "double footling breech." To this day, I find I tend to stand

with my legs crossed at the ankles. I can't help but wonder if that's how I arrived.

According to my mom, her beloved obstetrician, Dr. Burnham, knew early on that I was breech. Every time she went to him, he would turn me around, using his hands externally on my mother's abdomen. By the next doctor's visit, though, I'd be back where I'd started, in the breech position.

In those days, breeches were delivered vaginally, even double footling breeches. Back in 1957, cesarean sections were far less common than they are today. As any midwife or obstetrician knows, it's much less risky for a baby to exit the vagina "vertex presenting," or headfirst. That's why we often try to turn breech babies. But sometimes, believe it or not, the baby knows better. In my humble opinion, I think that may have been the case with me.

My mom thought my stubborn behavior in utero attested to the irascible, inborn willfulness that she would subsequently experience through years of parenting me. One time, when I was probably 7 or 8, my sister told on me over some minor dispute. My mother called me in to be disciplined, and I refused to go because I knew I was right. She tried to lure me to her with an ice cream cone, but even then, I didn't back down.

But there's a more mechanical explanation for my breech position. A baby in utero depends on the umbilical cord to receive oxygen and nutrients. If anything constricts the flow through the cord, it could potentially interfere with

growth. The doctor kept turning me around, but I must have innately known that my way was better—that when I was in the head-up position, there was a better blood flow through the cord.

There is, however, yet another theory about why I continued to assert myself in the womb. Some suggest that marital discord can cause a baby to malpresent. I have seen this in my work. When I learned, in my twenties, that my parents began marital counseling during the time I was in utero, I wondered if that stress played a role in my breech delivery.

One day a couple of years ago, as I was driving in Brooklyn, I got a call from one of my pregnant moms, Joni, who had delivered her first baby in an Oregon hospital and had chosen to have this child, her second, at home. During her first pregnancy, she had been treated for preeclampsia, a condition best described by an assortment of signs and symptoms including elevated blood pressure, swelling in the hands and face, and protein in the urine. She had been diagnosed in her previous pregnancy based on the lone symptom of higher-than-average blood pressure. If preeclampsia is left untreated, a mom could have a seizure and compromise blood flow to her baby.

Joni sounded pretty upset. She said that she felt as if she might have high blood pressure again. It was not time for our usual prenatal visit. But since I was in Brooklyn, I decided to visit her. After I arrived, the full story came out: she had discovered her husband had been cheating on her, even during this pregnancy.

Her blood pressure turned out to be fine when I measured it. She was physically okay, but in her heart, she was not. The baby, in keeping with this theory, was in a transverse, or breech, position. I related to Joni the lore about breeches being associated with marital discord, and I told her not to worry about the baby's position.

That prompted her to go with her husband to marriage counseling. In a short time, they were able to repair their relationship. Believe it or not, the baby turned around. Apparently, so did her husband. During the delivery, he went from being in the doghouse to catching his own son in the water — vertex presenting, of course. Their marriage was reborn.

My parents, however, never quite got to that point before I was born. Throughout their marriage, they were emotionally distant from each other. I adore my father and admire him in many ways. A printing industry estimator before he retired, I don't think my father ever missed a day of work. He inherited that famous German work ethic from the maternal side of his family.

From his Norwegian father, he inherited an artistic, independent, and freethinking spirit. He has always encouraged me to follow my star, but he has never been someone who easily expresses or witnesses emotion. I imagine that was hard for my mother. I know I often felt that I had to keep my emotions in check around him for fear that he might experience them as some sort of intrusion.