

B Y K A T H E R I N E G Y L E S

at rest

in the arms of the mother

**The postpartum practice of lying-in
allows a mom to deeply bond
with her newborn babes.**

IN MY MEMORY, the first beautiful moments I spent gazing on Kate's newborn face turn into minutes and hours, then days and weeks. Those were the moments when I fell deeply in love with this little person. She was born at home, where I was surrounded by familiar comforts, love, and deep faith in my ability to give birth without intervention. But the real story of her introduction to me lies not in the beauty of her perfect homebirth, but in the days and weeks we spent lying-in together as a new family.

The author lying-in with her second child, Michael.



I always knew that I wanted a homebirth, away from what I imagined to be the sanitized and chaotic hospital scene. I am blessed that the province of Ontario regulated midwifery in 1994, allowing me the choice of a publicly funded midwife as my primary caregiver. When I became pregnant, I went straight to a midwife and never saw a doctor. My confidence in Bridget was almost immediate: I was attracted by her more than 20 years of experience, her leadership in the profession, and her obvious passion for learning and teaching. This was a woman who could help me navigate among decisions I could not yet imagine, and who would support my faith in my ability to birth at home.

What I did not know was that Bridget had a prescription for six weeks of postnatal care that would not only make me the envy of many of my new-mother friends, but create a solidly bonded new family. We would develop behaviors and patterns of relating that supported deep bonding, breastfeeding, rest, nutrition, and the centrality of our new family to the exclusion of all other social relations. This helped me become the kind of mother I am: a conscious mother. It was perhaps the single most important step in my transition from busy corporate person to focused, calm, confident new mother.

So there it is—I've outed myself. I am not what many people imagine when they think of a home-birthing woman. At the time of Kate's birth, I held a leadership role in an international consulting firm, and worked in a high-rise tower in

the heart of Toronto's financial district. When they found out about my midwife, some of my colleagues reacted with shock and apprehension; I withheld news of the planned homebirth until the labor horror stories had faded from our conversations. And in a firm where women at my level commonly returned to work within a few months of delivering, I didn't disclose my intention to take as much of the legally available 12-month maternity leave as I thought my career could survive. I knew I was embarking on a journey with unknown requirements, and I was open to learning as I went along. I knew that I would put my child and her needs first.

Bridget's research of postpartum care in non-Western cultures pointed to a different beginning for a new family. Instead of the social pressures to introduce the baby, run the household, and entertain, this was to be a time of rest, healthy food, and connecting to this new person. I knew from the reading I'd done for my Women's Studies degree that there were cultures in which women were relieved of their familial and household duties for 40 days postpartum so that they could rest, nurse, and embrace the new child and their new mothering responsibilities. But while I was aware of the importance of the relationship between newborn and mother, I was shocked by the enormity of the shift I experienced from being a multitasking, high-functioning woman to a singularly focused *mother*.

It was hard to explain to my mother, who would come from a distance for the birth, that I did not expect her to stay and do laundry, make meals, or help tend to the baby. The ground rules of lying-in were clear: The first days postpartum are for the mother and baby to be sequestered together. For me and Kate, there would be five days *in* the bed, five days *on* the bed, and five days *around* the bed.

My recollection of the day Kate arrived is like a memory of a summer morning found only in childhood—warm, sunny, and free. She was born into the hands of her dad just before my legs gave out underneath me. Within moments, she was nuzzling into my breasts, enveloped by sunshine. So began our lying-in time—mother and daughter learning to know the smell, touch, taste, sound, and sight of a pure new love.

Kate's presence was strong—she bellowed in objection from the moment she arrived until she first latched on. She hollered again two hours later, when Bridget checked her over and weighed her, cradling her on what I remember as the trout scale—the kind I'd seen my grandfather use to weigh his catch. She yelled when she was hungry, her eyes darting back and forth, her mouth opening and closing like a fish's. Convinced that there was nothing around that could satisfy her painful need, she cried until she felt the milk shoot past her taste buds. Only then would her body relax and her eyes close. In those moments, I realized I was building trust with a little person who was unsure that the world would take care of her.

I believe I learned about her doubt because we were lying-in. Had I turned from her to attend to other tasks while she rested and awoke, I might have misinterpreted the franticness that defined my first impression of her. Without the connection we were developing, I might have seen her only as a crying baby who needed nursing. But because we were cocooned together, her very individual needs and language became as clear to me as my mother tongue.

It surprised me, but the practicalities of lying-in were easy to embrace. I thought I might be bored, or feel caged-in, isolated, or depressed. But, after making some phone calls to my family, I followed the lying-in ground rules almost to the letter. Leaving my bedroom was not a high priority after laboring. My husband, Chuck, was eager to do anything for us, and must have run our two flights of stairs 20 times a day, bringing food, water, flowers, and cards. While he tended to my every need, and kept the house running and well-wishers at bay, Kate and I rested together in bed. I nursed her to quell her frantic hunger, and we gazed endlessly at each other. The lack of visitors allowed Chuck to join us. When Kate rested, so did we. Minutes became hours, then days, with seemingly nothing going on but the three of us.

I was hanging out in my bedroom with Kate to really get to know her, to ease her into the world. Chuck massaged her body

while describing to her her length and breadth. We would sleep with her and snuggle, imprint our scents on one another, listen to her breathe, watch what she observed in us. This lying-in time was the first piece of critical business—creating for our daughter a strong foundation of trust and security. When I did feel a bit cooped up, I would go for a walk alone to get my ya-yas out, then return to our lying-in. I remembered that the lying-in time was not designed to torture me or dampen the joy we naturally wanted to share with others, but was helping me transition to a different season of my life, to tune in to my new child and to being her mother.

Of the many things that became clear to me in those first days, perhaps the most significant was that my purpose in life was shifting, and I knew intuitively that it would continue to do so, over and over again. Kate was creating a new world order for me, and I was fitting into it. The experience was transformative in a pure sense—just as Kate was moving from her world inside my body to life on the outside, I was, in a sense, doing the opposite. I shut out the external world, which had long provided my guidance, energy, and purpose, and turned inward to learn a new language and a new life order. I floated in those first days between a deeply felt love and a sense of astonishment—that someone so beautiful could have come through me into our lives. I connected with that love very quickly—it was so pure and uncomplicated—because it felt so much like the love I had known, as a child, from my grandfather. I wondered if his spirit was actually in the room with us, helping me make that connection with Kate in a real way. With that

thought came tears of joy—joy for her beginning and for mine.

By our last visit with Bridget, our daughter was six weeks old. I told Bridget how we were continuing to slowly introduce Kate to the world. It felt like a smooth, fluid, gentle introduction for this new soul. I was on my way as a new mother, feeling rested and confident that Kate and I had a good thing going, and beginning to sense that my experience was different from that of many of the new mothers I was encountering. They often struggled with why their babies were crying and how to make them stop. I knew that when Kate cried, it was often my signal to return to connecting and cocooning for a few days. I wasn't spending hours trying to figure out "why" or reading books about "what comes next" or "what to do when . . ." I was keeping it simple, and Kate was responding with a good disposition.

When I speak of Kate, I always use her name, never referring to her objectively as "the baby." The significance of this was made clear to me in hindsight, following the birth of my second child, Michael. Our home was twice blessed by the birth of our children, but my second experience taught me more about the lessons of lying-in. My mother had come for Michael's birth, as she had for Kate's, but at the last minute I asked her to pack a bag for a few days, knowing that Kate, then 21 months, would enjoy a special visit with her and would be kept occupied while I was with Michael.

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My mother arrived, burdened by a thundercloud of emotional energy: her brother had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer and had only a few weeks to live. Naturally, the presence of this energy was like an unwanted guest at a private party: stress and sadness hung in the air as she held on to this secret. It finally came crashing into my bedroom, and Michael's second day, when my uncle called to tell us the news himself. We were getting wrapped up in the world outside our supposedly sacred space.

That first breach of the sanctity of our space started us down a slippery slope: scheduled window-washers flowed through the house, cleaners came and went, and I had dinner in bed every night beside Michael, chatting with Chuck and my mother.

When Bridget visited on day five, I got a jolt. Within minutes of arriving, as I gleamed proudly at my precious boy, Bridget rocked my world by observing that there was a somewhat frenetic energy in the house, and that I was "mothering" Michael but "not really connecting" with him. Tears came to my eyes, and I froze: I was taking care of *the baby*, not bonding with this sweet, gentle soul who would not protest, as Kate might have done. He was letting me get away with it. Just being in bed nursing him didn't cut it. I realized that there was too much going on, and that I wanted to give Michael what Kate had received.

Following Bridget's advice, I decided to begin again. I sent Kate to a friend's place during the day to get everyone out of the bedroom, and began lying-in as if it were the day of Michael's birth. By day three of this new count, I knew I had crossed to the other side; I was intensely in love with Michael and knew his own deep sweetness, as I had known Kate's strength. I was also beginning to feel the challenge of the second child: guilt and sadness for Kate as she lost her position at the center of our affections, and protec-

tiveness of Michael—my determination that he would be welcomed and nurtured in every way Kate had been. I focused on creating a shared center for both of them, and my world once again had a new order.

The first lesson of the lying-in time runs counter to what our culture would have us do. Those first precious hours, days, and weeks of a baby's life should be an intimate and loving time in which mother and child get to know who each other is. But the common conveyor-belt experience of Planet Baby would rush us off to an infant photo shoot or to a baby shower or to the work of running a household, with little understanding of the needs of a new baby and mother. It's the difference between saying "We're having a baby" and saying "I'm becoming someone's mother."

New mothers and fathers can resist these cultural urgings and embrace a new order in their lives. By reclaiming our babies—our Kates and our Michaels—for private lying-in times, we can make a statement about what it means to us to be healthy families. We can choose to focus on loving—*deeply*

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loving—the babes who are born to us by holding, sleeping with, nursing, smelling, gazing upon, listening to, and *knowing* them. By teaching them that their individual needs are our highest priority—perhaps putting ourselves well outside our own comfort zones and making others uncomfortable—we give them what they need. But the gift is also for us as mothers—giving ourselves the time to deeply resonate

with the soul who knows us as Mum. It's about becoming the mothers we are meant to be.

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