

When The Baby Dies: A Doula's Perspective

by Amy L. Gilliland, M.S., CD(DONA)

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As an experienced doula trainer, I am often asked, “What do you do if the baby dies?” I hear this most often from newer doulas who are afraid that they will not be helpful or supportive to the parents. My response is, “You do the same things you always do – just more intensely and with a different twist.” The principles of emotional support don’t change even if the circumstances do. Underlying that question is often another one that remains unspoken. “How do you feel when the baby dies, and how do you get through it?” The story that follows is my answer to that unspoken question.

12:00 a.m. The room is warm and quiet. As her contraction begins, the mother takes a deep breath, signaling the rest of the birth team into motion. Her husband pushes into her back, countering the pressure from the baby’s head. I push against her feet, helping her pelvis to open as wide as possible. She leans back against her husband in the circular tub and begins to moan. “That’s the way, just like that”, I say. She gives these pushes every effort she can, moving the baby forward just a little bit more with each surge. The contraction ends and we all relax. Her sister rubs Dad’s shoulders, while another friend offers Mom hot tea with honey. The midwife listens to the baby.

Home birth offers these golden, easy moments. The lights are dim and we are guests in someone else’s home. We are invited in to help and to share this deep and empowering experience of life with them. As a doula for twenty years, I’ve been privileged to be at many home and hospital births, each one different but also essentially the same. It is a collective and an individual experience at the same time. For me, births are work. I assist mothers into different positions, push on their bodies to lessen their discomforts and hold their hands for hours and hours. I fetch hot water, warm blankets and fresh ice chips. I take pictures and offer reassurance to anyone who needs it, but especially to mothers. I am their doula.

1:00 a.m. The contractions continue as mom pushes with each one. I’ve gotten her up into a squatting position now and she leans forward gripping the edge of the tub. Her

moans turn to a roar as she feels the strong urge to push that baby out coursing through her. The rhythm of the labor has affected all of us. We are quiet, synchronized, focused on meeting mom and dad's needs. The squatting has helped move the baby's head down further into the birth canal but it is exhausting for mom.

We've been together for twelve hours now, working harmoniously to help her birth her first baby. Mom has had back labor for most of that time. Changing positions seems to help as does the counter pressure against Mom's sacrum. We've used hot packs when she's out of the tub and ice packs while in the tub. Mom bears her pain well and the midwives and I continually try different tricks to assist her.

2:00 a.m. My energy is flagging and I head to the kitchen for a snack. One of the birth team members has prepared homemade chicken noodle soup, and I also find peanut butter and whole wheat bread in the refrigerator. In order for me to make it through an all nighter at a birth I need to eat protein and complex carbohydrates with a little bit of fat. After twenty years of attending births, I have figured out that it is not a time to try to lose weight. If I don't feed my brain and body, I am no use to my clients.

As I reenter the birth room, Mom has begun to sing. She sings to her baby and sings to herself. She loves this baby, longs for this baby, wants to hold him in her arms. She tells herself she is strong and this baby is strong. Mom surges into the next contraction and we all wipe away our tears, knowing how much this baby is loved and wanted.

3:00 a.m. Finally, finally, the baby's head is emerging fully from the birth canal. It has been so slow to watch and I have been right there, holding Mom's legs in a position that enlarges her pelvic opening. We are all excited, knowing it will soon be over and we will be able to see the face of this little one—but something is wrong. I can sense it in my bones even before any of the reasons *why* have registered consciously on my brain. We move Mom into a different position and the baby is born but he does not move. His color is pale. The midwife immediately begins to resuscitate him and calls for someone to dial 911.

Because of the way mom changed positions, I am now holding her in my arms. Once again she sings to this baby, calling his name out loud for the first time. Dad sits above me, wet from the tub and dripping. He is in shock, but talking to his baby. My concern is the emotional well-being of these people. I tell them they are doing exactly what they need to be doing and ask someone for warm towels. I grip Dad's hand and hold Mom's head to my heart as they call to their child.

4:00 a.m. I take a deep breath as I put my things in my car. I have hugged Mom and the midwife and am off to follow Dad as he goes with his newborn son in the ambulance. As a mother myself, I understand that we want life to be safe, but there are no guarantees. Every time we get behind the wheel of a car, we are driving into the possibility of an accident. Because we can't live life worrying about that possibility, we try to make things as risk-free as we can. We all love feeling safe, but there are no unconditional guarantees of safety, not even in birth. No matter where birth takes place or with whom or what we try to do, babies sometimes die; and almost half the time we don't know why. According to the Wisconsin Stillbirth Service Project, stillbirths occur once out of every 115 births, but it is never something we feel prepared for.

I call my sweetheart and tell him that I am following Dad on the way to the hospital. He says he'll be there for me whenever I get home—he'll try to make his workday flexible enough. Knowing that there will be someone waiting for me at the end, I will be able to get through whatever comes next.

5:00 a.m. Dad is alone in the room, holding a quiet wrapped bundle in his arms. We take turns crying together and holding his son. Off and on, I leave him alone to make phone calls and to spend time with his baby. The nursing staff is attentive but not intrusive. At one point, I call the parents' home and tell the midwife the news.

6:00 a.m. I hold this perfectly formed, still baby boy. He is heavy and still warm from his mother's womb. I want to look at him but feel guilty—his mother should be the first to unwrap him, to count his fingers. I compromise by peeking at his feet and toes, which

are beginning to stick out of the blanket anyway. Dad and I take turns carrying him, and I can't help but rock him. I don't stop myself_ acceptance is the best path right now.

The bereavement nurse makes her first visit and greets Dad. She will come in and out unobtrusively for the next few hours, building trust and getting to know the family.

7:00 a.m. I eat. It isn't very nutritious, but it is fuel and I need fuel.

8:00 a.m. Mom arrives and I leave the family alone together. In the next hour, each member of the birth team will come and visit the baby. I take pictures and fetch water, pillows, anything they need. I talk to the family members waiting outside, filling them in on what we know and listening to their first responses of grief. I don't want Mom and Dad to be overwhelmed and encourage them to pace themselves with rest, food, and visitors.

11:00 a.m. The family has come together again and seems to be well connected to the bereavement counselor from the hospital. I've waited for them to gel with one another, knowing they need to feel safe to get through this difficult day ahead. She knows what to do, what they are going through. I've made the phone calls, gotten ice water and more tissues. I am ready to go home.

I call my sweetheart and he will meet me at my house in an hour. I walk in the door and am met by quiet. My 16-year old daughter is at school, and my 21-year old son is at work. (Their 18-year old brother is away at college.) My house feels surreal. The dining room table is covered with boxes of holiday cookies_the project my daughter and I were starting when Mom went into labor. She called a family friend and they baked the day away together.

I eat because I know I need to. My body aches. The labor was hard and incredibly physical and awkward. I call my chiropractor and make an appointment for the next day, but there is an ache in my arms and in my heart as well.

12:00 p.m. Sweetie shows up and just holds me. We don't say much. Eventually I tell him the story. I awkwardly lurch upstairs and he bathes me in the shower. That's when I

cry. Up until now it hasn't been about me, it's been about that mother and father and their family. I sob in his arms and he puts me to bed, rubbing my aching body until I fall into a deep sleep.

5:00 p.m. It's dark out. I wake up achy and sore in the quiet darkness of my house. The cat peeps and looks up at me. She purrs as I rub her head and figure out what to do next. I need to make dinner for the kids, something simple. I put on a robe and slippers and pull things out of the refrigerator, amazed at the human capacity to go on in the face of tragedy. It has to be biological, something inherent within us, a resiliency of some sort.

6:00 p.m. I peek in my office and realize that tomorrow's lecture and discussion on sexuality and disability still has to be prepared. I teach Human Sexuality classes at one of our local colleges. I clear my head and focus on the task at hand. In some ways, this distraction is welcome.

7:00 p.m. The kids will be home any minute now, so I finish up with my paperwork and e-mail, placing some things in the "to do later" box in my e-mail program.

8:00 p.m. The door slams and I hear the heavy footsteps of a teenage girl who has had a good day. She smells dinner and we finish it together. I tell her the story of Mom and Dad's baby and she cries with me. Her brother arrives as dinner is ready and I explain to him in simple terms what has occurred. My oldest son is a high functioning autistic person taking a break after two years away at engineering school. Communication often takes effort on both our parts, but loss and grief transcend the usual barriers. We sit down at the table and talk quietly. I appreciate these moments of eating together like we did when they were younger. We connect and visit every day but not always around food anymore, balthough somehow I like it better when we do.

9:00 p.m. I call my closest doula friend on the phone. She has been to 200 births and has experience with several infant or fetal deaths. She listens to me tell my story but doesn't offer any advice. She doesn't need to, as we both know the power is in the listening. We

figure out what to do next and come up with a plan for me to take care of myself the next few days. I know that I will be doing things for the family: informing coworkers, returning diapers to the diaper service, bringing food, etc. Taking care of me is also important; otherwise I'm no use to anyone.

11:00 p.m. I look at the journal article waiting to be edited before submission and realize it will be a while. I am a PhD dissertator now and I'm publishing some of my research from my master's degree project. I research effective labor support by doulas and the deeper psychological needs of mothers and fathers during labor and birth. Studying the subject while actually doing the work has enriched my life immensely as a doula, trainer and researcher.

12:00 a.m. Bedtime. I am finally able to leave my office and slog up the stairs to bed. I never did take off my bathrobe this afternoon. I laugh and reflect about my professional life. Which today has been about birth, death, and sex. Can anyone guess my astrological sign is Scorpio? I'm not afraid of life's depths; somewhere along the way I figured out how to traverse them. This work is powerful; it has the power to change me and who I am as a person. In a way, it has shaped me and allowed me to be present with strong emotion without needing to control it or fix it. Also, when I doula well it has the power to change others. I care for them, with all that I am, in the way that they deeply need during a very vulnerable time. Don't we all wish we had that?

Epilogue: I was a very close personal friend to this couple. This was a baby I anticipated holding and watch grow up into a young man. So this loss was personal as well as professional and it changed me in ways that I did not expect. The family and friends who were present at the birth continue to meet monthly to support one another, which has been immensely helpful.

Bio:

Amy L. Gilliland, M.S., CD(DONA) is DONA approved birth doula trainer, writer and researcher in Madison, Wisconsin. She has three children and has been attending births since 1987. She is currently working on her PhD dissertation studying effective labor support by doulas, and teaches advanced doula training seminars. She can be reached at amyLgilliland@charter.net or through <http://www.amygilliland.com/>.

