

(introductory music)

DISCLAIMER: *Taking Back Birth* is a production of the Indie Birth Association and indiebirth.com. No material on this podcast should be considered medical advice. Birth is not a medical event.

MARYN: Welcome to Indie Birth's series of podcasts here on iTunes. Good afternoon. I am Maryn. And today's podcast is sort of a reminiscent part of my life. Today is my two year old's birthday, and his name is True. And I'm going to reminisce about his birth today. Hope you don't mind. But so many women ask us probably daily—I'd say we get an email almost every day. Somebody that's considering unassisted birth or free birth or has questions. A lot of the emails seem to be along the lines of how do I get to the point where that feels like the best option for me because my head believes it's the best option—or should I say my heart believes it's the best option—but my head is having trouble wrapping around it. And people are asking me questions, and I'm just not there yet.

So I thought I would tell True's story. And I'm not going to tell his actual birth story actually. The birth story and a really nice slideshow is on the Indie Birth site. So indiebirth.com. And it's called The Free Birth of True. And if you can't find it there, you can just put it into Google. The Free Birth of True. And read the actual birth story and look at the pictures. But today, again, just kind of talking about how I got to that point with his labor and birth and how my life changed completely when I accepted responsibility—complete responsibility—for my own birthing experience. So, obviously, this is my personal story and my experience. We're all different. We're all unique. And our birth stories are all unique and how we come to the place of our actual labors and births are, obviously, very unique. So this isn't really meant to tell you what to do. It's just sharing with you my story because I get asked a lot.

So let me start by saying that I do believe that things we think are not the best things in our lives, things we feel kind of cursed by often turn out to be blessings. And I feel like my life leading up to True's birth and even beyond was certainly that kind of situation. So the short story is—so I don't take up too much time during this podcast with a related but yet not related topic—is the stressful midwifery situation I found myself in about two and a half years ago, three years ago, at this point, probably. So I reside in Arizona. And I was licensed as a midwife with the state for several years. And about three years ago, I got into a situation, shall we say, with the state for having attended a mom here that had had a Cesarean. So she was a VBAC mom wanting a home birth. And although that is going to be legal here now in Arizona for licensed midwives, it wasn't at the time.

And because a doctor reported the situation to the state and it's not even a midwifery board. We don't have one of those in Arizona. So it was simply the office of where we hold licenses or where I used to hold a license. And it turned into a really big deal. And in a lot of ways, it didn't need to turn into a big deal. Midwives here attend VBACs and have for the last who knows how many years even though it is technically illegal. And not too many people have a problem. But I wasn't really willing to back down. I think that's a lot of it. And you could probably read some stuff online. I wrote a letter to the state that's on the Indie Birth site when I finally gave up my license. But that's kind of the end of the story. So I'm still at the beginning, which was it was very stressful.

And even though I really believed that serving this woman in particular was the right thing to do, I was, again, going back and forth with them over keeping the license. They decided they wanted to remove my license for having attended her birth. And so, again, it just sort of spiraled me down but also up. Down at the time. It was a very emotional situation. It was very hard to deal with. I never knew from day to day kind of which way it was going to go. I had to hire a lawyer. I spent a lot of money. And it was very, very hard to deal with. And at the time, I couldn't imagine doing anything else. I knew that the way I wanted to be a midwife, the way I wanted to help serve women, didn't really fit the bill of being licensed in the state. There are too many rules and regulations. There is no respect for the natural process. There is no respect for individual women. Birth is a medical event here in Arizona to the licensed midwives. And I don't know that I would go as far to say that many of them believe that personally. I don't know what they believe personally.

But when you sign a paper saying you're licensed with the state, you serve the state. You don't serve the women. And so if the rules and regulations tell you that you have to dilate at a certain amount per hour or during a labor, or you can only push a certain amount of time in a labor, or you can't go past 42 weeks and have a home birth, there are so many rules and regulations. And Arizona certainly isn't the only state to have and enforce these regulations that essentially make birth a medical process. So, again, I had put myself in the position of not believing that, but, essentially, serving the state. And here I was challenged in a way I never thought possibly. But yet, in hindsight, it makes perfect sense because, of course, it was going against everything I believed.

But there was a part of me that felt like being licensed was safer somehow. That I protected my family. I did my apprenticeship with an unlicensed midwife in another state, and that was my solution. That I would go to a state like Arizona, get a license, and suddenly be safe. Whatever that means. But, again, all of these things were challenged. And all of these things brought me to my own free birth, and that's the story today. So, again, I was challenged by this essentially political situation in a way I never thought possible. I never saw myself in this situation. But yet, as I mentioned, it probably didn't need to go on as long as it did. I had many opportunities, I think, to

probably lie or do some other things that could have made it just go away and remain licensed and just act like it never happened or something like that.

But my integrity would not allow me to do that. I believe that the woman who had had a Cesarean, just like all women who have had Cesareans, are entitled to make their own choices about how they want to birth and who they want there. So this made me rethink everything though. It wasn't just about who the attendant could be or should be but how I think of birth and what I think my role is as a birthing woman, as a mother. What I think my role was as a midwife. I couldn't even explain what this did internally. It was a great thing, in the end, but I just started to question absolutely everything. And although I considered myself a hands off sort of midwife at the time, I realized how much fear I was still carrying because of being licensed, because of these regulations that we were supposed to adhere to.

And frankly, because of the regulations themselves, I found—and, again, sort of in hindsight—that many of the women I was working with as much as I loved them weren't really taking responsibility for their births and were looking up to somebody to make choices for them. And, again, this is not my truth. My truth is that we all have what we need. And although we may look to support on the outside, it's kind of been the theme of these podcasts. That really we have what we need on the inside and that we are the only ones that know what we need and what's good for us. And that birth is not something that should be owned by anybody other than the woman herself. So for a state to own birth, for licensed midwives to sort of own the experience—and, again, as a medical event just really started to become clear to me.

So with the fact that VBACs, at least at the time here, for licensed midwives were prohibited care, I'd say that there was a lot of fear around that and probably still there is. And there's a lot of fear in general around birth. And I don't think that midwives and licensing are helping the situation because things are prohibited or out of range or this or that. Again, women aren't making their own choices. And that's not to say everybody should have a home birth necessarily. But I do believe it's everybody's choice to have a home birth, if that's what they believe is best for them. I really don't believe that a woman would choose anything other than the best for herself and her baby. So, again, these rules and regulations just put midwives and women in positions where they can't make choices and, essentially, the choices that are made are being made out of fear.

So I was working my way through the situation, and I had actually had a miscarriage during the early part of this experience, which really emotionally wasn't a surprise. It was a very early miscarriage. But I was an emotional mess. And not to say, that's the sole reason for miscarriages. But I knew that it was part of mine. So I quickly became pregnant again. And that was with True. And, again, I spent the entire pregnancy

dealing with this situation. So lawyers and letters and potential hearings and fines and charts and this and that. And the whole time I remained licensed. And I remained attending births, but it was a very uncomfortable situation. But I came to one pretty clear solution for myself, and that's, again, the point of this podcast today. That I needed to own my own experience. That I really came to believe that all of us—all birthing women—should own their own experiences. And so in the context of what I was going through, this meant that I would not have somebody there that was licensed by the state. I would not have somebody there that had political interest in anything—anything at all really. Anybody that couldn't completely serve myself and my baby.

So, again, for me, this meant free birth. It doesn't have to mean that for you. It doesn't have to mean that for everybody. Certainly, there are traditional birth attendants. There are friends. And I did have a friend, as you'll hear, at my birth. So it's not an anti midwife campaign by any stretch. We are just where we are at with the word midwife. But women serving women in birth is something that has always happened and will continue to happen. But, again, that's what I came to through this experience was that I needed to own my birth experience completely. And that I would love if all women could and if all women could literally take back their births, and that's, of course, as you know the name of these podcasts. And here's the inspiration for it.

So this political, emotional, spiritual situation changed my life forever. As I was going through it, again, as I mentioned, I was still licensed. But I was questioning everything. And I was already planning in my head how I was going to serve women without a license because I knew, in the end, especially when I was done birthing this baby—I knew that my life would be changed forever. And I knew very deeply that I would not be able to go back to that world. That I would not be able to serve the state any longer, and I would need to find a new way to be in birth which was very emotional at the time. I think change is always hard and leaving the world of midwifery, in a sense—and, again, the word midwife is a charged word. It's a word that's owned by the state, literally, here and in many other states. You can't call yourself a midwife unless you're licensed by the state. So I've chosen to part with that word completely. And, again, at the time, I knew I would have to. I knew I would have to find a way to be in birth but not the way I was.

So Indie Birth was, obviously, crucial. Indie Birth has existed, actually, for close to seven years. So Indie Birth itself was not new. And it was an online community even back then. But it certainly has changed and, I think, blossomed in the last couple of years because of these personal experiences. So, again, I knew I wouldn't be able to serve women as a quote on quote midwife anymore. And Indie Birth became the platform and still is. And we have the podcasts and classes and all kinds of stuff. And all of these tools and resources have come out of mainly this and other experiences because women do need to own their own experiences if they want to birth on their own

terms. So I ended up doing my own prenatal care, and that's kind of in quotes. If you've listened to starting with the very first podcasts—I've had like 40 of them now—then you'll hear about my next pregnancy. Not True's. The one that I just had. Baby was born a couple months ago. And I started to really document those things with the last pregnancy as far as how I felt about prenatal care, what that means to me, what I actually do for myself when I'm pregnant.

But, again, with this pregnancy, with True's, I did these things as well. I just hadn't evolved into documenting them yet and kind of sharing them with other women. But this was my first pregnancy. True's is—True was my sixth baby. So it was my sixth baby's pregnancy where I finally took control of my own care. I mean I had always, I though, been pretty good about taking care of myself and listening to my body and eating really well. But this was the first time I didn't ask anybody on the outside what they thought or knew about me or my baby because, frankly, I just didn't care. And I saw the irony in that I had been serving as a licensed midwife and playing this role in women's lives. And then suddenly, I was that woman. And I was wanting to make a point to myself that although midwives are great and although I had loved serving the clients I did there was a certain element of me being too involved in their experiences. I don't know that they felt that way. But, again, just sort of looking back, I felt like that wasn't something I wanted to continue doing.

So in other words, I had to walk the talk. If I was going to talk the talk, I needed to walk it. And I was willing and excited to do that. So I didn't do any lab work with True's pregnancy. And, of course, not the last one either. And that was my own personal choice. It doesn't mean there aren't lab tests to be done. That doesn't mean that that means that's what you should do. That doesn't mean that all lab tests are bad. It doesn't mean any of those things. It just meant, for me, that wasn't the right choice, and I had to make drastic changes basically to my own life. So I didn't really access anybody midwife wise. I certainly had friends that were midwives and still do. And it was just a very internal pregnancy. And, again, a lot of it was because I was dealing with a hefty dose of fear from this situation going on and politics. And I had to do this inside work. There was nobody that could have done it for me. And truly, there was nobody that could have done anything for me to have made this pregnancy easier. It was just what it was. It was just difficult on that level. It wasn't physically difficult but on every other level it was.

So at those moments, I began to accept the full responsibility that I knew I always should have taken and that I knew I wanted to teach other women to access. And I came to the realization again that our births are our own. And what that means for you will look different. But for me, it meant not engaging professionals on the outside even though I technically was a professional. I had to not engage my own brain and my own self in that way. I had to come to the realization that no one else can hold the

responsibility for anyone else in birth. Or at least, they shouldn't. I really think they shouldn't. No one can save us from our own experiences. And that's a really hard thing to talk about especially when birth doesn't go the way we want or our experience isn't the way we want it. It's so easy to have regret and guilt and blame and want to put that on somebody else because we just have been indoctrinated especially in this country in the time we live in right now that there is always someone there to save you.

And I'm not going to get into my views about hospital birth and all that, but, obviously, I think the overriding assumption is that for many women—I mean maybe not you. Definitely not me. For many women is that they go to the hospital because they can be saved. There is a doctor that can save them or their baby. But, again, in the bigger picture, accepting full responsibility means no one is coming to save you. And that doesn't have to be a scary, negative, bad thing. In fact, I think it's absolutely exhilarating. I think it's the most empowering thing that I ever realized about my life. And, again, birth is not separate from life. The lessons I've learned in pregnancy and birth are life lessons.

And so to me, to be faced—truly faced with this realization that even though I had acted as a midwife for many years and I had been that role for women. I had been the one that they thought would come to save them, if need be. I had to suddenly face that. That doesn't actually exist. That we all are in a place where we need to accept full responsibility and that no one is going to be able to change that. But the very positive side of that is when we do accept full responsibility, there is very, very few situations where saving would even be part of our vocabulary anymore because we start to believe that what happens to us needs to happen. And that it is our experience and, again, our responsibility.

But it's not to say I didn't have moments in my pregnancy where I debated having somebody at the birth or having somebody involved in the prenatal care just in case. The whole what if. How many people talk about that in birth? Well, the what if. Have someone there just because or just in case. I had to wrestle with that because, again, I was that person. So it was changing my own views of work I had done and believed in—very much believed in. And it was changing me as a person, literally by the day, to realize these truths. And, again, these are my truths.

So ironically, what actually saved me if that is such a thing—kind of saved me from myself as far as fear goes and dealing with that in the middle of this pregnancy was complete and—complete and utter immersion and study in birth. And, again, I've been studying birth for ten years. But I began to study in a different way. So in the years prior, it had been about testing and licensing and becoming a CPM and the basic level of knowledge that's required to do those things. But, again, for the most part is pretty fear based, is pretty emergency skills based. And although emergency skills are great

and fine to know, I began to study and immerse myself in physiological birth, which is, again, what we teach here at Indie Birth. We have a five-week online series. We are dedicated and devoted and passionate in a way that I don't think many people are. And, again, it's because of this experience.

I committed myself to learning and studying and talking to people and soul searching and getting deep inside my own soul and my own body and this baby to know that what I was intellectually about not interfering in birth and the hormones and why things work and, again, a lot of this was due to the work of others. Michel Odent and Sara Buckley's book, *Gentle Birth, Gentle Mothering*. It was mind blowing to me. All the years I had studied birth and thought I was being hands off or leaving it alone. I actually knew next to nothing. And so this was just a mind blowing pregnancy where I got to just dive in. And so much more. If you know anything about these concepts, that's awesome. And if you don't, you can certainly access the information we have.

But it's not just natural birth. It's not home birth. And in fact, home birth is so misleading. So many home births happening nowadays with midwives are not physiological births. And women aren't getting that kind of experience at home. They're getting medical births at home for the most part. So, again, this wasn't learning about those things. I knew about those things. And it was getting myself away from what I now considered midwife-centered birth, which, again, which was what I was doing. And loving it in a certain way. But feeling like something was missing. That I was taking up space at these births and that women were entitled to know more. But I had to know more first. And, again, that was this experience.

So birth as it was meant to be. I dove back into study. I intensely finished up my academic course that I had left for a couple years while I did all this licensing stuff. So I graduated from the Ancient Art of Midwifery Institute with the wonderful Carla Hartley shortly after True's birth. But while I was pregnant, I did the bulk of what I had left. And I completely switched my focus. I realized that if I was going to leave licensed midwifery behind willingly and gratefully that I had to have something completely different to go to. And that might sound crazy because I was still in birth. And I'm still working in birth, and I'm still educating women. But to me, they are two completely different worlds. Being a licensed midwife at a birth in a state where the rules and regulations rule and taking—or I should say. Or. Taking a step away from that and learning more than I ever knew and sharing that with women and saying, "Here. This isn't mine. This is yours. We all know this. Take it back. Take back this knowledge. Take back your birth. I don't want to own your birth. I don't want to necessarily even be part of your birth. I want you to realize this is yours and this is your power."

And so this is what I did for myself in this pregnancy and birth. One of the main motivating factors was actually at the very end of my pregnancy. I went to the Trust

Birth Conference in Nashville, and I was about 36 weeks pregnant. And, again, I had made a lot of progress, I think, in the pregnancy as far as intellectual knowledge, study, that kind of thing. I had made lots of progress emotionally. But, of course, you're still hanging on to some stuff occasionally when you have a month left. And I had an amazing time at that conference. I addressed lots of fears and learned even more. So one subject in particular that I always had tucked in my brain as a reason that I maybe wasn't comfortable with unassisted birth for myself was the issue of shoulder dystocia.

So anybody that knows that's when the baby kind of gets caught on the pubic bone and can't get born often without some help. And so having been trained as a midwife, this was definitely a fear for me. And I thought if I was alone at my birth and that happened, what on earth would I do? Because I couldn't probably reach in and get my baby out myself very easily in my own body. So, again, just going to this conference was one of the things that addressed actual fears like that for me because I really did have to work through them. And now, of course, I have a completely different view on shoulder dystocia and why it happens and why the normal, physiological process really almost always avoids such complications because they just don't make sense. And I mean I've also learned through my own births that you can feel and connect to your own body and your own baby and solve some things that way as well.

So all to say that I did address fears, and there were pretty specific fears that I had. But the education that I received during this time was just phenomenal. And I will say I shared it with my husband as much as he wanted to learn because I think he was holding on as well. I've had very nice births in the past. My first was a hospital birth, but all the rest were home births. And so he's seen birth quite a bit. More than most people. And he was still hanging on at an earlier point in the pregnancy to, "Well, what if? Shouldn't we have someone here?" And once he became educated in how birth actually works, he could probably be considered one of the first students of our online class years ago. Even though the class itself didn't exist back then. I would consider him one of the first students. And when he learned about these things, he was completely on board. And he said, "I know your body will do this just right. I know now that anybody there at all, any interference at all, will actually make this harder for you and our baby. And I completely support this way." So that was huge.

So going into the labor was no different really for me than any other labor. I knew that we weren't going to have anybody there. And there were points during the labor that were mentally and emotionally challenging. And I don't necessarily chalk that up to it being a free birth. I mean my labor just moved along like it always had. Just without anybody really watching and without anybody asking questions or wanting to do anything or waiting for me. So that was different. But mentally and emotionally, I did have things to work through in the labor as well. And I believe that had more to do with, again, the situation that I had been in the year prior. Just working through those things.

I knew I could do it. I had moments of fear for sure in labor. You can read the birth story again. But I knew deep down that I could do this. That this was the way it was meant to be. That my baby could do this.

And I went into the birth knowing that I would be changed. And so there was sort of an apprehension in an excited kind of way about that. I think it's funny, in a sense, because I think every birth changes you. Every birth has changed me. And I don't think I'm an exception. I think most women or maybe all women—every birth they have will change them on some level in some way. Some more than others. So, again, I went into this birth knowing that it would be big in a sense. That my world was going to get blown open in a way I didn't even expect or know about yet. And that is exactly what happened.

I knew that everything I had learned and come to internally over the course of the pregnancy and in this fight with the state of Arizona I knew that it was showing me my truth. And so, again, in the beginning when I said that sometimes these really difficult situations seem like they are just difficult for no reason, I think—and in my case, that it ultimately was the greatest good. It ultimately was the greatest teacher and learning experience to get to know myself. More than anything else that had ever happened in my life. So I talked with the baby, of course, while I was pregnant. And he was very strong. Very strong soul. I felt like he wasn't a baby in the sense of his soul. And that he very much supported me and actually kept me going and uplifted and focused during the pregnancy when I would get depressed and when I would feel defeated, again, from this whole situation.

So I knew going into his birth that I would be changed. And I knew what I believed. And I also was told by him and knew as well that I would be shown my own truth with this birth. I would be shown what I knew and believed about birth was, indeed, true. So that is indeed where his name came from. I knew that that would be the case. And it most definitely was. His birth was physically challenging. But absolutely one of the most amazing experiences of my life. If I hadn't just had another baby a couple months ago, I would have said that True's birth was the most amazing experience of my life. But my daughter's birth four months ago was also mind blowing and emotionally just rocking my world. And you can read her story as well. *The Free Birth of Ever Wild*. So the babies, number six and seven, are my free birth babies, and I don't love them any more than my other children.

I don't love their birth experiences any more than my other ones, to be honest, because it's been a journey. Each one has led me to the next. But I do feel like with the free births—and True's in particular because it was the first one—that it completely changed me. I can never go back to what I consider the old way. I can never go back to seeing birth the way I did, to working in birth the way I did, to working with the same people that

I did. My whole life has changed. I could never, obviously, go back to attending births as a licensed midwife. And after True's birth—a couple months after—I guess by the time he was about six months old ish or so, it was still going on with the state of Arizona. And I had many opportunities to keep my license.

We were going to do a settlement. And I did not agree to the settlement. And here I am holding this glorious couple months old baby that completely blew my world open, and there was no way I could go back. There was no way. I couldn't march forward in my own truth knowing what I believed about birth and experiencing it. It wasn't just a knowing or an intellectual knowledge. I had experienced that everything I knew deep down about birth was true. That I could do it. That our bodies were meant to birth. That there is a process. That we don't interrupt the process. That we don't rush the process. That the process is nearly always perfect. That it can be unpredictable. That it can be scary. That it can challenge us. But most often, babies get born, and it's not because of anybody other than the mom and baby working together.

So I could never go back. And, again, when he was about six months old, I actually surrendered my license. I wrote them a letter, which you could read on the Indie Birth site. And I basically told them that my life had completely changed. I didn't regret at all serving the VBAC mama the way I had. And that if they were going to continue to medicalize birth that they could take my license back and my licensing number and that I would no longer be a midwife in Arizona again. And I have to say it's the best decision I ever made. I don't know. A lot of things would have had to be different for me to continue on that path. But I am so grateful. I am so grateful for that having happened to me. For me to see the light, the truth, and, again, may not be everybody's light and truth. But it certainly is mine.

But I had to be shown it. And I had to experience it. And I had to feel it. And I had to come out the other side saying, "This isn't crazy. This isn't just a concept or an idea. This isn't irresponsible. This isn't crazy, hippy way to birth. This is real. This is what we know as women. And the science is there to support it. So I think we all have our internal workings and our intuition. But for me, it was those things, and it was very much science as well. It was very much this knowledge and understanding that birth does have a way that it's worked for millions of years. And that we really just have to get out of the way. So reminiscing here today on the day of True's birth. And I watched his slideshow right before I began recording this just to kind of get myself in the mood for talking about this. And nearly cried, of course, because it's so wonderful to watch our babies come into the world. And, of course, now that he's two, it's even harder to believe that he was that baby a couple years ago.

But I am so thankful to him for this experience that continues really. And to my—all of my children really for leading me on the path and for them being my teachers. They are

all wonderful teachers. But, again, this unassisted birth for me, free birth was not something I ever thought I would do as a midwifery study, as a midwife. And, again, even though I considered myself hands off, there was always a part of me that thought I was needed, that thought maybe that birth wouldn't go as well without someone there. And, again, I had to shed that. I shed all of that like a snake losing its skin. And I'm a completely different person.

So for the last couple of years since I've given my license back to the state of Arizona, I have, obviously, put all of my passion and knowledge and support and education into Indie Birth. And I'm hoping that women are out there really benefitting from this knowledge, from this support. And I thank you for your support because there are many people that do listen to these podcasts, and I think it just is a platform for us to share. And although I can't hear you when I'm doing these podcasts, I do receive your emails. And I know many women share with Margo and I that way. And I do feel like Indie Birth has gotten to the point where we do know what we're about. This is what we're about. We're about you taking back your power in birth and making the most of your experience and not giving away—giving it away to anybody at all. I'm hoping that we're helping women see around and past their fear. There is so much fear in the world right now about absolutely everything. Birth in particular. So trying to educate women and support them through these fears is my lifelong passion.

So thanks for listening today. Go ahead and watch True Rowan's slide show, The Free Birth of True. And I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thanks so much. Have a great day.

(closing music)