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“The Routine”

On Sunday morning I delivered a baby.

The story, of course, is a bit more complicated than that. It was the end of my obstetrics rotation, and all throughout I had had a black cloud hanging over me. You see, over the course of my two weeks on the labor and delivery floor, I had seen a total of only three “normal” births – all the rest were done by cesarean section. In fact, two of these three happened on my very first day, when I still didn’t know how to properly introduce myself to the expectant mother, so as to be even allowed in the room. The first woman I saw that first day glanced over me with an odd mixture of nervousness and contempt – enough so that the resident, catching that look, sent me right out of the room. The mother’s sigh of relief followed me as I closed the door. This, I thought to myself, is going to be fun.

On the other hand, I did scrub in on something like 20 cesarean sections. I felt like I had seen it all: “normal” cesareans indicated for maternal failure to progress in labor; mothers of twins sectioned because the first baby was positioned feet-first or sideways; even a case of a ruptured uterus that was sectioned emergently.

And so it went – section after section after section. My last time on the floor was an overnight Saturday-to-Sunday call with the head of the obstetrics rotation, but even she was powerless against my cloud – true to form, not one mother delivered during those twelve night-time hours. At this point, I was actually pretty upset about this: delivering a baby (and not merely observing from a corner) seemed to me to be one of the quintessential experiences one has in medical school. So when my shift ended, I stayed – the three women in labor at that time would have to deliver at some point, they looked to have no complications, and I sure wasn’t going to lose my chance at assisting one of them.

Long story short, it happened – I delivered one of them. It was amazing, it was indescribable, it was just like I practiced for and imagined it to be – and yet nothing like I imagined. The realization that I was involved in bringing a baby out of a womb and into my world was more than a little staggering. As it was dried and swaddled, nursed and then wheeled in its crib down to the nursery, I accompanied it, chest puffed out and proud as a peacock (this was my first child!), but I could not shake the wondrous feeling that comes with knowing that I was one of the first things this baby saw “out here.”

But what was equally interesting to me (though only later, upon further reflection), was how commonplace all of this was. No one cared. “Number 76 delivered” called out one nurse to another, referring to the patient’s room number, adding “yeah, yeah, vaginally, everything is fine.” That was the shockingly brief summary of what had just occurred, the cardinal event of my rotation. To these nurses and obstetricians around me, though, it was an everyday occurrence – that is, on the days I wasn’t around. The wondrous has

been routinized. Over the months and years, the sense of one's unique position in the life of any single expectant mother was replaced by the professional duty to examine, diagnose, treat, push, deliver, repeat. Other events that may seem amazing – participating in robotically-assisted operations, touching someone's uterus (or kidney, or a beating heart), performing an organ transplant – become routine as well. Mind you, the same happens regardless of what profession you go into – merging companies or marrying people, defending the accused or defending our country, designing homes or figuring out ways to reduce homelessness. This dining hall, our wood-paneled Lowell library, seemed stunningly beautiful the first time I saw them; now, I never think of their beauty when popping in to return a book or to grab a snack.

In effect, familiarity, as they say, breeds contempt. But I want to rephrase this, in a more positive, hopeful way. The vast majority of us will be doing something entirely new this upcoming summer – starting a new job, or a new school, or a new project, moving to a new city, in the US or maybe abroad, finding new friends. And as you very well know, beginnings are often tough, and in navigating your new city, or project, or relationships, you might feel not all that competent, if not altogether lost. But herein lies the benefit of just starting out: namely, that unlike your veteran colleagues, you will be able to see, to really take in your surroundings, with fresh eyes wide open, and to appreciate the wonder and privilege that comes with whatever it is that you chose to do. Remember that wondrous feeling. Remember it, and recall it as your new turns into a familiar, and as the blasé, the offhand, the routine, all try to creep back.

The postscript to this story is that of the other two expectant mothers who were still in labor. As soon as I could after the first delivery, I left the labor floor to call my parents and boast (Mom, I'd just delivered a baby!) – and of course as soon as I had left the labor floor, the second mother delivered. My black cloud held; and the last woman? Yep – a cesarean.