

| by Karen Brody

my body rocks




A group of yoga nidra practitioners at the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School in Sweden

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As I lay down on the four folded blankets and tucked myself in with another blanket on top, a sigh emerged from my mouth that was more like a roar. *This mama was tired.*

I needed a nap. It was spring 2004, and my body felt a deep-in-the-bones exhaustion. My boys were three and four years old, I had been rising at 5 a.m. with my older son for over four years, and I had just spent a year interviewing over 100 women about their childbirth experiences, for a possible book about why so many healthy, educated mothers in America were having an unusually high number of medical interventions and complications when giving birth. I deserved a nap, right?

I told myself that, to unwind, I should take a “bendy-stretchy” yoga class. But when I read the description of the yoga nidra taught by Robin Carnes at Willow Street Yoga, in Takoma Park, Maryland—that all you do is lie down and rest for an hour—I thought, *Forget about bending my body into the boat pose—yoga nidra is exactly the kind of yoga I need.* Little did I know that a yoga nidra nap would change my life. “That’s not serious yoga,” commented my mommy friends.

A photograph showing a group of people lying on their backs on orange mats in a yoga studio. They are in a relaxed, supine position, likely practicing yoga nidra. The room has blue walls and large windows with wooden frames. The people are of various ages and are dressed in casual, comfortable clothing. The mats are arranged in rows, and the overall atmosphere is calm and peaceful.

How an ancient yogic practice led to the birth of a play—and a movement

Part of me agreed. Paying for a yoga class was an investment, and paying to nap at a yoga studio seemed a little nuts. So when I stepped into Robin's class for the first time, even though I desperately needed rest, I was somewhat skeptical that this expensive nap in the middle of the day was a good idea.

"How many blankets do I need?" I asked Robin, a striking, middle-aged redhead who appeared less earthy-crunchy than the average yogini.

"At least four underneath you, one

for your head, and two to put on top of you," she said. "Oh, and you may want a bolster and an eye bag."

As I made my bed, I watched the room fill with women of all ages, some of whom had brought their own eye bags. By noon, the room was packed. I guess I wasn't the only one who needed a nap.

"Is there anyone here who has never done yoga nidra?" Robin asked. Up went my hand. "Great. Your mind may not know why you are here, but your body does."

I didn't know it yet, but my yoga nidra journey began right then.

DISCOVERING MY SANKALPA

As I lay down on the four folded blankets and tucked myself in with another blanket on top, a sigh emerged from my mouth that was more like a roar. This mama was *tired*.

"We're going to focus on your sankalpa today," Robin said. "*Sankalpa* in Sanskrit means *will* or *purpose*. Every yoga nidra



THE GREAT NAP

Outside of yoga circles, most people have never heard of *yoga nidra*, a meditative form of yogic sleep. If you've ever taken a yoga class and, for the final few minutes, the teacher has had you lie down on the floor in *shavasana*, a corpse-like position for deep relaxation, you've had a taste of yoga nidra. This state of deep, conscious sleep is similar to meditation, with this difference: In meditation, you remain in the waking state of consciousness and gently focus the mind while allowing thought patterns, emotions, sensations, and images to arise and dissipate. In yoga nidra, you leave the waking state, go past the dreaming state, and enter deep sleep—yet remain awake.

Got it? Don't worry. The beauty of yoga nidra is that you don't have to understand it with your mind. Just experience it, and your body will get it. You can even fall asleep and still benefit from it, although the intention is to stay awake.

As with most ancient yoga practices, present-day teachers of yoga nidra put their own spins on the essence of the teachings and on how the yoga is practiced. There are many yoga nidra teachers with followers: Rod Stryker, Yogi Amrit Desai, and Richard Miller, to name a few. My teacher, Robin Carnes, uses Miller's powerful approach to yoga nidra, which he calls Integrative Restoration (iRest). For more information about iRest, go to www.irest.us.

On Mother's Day 2010, I kicked off a one-year commitment to nap. Read about my journey, and join my 40-day nap challenge for moms, at www.mothering.com/pregnancy-birth/karen-brody-course.

—Karen Brody

Above: Robin Carnes leads a yoga nidra class in her studio.

“Every *yoga nidra* session begins with focusing on what your *intention*, or *purpose*, is for the practice. It could be to simply *relax*, or it could be more focused on something you want *to manifest* in your life.”

—Robin Carnes

session begins with focusing on what your intention, or purpose, is for the practice. It could be to simply relax, or it could be more focused on something you want to manifest in your life.”

I want rest, my mind told me in an instant.

“Don't let your mind answer this question,” Robin urged a second later, ruling out the immediate answer my brain had come up with. “Let your intention come from your body.”

My *body*? I was ashamed to admit that, after two powerful homebirth experiences, I no longer felt intimately connected to my physical self. Pregnancy and giving birth were all about every little feeling in my body; mothering felt like a marathon of meeting everyone else's needs and rarely my own. My life was too busy to focus on my body. I was consumed with interviewing mothers about their birth experiences and caring for two small toddlers born 18 months apart, the elder a constant screamer. Most days, the question I asked was, “How are *their* bodies?” My body was in the backseat, unattended, without a seat belt.

“If you don't know your intention now, don't worry,” Robin assured us. “See if it comes to you during the practice, once you're sensing your body.”

And off we went. Robin's sweet, melodic voice, with a hint of high school history teacher, took me through my body: mouth, tongue, ears, eyes, forehead, scalp. She even led me into “the hollows of the brain cavity,” a place I had not ever imagined.

“Sensation flowing in the back of the neck . . . in the throat . . . in the shoulders and arms . . .” her voice continued, as tingling electricity pulsed through these parts of my body. “Radiant sensation flowing down the left shoulder . . . into the left upper arm . . . left elbow . . . left forearm . . . wrist . . . left hand.”

After 45 minutes of guiding me in the exploration of my every body part, right down to the phlegm, while breathing deeply and sinking down into awareness of my feelings and thoughts, Robin invited us to feel our bodies as spacious, open, without boundaries. Ten minutes later she returned us to our *sankalpa*. At that point my body felt deliciously empty, as if an



abandoned lot in my brain were now displaying a big “VACANCY” sign. From this space emerged my sankalpa: *I will turn the 118 birth-story interviews I did into an important piece that will help make childbirth more mother-friendly.*

Four classes later, I began to hear the voices of birthing mothers.

FROM SANKALPA TO PLAY

The first time the symphony of mothers’ voices emerged, I was driving my boys to a park. Raffi was playing in the car’s CD player, and an argument about a blue ball was brewing between them. Suddenly, I applied the brakes and screeched to a halt. Both boys went silent, waiting for my scolding. Instead, I pulled a napkin from the glove compartment and started writing down dialogue. For the next five minutes, I wrote on every napkin in the car.

“Are we going to go to the park, Mommy?” Jacob finally asked.

Feeling guilty, I quickly wrote one word on my hand: *play*. Then I drove them to the park.

Play? I had never written a play, never thought about writing a play. I could not imagine, with two small children and a husband who traveled overseas all the time, how I could ever write a play. Sure, I was a writer—I could see writing a *book* about childbirth—but plays were definitely not my genre.

Back in yoga nidra class, I continued to focus on my sankalpa. By the end of the practice one day, again feeling open, my body lying there like a limitless blue ocean, serene as a morning mountain mist, this sense—not in my mind but in my body—came to me: *Nobody’s going to buy your book, Karen. Write a play about childbirth and change the world.*

The next morning, as I walked my kids to a nearby park, I asked a neighbor, who wrote grants for a local prominent theater company, where to go if I wanted to write a play.

“The Playwright’s Forum,” Gary responded.

I went to www.theplaywrightsforum.org and signed up immediately.

The voices of the mothers I’d interviewed now

flooded my head every day, and especially just after I’d practiced yoga nidra. I remember a session with Robin in which she’d had us dive into awareness of our thoughts and images, and I had explored my belief that I could not write a play because I was not qualified. She invited us to “locate a belief about yourself that you are working with in your life. Where and how do you feel it in your body when you take this belief to be true about yourself?”

I felt the belief that I could not write a play deep in my throat.

“Now bring to mind the opposite of this belief,” she suggested. “Where and how do you feel *it* in the body?”

I felt *I can write a play* in my heart.

“Alternate several times between these two opposites of belief.”

I cannot write a play. I can write a play. I cannot write a play. I can write a play.

Like magic, I entered that scrumptious feeling of emptiness again. I was totally open, a boundless ocean, my beliefs morphing into a completely unexpected place where my thoughts were unchained and neither belief was true.

That evening, mental handcuffs now off, I went to my computer and began to write a play about childbirth.

BIRTH OF A PLAY

Over the next six months I wrote *Birth*, a play about how healthy, educated mothers were giving birth in America. I wanted to present a portrait of real birth stories from the mother’s perspective because there are so many statistics about childbirth—for example, showing a rapid increase in the rate of cesarean sections—but few stories from mothers themselves. My intention in writing *Birth* was to make sure this period in history did not go by without clear documentation of how mothers are giving birth, and to raise consciousness of the current birthing climate so that mothers are aware of their birth options. It seemed unbelievable to me that so many serious, important plays—such as Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*—have been written about women’s history and the politics of women’s bodies, but none about childbirth, an

At that point my body felt *deliciously empty*, as if an abandoned lot in my brain were now displaying a big “VACANCY” sign. From this space emerged *my sankalpa: I will turn the 118 birth-story interviews I did into an important piece that will help make childbirth more mother-friendly.*

Birth is being used to revolutionize the way communities view childbirth and respect women's pregnant bodies.

act that, each year, is performed by some 4 million US mothers.

I chose eight birth stories from my interviews with mothers. I fictionalized some of them to make the piece work as a play, but mostly I retold each woman's actual birth story. The stories range from a planned cesarean, to a mother who wants natural childbirth, to several mothers who want epidurals. Jillian, a character who, in the course of the play, tells the stories of all four of her births, begins with a birth she does not want and ends with exactly the birth she has always wanted. What I love about Jillian's story is the overarching tale of how she got there, and that one bad birth experience need not define a woman's entire birth history—a message I want every pregnant mother to take home.

Another of *Birth's* important messages is that of women knowing what their birth options are,

and their right to them. This is why, since 2006, so many communities around the world have used the play to raise awareness and money to make maternity care better for mothers. *Birth* is being used to revolutionize the way communities view childbirth and respect women's pregnant bodies.

Every week during the time I was writing *Birth*, I attended Robin's noon yoga nidra class, moving from a mommy busyness in which, some days, I felt completely out of my body, to a yummy state of bodily presence I had never before been able to sustain. I wrote while the boys napped, and in the evenings I workshopped the play in a church basement with a group of playwrights from the Playwright's Forum. Though dumbfounded by the topic of childbirth, and often refusing to believe the mothers' firsthand accounts of being coerced into having cesarean sections, these writers

began to profoundly hear the voices of the women I was writing about, and to cheer them—and me—on to completion.

On tougher parenting days—for example, when the entire family came down with flu and high fevers while my husband was away on business—my sankalpa anchored me.

Write a play and change the world of childbirth, Karen.

The play had its first reading on a frigid evening in December 2004, in a small rehearsal hall on the campus of George Washington University, in Washington, DC. The purpose of a play's "first read-

Opposite page (clockwise, from top left):

Birth performances in San Francisco, California; Fort Collins, Colorado; Maui, Hawaii; Paris, France; Fernie, British Columbia, Canada; and Bermuda

Below:

Jeana Naluai nurses her son Kala while rehearsing for *Birth* in Maui, Hawaii.





Birth

around the world





Above (clockwise):
BOLD Red Tent circles in
Northampton, Massachusetts;
Paris, France;
Atlanta, Georgia;
and Austin, Texas



Be **BOLD!**

In 2006 I founded BOLD, originally called **Birth On Labor Day**, as a way of inspiring communities worldwide to use my play, *Birth*, and **Bold Red Tent storytelling circles** to raise money and awareness to improve maternity care. Since the project began, various communities have raised a total of more than \$250,000 for local mother-friendly initiatives to improve maternity care—by providing **doulas for women in prison**, supporting the growth of **local birth networks**, and raising seed money for important **childbirth conferences**, such as the Second International Breech Birth Conference, held in Ottawa, Canada, in 2009.

Birth has now been performed as part of BOLD events in **hundreds of locations**, from cafés to professional theaters to college campuses around the world, including in **France, Malta, India**, and **throughout the US**.

If you would like more information about BOLD, visit www.boldaction.org.

—K. B.

TELLING SOUL STORIES



In my play, *Birth*, “**My body rocks!**” is a mantra used by the character Amanda, who passionately chants the phrase as she gives birth. Amanda, who is clear that she wants to give birth in a hospital but without medical interventions, uses this mantra to anchor her as she pushes her son, Dexter, out into the world. It is a **pregnant mother’s call to the wild, intuitive side** of her that trusts birth completely.

In 2010, I decided to use the “My body rocks!” spirit to teach not just pregnant and childbearing women how to feel more **comfortable in their bodies**, but others as well—such as women who are mothering aging parents or a spouse. Thus I launched the **My Body Rocks Project**, which helps mothers and other women connect with their bodies and find their authentic voices to make better decisions, such as where to give birth, or how to parent a child with learning challenges. Into each workshop and class I weave my love of **yoga nidra, movement, and storytelling.**

In fall 2010, when I taught a My Body Rocks workshop in British Columbia, mothers of all ages gathered in an intimate yoga studio, where together we **danced our story**, then told each other those stories. Each person had a unique tale, from one woman’s letting go of sorrow at a cousin’s death to another’s determination to find her birth mother.

The essence of the My Body Rocks Project is my belief that by **telling the stories of our souls**, each person can inch **closer to his or her true nature**, make better choices, and live a more vibrant life—and I recently began offering this experience online. In March 2011, I and *Mothering.com* are offering a seven-week My Body Rocks Pregnancy class online so that pregnant mothers around the world can experience the power of a “My body rocks!” birth. This takes me full circle, back to the roots of why I wrote *Birth*: **to help mothers explore their birth options** and have happy birth experiences.

—K. B.

ing” is to get feedback about it from an invited audience. I printed 50 invitations and posted them around Washington, at mother-related organizations and yoga studios. I hoped to see 20 people in the audience. To my surprise, the place was filled with more than 70 mothers, many with babies in slings. A mystery was unfolding, and I soon realized that not even I was in control of its power.

Eighteen months later I started Birth On Labor Day (BOLD), a global movement to inspire communities to use *Birth* and Bold Red Tent birth storytelling circles to raise awareness and money to improve maternity care. Our slogan was “Be BOLD”—a shout out to mothers everywhere about the importance of knowing all their birth options, not just the traditional choice of a hospital maternity ward (see sidebar, “Be BOLD!”). In addition, I started the My Body Rocks Project, which helps mothers connect with their bodies and authentic voices using yoga nidra, movement, and storytelling exercises (see sidebar, “Telling Soul Stories”).

My yoga nidra practice led me into my body to my true self, and out popped a play, a movement, and a mission. Not bad for an expensive nap.

♦ **Want more from Karen Brody?** Go to www.mothering.com/links and see Brody’s teleseminar on what to expect during pregnancy and birth, as well as her virtual pregnancy and birth course, and *Being Bold*, a short documentary about the play *Birth*.

Karen Brody is a writer, activist, and mother of two boys. Her critically acclaimed play about childbirth in America, Birth, and her BOLD Red Tent storytelling circles are experienced by thousands of people worldwide every year as part of BOLD, of which Karen is the founder and

artistic director (www.boldaction.org). In 2010, Karen received training in iRest yoga nidra. She currently teaches My Body Rocks Pregnancy and Mothering classes online, offers workshops, and works privately with mothers through her new venture, the My Body Rocks Project.



Left: Author Karen Brody (center) with *Birth* San Francisco producers Earth Lande (left) and Aimee Miles (right)

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR

CATE STOKES