

Alternative Birth Locations: Sites of Controversy (Panel Discussion) – Lynn Griesemer -
Unassisted Homebirth (www.unassistedhomebirth.com) – notes from my 25 minute presentation.

This conference today is about FREEDOM and RIGHTS. We could say that unassisted homebirth (UHB) is the **ultimate in freedom** regarding “reproductive rights” and childbirth. UHB is perhaps the most radical of birth choices and those who have a UHB are marginalized, criticized, patronized and sometimes penalized for making this choice. UHB means having the **right** to create a birth environment in complete alignment with one’s desires or beliefs.

Today I will discuss the definition of unassisted homebirth, current criticisms of UHB, cultural expectations for childbirth, why families choose UHB, current trends, and hope for the future.

1. Definition of UHB: birth without a doctor or midwife. No contract, no payment for services, no business arrangement with a doctor or midwife, no interference from someone else managing or directing your birth, which is a private, intimate, life-changing event. UHB could be husband and wife, solo birthing, inviting a friend(s) or relative(s) to share in the birth. European countries often refer to this as “freebirth,” but in the United States, it is often referred to as unassisted childbirth (UC), unassisted homebirth or unassisted birth.
2. Current Criticisms of UHB: women put themselves and their babies in danger; media often depicts a fascination with an unassisted birth, quickly followed by a scolding or warning that a hospital and doctor is the best choice for everyone, because birth can turn dangerous in seconds. (This is not as true as we are led to believe – there are often indications and warning signs of problems at birth).
Critics claim unassisted birthers are selfish and are aiming for some romantic notion of an ideal birth at the risk of the baby’s or mother’s life and well-being. Additional criticism is coming from midwives, who claim that a skilled professional is necessary and desirable. What critics don’t realize is that unassisted birthers are often extremely well researched and prepared and take everything about their birth seriously. They have thought through all kinds of scenarios and possible responses.
3. Cultural expectations for childbirth: Since childbirth is seen as risky and potentially dangerous by a majority of Americans, people are focused on the medical, tangible, material aspects of the body. This one-dimensional and superficial preoccupations lead people to ask the following questions: “Who is your doctor? What hospital are going to? What is the sex of the baby? When is your due date? Can I see your ultrasound photo? Have you decorated the nursery / baby’s room?”
4. Why families choose UHB: Stems from a philosophy of life and birth, especially the idea of a “whole woman” concept, that birth is much more than a tangible, material, body experience. It is emotional, private, often spiritual event which is best done in a place that respects a natural process / unfolding and it is crucial to be fully awake and aware. People who choose UHB want to be surrounded by love, not machines; they want to be free to be uninhibited and unhurried.

Stumbling blocks to UHB:

- a. fear of what others will think or say
 - b. fear of emergencies – the mind is stuck on worry and an imagination that is fixated on unlikely outcomes.
 - c. Husband / father of the baby is opposed to a UHB, so a midwife is often hired.
5. Current trends: Women often have enough courage to have a UHB, but sometimes “panic” or worry afterwards and go to the hospital if they feel the placenta is taking too long to detach or to get the baby checked. My advice is that we need to network with other unassisted birthers to know their stories and see what is possible. For example, I knew of a woman who’s placenta took 27 hours to detach and what she did was to wait patiently. By knowing a “range of normalcy” or possibility, we can take comfort. Otherwise the model we have to go on is what happens in the hospital: placenta is seen as a mess and doctor wants to finish up the birth – often cuts the cord within seconds of the birth, mashes down on the abdomen and yanks out the placenta.
Unassisted birthers can find a lot of comfort and friendships in an on-line community.
6. Hope for the future: We know the research; we know that birth is headed in a more technological direction. Many women will have a deep yearning for a much better birth than what a hospital can offer, but will they follow that pull that is telling them that birth is a lover’s interlude, which requires and almost demands privacy?
We have the knowledge, so what we need is the courage to follow our heart’s desire, the courage to take action. I want to encourage everyone to make the choice that is right for you and your baby, even if it seems so unusual or extreme or if no one else you know has had an unassisted birth.

Things I intended to say, but forgot:

1. Don’t give validation to other people’s opinion. Why is a doctor more “right” than you, who are seeking a UHB? The difference is rooted in philosophy, belief and approach, not fact. We should not give credibility and validity to someone else.
2. In my presentation, I said in the beginning that I will share a secret for a less painful birth and I forgot to at the end. I’ve done a lot of research on pain and will share one point here: One secret lies in the fact that if you have a “whole woman” concept, you are tapping into many elements – positive attitude and expectation, emotional, spiritual, being patient, being conscious and awake at your birth, being surrounded by love. All of these factors and more can overshadow physical discomfort.