



Lisa Goldstein



Fourth Annual Birth

August 1-5,
1996



Heidi Rinehart and son, Peter



was honored to be there, among these essential women whose work is one on one, a day at a time.

I mingled incognito during the lectures, listening to the accents from across the United States tell their remarkable stories. I could have been an aspiring midwife myself, birth has fascinated me all my life. But recently, I've become comfortable with the title "Playwright and Performer". Like these midwives, it's taken me years to believe that the words describing what I do apply to me.

As the hot and humid day wore on, as I went from workshop to lecture, I began to see the similarities of our lives and our work, so that as my self-definition stretched to "cultural



held hands, a baby was being born.

I had driven, then ferried, then cabbied, then bussed through customs, then flown reluctantly, not to the Atlanta Summer Olympics where almost everyone with a summertime destination seemed to be headed, but to a place called the Farm, an hour and a half outside Nashville to read from my latest play *SINGING THE BONES* at the Fourth Annual Birth Gazette Conference.

Across North America and five days out of my life, to read forty minutes of my play at the end of a long day, I



Makeda Ka

Somewhere along the way, I began to think of myself as a cultural worker. Perhaps I was in that strange atmosphere of pressurized cabin hyperspace, aloft between Seattle and Nashville, breathing anyone's sneeze, waiting for the flight attendant and the plastic cup with ice cubes.

I could have been in the dorm room of the Speakers' Quarters at the Farm, squinting in the dark over the curled torsos of my slumbering roommates Friday night when I arrived, late after the singing. It could have been the moment I heard, over the droning air conditioner, the cacophony of frogs and crickets in the Summertown, Tennessee trees outside.

I could have been squeezing Leslie Huffman's hand, who at the time was an almost complete stranger to me: we were both anxious for the safe passage of a baby in the video whose birth was complicated with the dreaded shoulder dystocia. The baby was probably a teenager by now, handing out leaflets or taking lunch tickets at this very conference, but at the moment we



Gazette Conference

By
Caitlin Hicks



**Kathy Acree
and
Peter Rinehart**

worker", so did my understanding of midwives.

I spoke with a medical doctor whose livelihood has been stolen from her because she had the sense to transport her home birth client to a hospital where traditional medicine not only failed, but screwed up; this woman has been



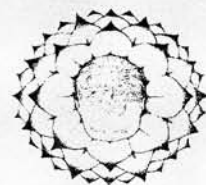
Ina May Gaskin

scapegoated and hunted in the media, and can no longer work as a doctor. I heard stories of women who spent time in jail for doing a competent professional job where everything went right—except the law.

I heard very smart women talk strategy and tactics and common sense, about legal issues, about AIDS, about building relationships, and yes, about birth. I was surprised to hear that a generation of midwives



Lea Rizack,



Diane Barnes and Sondra Abdullah-Zaimah

Marna McKinney and daughter, Margaret



Dr. Karen Davis and grandmother Mrs. Ola Dorris



Lisa Goldstein receiving Birth Gazette Award



Frida Vissuet

practice—midwifery—from extinction, simply by practicing and passing along information from one to the other, often at great personal risk. I was astonished to feel a part of a grassroots movement in which everything made sense. How powerful and essential birth can be! How fully it can change each life, one life at a time. Isn't this how revolutions begin? One by one?

A further realization permeated everything; an idea so common and profound recurred with every face I saw: that everyone, everywhere has been born. This invisible reality changed my perception of everyone with whom I came into contact that weekend. How alike we begin, so little, so helpless. It made me question: into what reality are our babies born? Onto what fabric do we weave their lives? What is this important event so invisible in the society we live?

When it was my turn at the microphone, I could barely speak myself. So suggestible, so tired, so ready to belong. I pulled myself back and began, "I am a cultural worker. . . and I'd like to tell you a story."

And so I told a story of birth from *SINGING THE BONES*, and another, and another. Stories shared with me by Wendy Clemens, an experienced

midwife in my township, in my province, in my country. Stories that are remarkably similar to the stories I heard you tell. Stories that are each unique, that each represents a life, that each echo and reflect a culture.

When Ina May spoke to us earlier that day, she said women who birthed on the Farm had the advantage of hearing stories of other women who birthed before them on the Farm. And these stories would help them through the essential work of birth with images of power and healthy babies. These true stories gave each woman confidence, these true stories helped her know that women are capable of this important work, and that as a woman, she, too, is fully capable.

That evening when all got up to dance with Makeda Kamara, we celebrated her culture, the culture that brought us the drum sounds and the movement she taught us. We sweated and celebrated ourselves, and we danced to each other. The babies in slings, in other women's arms, on their father's laps, their mother's hips, we all touched and hugged and danced and celebrated our common culture, the culture of birth.

Yes, I am a cultural worker. And I have a story to tell.

