



# Internat

about creativity and power. And yet, it is virtually invisible in our society. It's worth

When we look at the history of men's achievements in the last 5,000 years, we are filled with images of war, of conquering, of winning and owning. All over the world, the model for this seemingly universal behavior is the sports game, played and replayed season after season, year after year. This common event revolves around the repetition of a known goal, physical prowess, winning, and the most essential element — losing. The sports event is an essential microcosm of the society at large, because here, we are all taught the structure of our cultural system and its rules. Everyone is constantly indoctrinated: from little leaguers to college athletes, to a mass of onlookers. On television, in film, advertisements, and in our very language, the world culture reinvents itself daily in The War Model. Someone on top, someone below. Winners and losers. The caste system, based on rank, bigotry, privilege, and discrimination is alive and well all over the world.

Another event of a different sort has also played itself out just as frequently over the last million odd years, as the women of the world went

about their essential work of creating life. Birth, for centuries the domain of women, has at its core hard work, cooperation, physical prowess — and creation. No one needs to lose in birth, everyone can be a winner, the mother, who performs a remarkable athletic achievement, the caregiver who cooperates in the flow and celebrates the joy of the birth, the child who is born to life. The implications of the repetition of this kind of activity — hard work, cooperation, physical prowess, and creation — are astounding. Supposing we saw this kind of event repeated endlessly, in a variety of ways just like the sports event is endlessly repeated, wouldn't it make sense that our global village could be positively empowered to reflect this kind of ethic? This mode of operating? This way of solving problems?

Birth is an event that is at the core of our confidence as women. It is so common, yet so miraculous, and so powerful. It is a spiritual event that has nothing to do with rank or privilege, or competition, nothing to do with winning, losing, or being celebrated as "better" than anyone else. It is personal, universal, political. It is

has more to do with the sums of money made by those who interfere with it, than the half of the population who make it possible.

Understanding this, at the 3rd International Homebirth Conference in Stockholm, it was not surprising to hear speaker and alternate birth guru Sheila Kitzinger assert that birth in the modern world is a drama patterned by society, a ritual used to reinforce the existing system. It was not surprising when Kitzinger asserted that birth can be like rape, that the medicalized desexing of birth is part of a ritual that sees women's bodies as the passageway in a storyline where the baby is the passenger and the obstetrician, the pilot.

That birth has been commandeered by a profession steeped in hierarchy, privilege, authority, elitism, and that women around the world are crying out to be left alone with their midwives in their homes to give birth as they have for centuries is not surprising either. The culture is still at war for control over women, and birth is one of its most essential battlegrounds.

At the conference in Stock-

# Report on the 3rd National Homebirth Conference in Stockholm

by Caitlin Hicks

holm, I was at once inspired and dejected — as I heard the passionate testimony of women who work with women giving birth — as I heard statistics — as I heard different ways “the struggle” for control over women plays itself out in country after country around the world.

Listening to the eloquent testimony of childbirth educator Janet Balaskas, I sat in awe of this momentous occasion as image after image of home birth was presented larger than life on the screen behind her. The sheer number of these powerful images gave me a shudder, as I realized how absent these images are from my consciousness, yet how common the event of birth is. I was astonished numerous times by miscellaneous pieces of knowledge that I’d never heard. From Kitzinger: the same chemical, oxytocin pours into the bloodstream of women during lovemaking, as during the pushing stage in birth, as during breastfeeding.

From researcher/statistician Ole Olsen: there is no evidence to support that home births are more dangerous than hospital births.

From childbirth activist Beverly Beech: an alternate birth group formed in the UK, which was

originally called The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Women, (now AIMS) helps change the nature of birth to be more supportive, safe, and less degrading for all women in England.

From Dutch midwife Beatriz Smulders, who asserts that Holland’s system is based on normalcy, and most Dutch women believe and thus do endure the pain of birth without drugs. From her I heard the Dutch midwives motto, adopted by the country’s obstetricians — “At home dilates best,” an anecdotal story about a woman who felt empowered because her midwife left her alone to birth. “You

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gave me confidence by leaving me. I must be okay,” this woman thought. In Holland, the statistics are fantastic: in a country of 50 million people, there are only 1500 midwives, and yet 37 percent of women give birth at home, safely, without intervention.

From home birth activist Lena Tuulse: 20 years ago there were no



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home births in Sweden, when she decided to birth at home. I laughed at her crystal-clear, common sense approach: her doctor said, “So you’re going to have your birth at home? What are you going to do when the baby dies?” And Lena responded, “I guess you’ll have to tell me what you do in hospital when the baby dies.”

From Ina May Gaskin, midwife and author of the world-renowned book *Spiritual Midwifery*: a positive birth experience can go beyond the distance to heal deep emotional scars; and the witch hunt continues to rage around the world.

From Marsden Wagner, a former obstetrician and currently serving as Director for Maternal Child and Health for the World Health Organization: strong statistical evidence against technological intervention in hospitals around the globe is ignored by doctors whose self-interest is in conflict with their duty to serve their patients.

At this conference, I heard the moving testimony of a man, Sam Weinstein tell of his memory of being breastfed in bed by his mother when he was six years old. His mother had been 'experimented' upon with an early cesarean performed on her in Auschwitz — the child, seven months developed at birth, was breast fed — and lived.

I learned that midwifery survives, birth by birth around the world; most political systems limit women's choice through lack of funding for mid-



**Susanne Erlansson  
Swedish Midwife**

wives and home births; social support is reserved for untested technology; the modern medical approach sees birth as an illness, and in this fear-based system, one technological intervention leads to another.

I came to understand how the birth machine's false benefits have been sold into the belief systems of women in third world countries. I was shown how these women would benefit far more from good nutrition and lack of poverty than expensive birth machines. The real risks of commonly used technological interventions, such as cesareans, fetal monitoring and ultrasounds, are not communicated to women and are now just being documented through scientific research.

I admired the well-organized midwives who brought midwifery in their own countries from the brink of extinction. I listened to Swedish midwives tell me of the magnificent births of their own children — alone!

It was into this gathering of midwives from all over the world that I presented my play, *Singing the Bones*. I was honored to stand in front of midwives from Sweden, Denmark, Norway, England, Poland, France, Australia, Austria, Holland, Japan, Italy, Belgium, the United States, New Zealand, Finland, Estonia, Uganda. I was thrilled to be able to reflect their experience, as midwives in company of women birthing. The play, which has at its core the question: "Who is there for the mother?" is as much about our potential as women as it is

about the realities of our lives — with the violence, sexual abuse, lack of respect and support for our work and the lives we bring into the world; it is about the wounds of all of us who have been born, wounds that begin from being cut off from this essential experience of birth.

As a playwright, a woman and a mother, I am so grateful to have attended this conference, to have been in the company of so many deeply beautiful women from around the world doing this important birth work. My life as an artist is given meaning by the work these women and men do daily — from attending women

at birth, to reeducating the public about the safety and value of women birthing where and with whom they choose to birth — to gathering stories and statistics which prove the dangers of a system based on fear and technology — to fighting for their own livelihoods as they are pushed out of the system by fearful and sometimes greedy obstetricians.

At the 3rd International Homebirth Conference in Stockholm, I began to feel that if more of all of us can bring ourselves back to birth — to that essential work that we, as women have been empowered to do; if we can return to that place of power, our voices will return to us, our senses will return to us, and we can begin to build a society that truly reflects our values of creating and nurturing. \*



**Agneta Bergenheim  
Swedish Midwife**

