

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

After a long hug and a series of giddy pictures holding the pregnancy test stick (later deleted because we agreed the association with pee was “kinda gross”), Emily gave me pause by saying that she wanted to give birth at home. She had mentioned this before, but I had only smiled and nodded in response, as if she had said something in a different language. Which, in a way, she had. Homebirth? Doula?

“But we don’t own our home,” I said, avoiding the point. “It’d be a rented-house-birth.”

“What’s with ‘owning a home’ these days?” Emily said. It’s true that it had been on my mind. We had just gotten married, and especially now with a child on the way, wasn’t a man supposed to provide? “It’s like some male version of the biological clock,” she said.



FURNISHING THE HOMEBIRTH

By Brian Goedde

After a long hug and a series of giddy pictures holding the pregnancy test stick (later deleted because we agreed the association with pee was “kinda gross”), Emily gave me pause by saying that she wanted to give birth at home. She had mentioned this before, but I had only smiled and nodded in response, as if she had said something in a different language. Which, in a way, she had. Homebirth? Doula?

“But we don’t own our home,” I said, avoiding the point. “It’d be a rented-house birth.”

“What’s with ‘owning a home’ these days?” Emily said. It’s true that it had been on my mind. We had just gotten married, and especially now with a child on the way, wasn’t a man supposed to provide? “It’s like some male version of the biological clock,” she said.

Touché. But a homebirth sounded like it would have a significant role for me, and no man was supposed to deliver a baby. Or... some of them were, but they’re called doctors. In hospitals. Where babies are born. Plus, what would we tell our landlord?

I didn’t really have an objection in principle—but in ignorance—and much of my resistance came from the fact that, for those like me who consider themselves to be open-minded and forward-thinking, it’s always disconcerting to discover your limit. The idea that birthing should happen in hospitals, however, was all-encompassing even to my progressive, my childhood bookshelf included those Mayla’s Where Did I Come From? the illustrated, “no-nonsense” explanation of sex, pregnancy and birth, published in 1971, a year after I was born. The section titled “The Birth Day” says, “nature starts things working to the right direction”—and this direction, when you turn the page, is to the hospital.

Emily and I found a compromise: the university hospital had a midwifery clinic. Emily had volunteered at a birth-center much like I’ve seen, which is where she learned about all of the options, from strange to birth tubs. The midwifery clinic’s philosophy was that “[a] natural birth in a comfortable environment is best for both mama and baby” which suited Emily—but across the hall was the universe of modern medicine, which suited me. I didn’t know anything about birth, but I trusted all that I had heard could go wrong, and I didn’t want anywhere near that kind of responsibility.

So we sat in a white-wash room flipping through pamphlets when I searched a midwife wearing a T-shirt that said, “U.S. Navy. We specialize in World Service.” We stood up, she walked right past me, introduced herself to Emily, and sat at the table in front of us. “Here a sec,” she said.

“Hi, I’m Brian,” I said, still standing, looking out my hand.

“Hi, Brian,” she said, shaking it lightly. I deflated into my chair. This is “mid-wifery.” I tried to tell myself, muttering “with women.” It’s not about me. But I couldn’t help thinking forward to the delivery day, when I’d want to be alongside Emily as something more than an out-of-glove piece of furniture. And why the Navy T-shirt, Admiral? Stop two post?

I don’t mean to be petty. I just didn’t want a bad first impression of the person who might be delivering my baby. That’s right, my baby. As she yammered on to Emily about all the tests she should get, I thought to myself: Wait a minute. I’m no bystander here. I’m the father. I want a role.

Wells later, Emily, a homebirth midwife, sat on the other side of a sleeping wagon in our living room. She wore a finely patterned cardigan, leather boots, and a nose piercing, which, as I peered at her, I got close enough to see was a tiny silver flower.

Early opened the discussion. “Um, what questions do you have about homebirth?”

Emily and she both looked at me. I unrolled my fears. What if she got in a car accident on the way here? (The doula would call one of the other midwives in the area, she said.) What if Emily goes into labor and she’s delivering a baby somewhere else? (It has never happened, because she plans for only two days per month, but if it were to happen, again, there’s a network of midwives that can be called on.) What if... God forbid... something was going wrong with the birth? (This has happened, Emily said, carefully though only a couple times in more than ten years of practice. “We’d all get in the ambulance and go to the hospital, twenty minutes away.) Or... is this legal? (Yes. Certified Nurse Midwives like her are permitted to deliver at home.) What if Emily is screaming and a neighbor calls the cops? (Kathy answers the doorbell, and the police don’t have a reason to get further involved.)

“You also wondered what you’d wear to the birth tub,” Emily chimed in from the couch, busily suppressing her snick.

“Up to you,” Kathy said flatly.

I told Kathy I wanted an active role in the birth, but—I had to say it—I didn’t want to deliver to baby. Kathy nodded her head and smiled it out. As the midwife, she is completely responsible for the baby and the mother. As Emily’s partner, my job is to support Emily to do everything she can. The doula, whom Emily and I also choose, is there to support us all—including me.

Someone to help me? It was all I needed to hear. Dear is.

The only time Kathy caught me off guard was when she said that childbirth was “beautiful.” I had never thought of it that way, and it made me think of how I had been imagining this moment, this genesis of my own family. Yes, there was beauty in the idea of Emily and I having a child, but I had only been terrified of the event.

10 | puffinbinderjournal.org 2012 10

10 | puffinbinderjournal.org 20

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

[Appearing in Issue #34. Order A Copy Today](#)

Touché. But a homebirth sounded like it would have a significant role for me, and no man was supposed to deliver no baby. Or—some of them were, but they're called doctors. In hospitals. Where babies are born. Plus, what would we tell our landlady?

I didn't really have an objection in principle —just in ignorance—and much of my resistance came from the fact that, for those like me who consider themselves to be open-minded and forward-thinking, it's always disconcerting to discover your limit. The idea that births should happen in hospitals, however, was elemental even to my progressivism. My childhood bookshelf included Peter Mayle's *Where Did I Come From?*, the illustrated, "no-nonsense" explanation of sex, pregnancy and birth, published in 1977, a year after I was born. The section titled "The Birth Day" says, "nature starts things moving in the right direction"—and this direction, when you turn the page, is to the hospital.

Emily and I found a compromise: the university hospital had a midwifery clinic. Emily had volunteered at a birth center much like it years ago, which is where she learned about all of the options, from stirrups to birth tubs. The midwifery clinic's philosophy was that "[a] natural birth in a comfortable environment is best for both mama and baby," which suited Emily—but across the hall was the universe of modern medicine, which suited me. I didn't know anything about birth, but I feared all that I had heard could go wrong, and I didn't want anywhere near that kind of responsibility.

Soon we sat in a white exam room flipping through pamphlets when in marched a midwife wearing a T-shirt that said, "U.S. Navy: We Specialize in World Service!" We stood up. She walked right past me, introduced herself to Emily, and sat at the table in front of us. "Have a seat," she said.

"Hi, I'm Brian," I said, still standing, holding out my hand.

"Hi, Brian," she said, shaking it limply.

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

I deflated into my chair. This is “mid-wifery,” I tried to tell myself, meaning “with woman.” It’s not about me. Yet I couldn’t help flashing forward to the delivery day, when I’d want to be alongside Emily as something more than an out-of-place piece of furniture. And why the Navy T-shirt, Admiral? Hup-two-push?

I don’t mean to be catty. I just didn’t want a bad first impression of the person who might be delivering my baby. That’s right: my baby. As she yammered on (to Emily) about all the tests she should get, I thought to myself, Wait a minute. I’m no bystander here. I’m the father. I want a role.

Weeks later, Kathy, a homebirth midwife, sat on the other side of a steeping teapot in our living room. She wore a finely patterned cardigan, leather boots, and a nose piercing, which, as I poured us tea, I got close enough to see was a tiny silver flower.

Kathy opened the discussion. “So, what questions do you have about homebirth?”

Emily and she both looked at me.

I unloaded my fears. What if she got in a car accident on the way here? (The doula would call one of the other midwives in the area, she said.) What if Emily goes into labor and she’s delivering a baby somewhere else? (It has never happened, because she plans for only two due dates per month, but if it were to happen, again, there is a network of midwives that can be called on.) What if—God forbid—something was going wrong with the birth? (This has happened, Kathy said candidly, though only a couple times in more than ten years of practice. We’d all get in the ambulance and go to the hospital, twenty minutes away.) Oh—is this legal? (Yes. Certified Nurse Midwives like her are permitted to deliver at home.) What if Emily is screaming and a neighbor calls the cops? (Kathy answers the doorbell, and the police don’t have a reason to get further involved.)

“You also wondered what you’d wear in the birth tub,” Emily chimed in from the couch, barely suppressing her smirk.

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

“Up to you,” Kathy said flatly.

I told Kathy I wanted an active role in the birth, but— I had to say it—I didn’t want to deliver no baby. Kathy nodded her head and spelled it out: As the midwife, she is completely responsible for the baby and the mother. As Emily’s partner, my job is to support Emily, to do everything she says. The doula, whom Emily and I also choose, is there to support us all—including me.

Someone to help me? It was all I needed to hear. I was in.

The only time Kathy caught me off guard was when she said that childbirth was “beautiful.” I had never thought of it that way, and it made me think of how I had been imagining this moment, this genesis of my own family. Yes, there was beauty in the idea of Emily and I having a child, but I had only been terrified of the event that would bring it. Kathy offered a different perspective, one that was instantly transformational. She was the first person to make Emily feel confident and excited about her labor, and, though some of my fears and reservations still lingered (who exactly are all these “other midwives”?), I started to look forward to the beautiful birth myself.

Before long I got a gift in the mail from Emily’s friend Ellen: grey swim shorts to wear in the birth tub with a multi-colored, sparkly-sequined “GO TEAM GOEDDE” embroidered on the butt.

Other friends and family members were less amused. One of my oldest friends called to tell me about a birth he had recently heard about, in which, as he put it, “If they hadn’t been in the hospital, both the mom and the baby could have died.” He knew nothing else about the birth—breech, ruptured placenta, umbilical cord prolapse?— beyond this comment, which was “I think from the doctor.” How could I possibly respond? I couldn’t say it wouldn’t happen to us—whatever “it” was. Being on the defensive is awful when you’re not even sure what you’re defending yourself against. The only position I could take was to say we’re proceeding as planned in the face of this clear and obvious danger.

My mother was diplomatic in her objection: “They make birth rooms [in hospitals] really nice now, you know.” I described for her our visit to the midwifery clinic, but she was unmoved. She then described for me the birth of my younger sister, where there was “poop in the birth canal,” and once they discovered this, a c-section “got her right out.” Again, we were facing clear and

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

obvious danger, and I didn't know how to respond. "I just don't want to worry," my mom said, always her bottom line.

A coworker of mine, herself a mother of two, was less diplomatic: "Emily's crazy if she wants to do it without drugs." Again, I had no response.

On this note, my dad asked, "What's the greatest amount of pain she's ever had?"

"Well, she broke her arm when she was a kid," I said, "but that's a different kind of pain."

I was ready for this one. Emily and I had been going to a birth class that supported homebirth; the instructor, Monica, an unflaggingly calm and cheerful Ph.D. student in women's studies, had become our doula. I described for my dad the pain management exercise we did in class: gripping ice cubes at the rate and length of time of contractions. The purpose was to prepare for the experience, I told him, to strategize how to trust yourself to cope with the intensity when it comes.

Childbirth may not be like breaking your arm, but I also felt silly comparing it to making my hand really, really cold. "Look, this is something Emily wants to do," I said, hoping to establish our bottom line.

It could be hard to hold our ground, especially because sometimes I didn't know where our ground even was. One night we went to the public library for a screening of *The Business of Being Born*, a documentary that excoriates standard hospital practices and applauds the "homebirth movement." In rows of stackable plastic chairs, over the din of kids crawling on their parents, we watched one startling fact, figure and testimony after another, both of successful homebirths and of hospital births that began well but quickly went down the slippery slope of drugs and other interventions, ending in caesarian-section deliveries.

It was gratifying to feel our homebirth plan so supported, but I also found myself beginning to resist my allies. In the discussion that followed the movie, one mother said she gave birth in a mountain lake and an admiring "ooh" rose from the crowd. I thought, Hold on. Was this some

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

kind of competition? Who among us has had the most natural birth? Why don't we ask who among us has the most natural, most pure baby? And do we really have to vilify c-sections as some kind of failure or injustice?

On this last point, however, I could have just been feeling touchy. After all, they were talking about my mom.

As part of our birth class, Monica assigned us to ask our parents for a complete and unabridged story of our own births. Some of us had a few details—I had known I was born by c-section—but no one knew much. Now that we were about to give birth, Monica asked, wouldn't we be interested to know how we came into the world? For every person who ever lived, there is a unique birth story. Imagine it, and wonder why we don't know more of them, Monica said, a feminist critique clearly implied. It was one of those thoughts that changed the way I passed people on the sidewalk, at least for a day or so. For every person you see, a woman labored.

My parents lived in Flagstaff, Arizona, but wanted me to be born 2½ hours south at the Edgar Cayce Clinic, a medical practice based on the teachings of the psychic by the same name. My doctor was Dr. Gladys McGarey, an M.D. who thought of herself as more of a "healer" than a doctor, and who practiced nontraditional, nonwestern, homeopathic healthcare. As Mom wrote me, McGarey had told my parents that she'd like to "wrap [my] mind, body and soul together with her hands and a prayer" after I was born. Mom's prenatal care involved herbal teas, and she labored in the clinic with acupuncture needles across her belly.

Despite their plans, as Mom's e-mail said, "a cesarean was decided." By whom? She doesn't say. My dad's e-mail elaborated. (They've long been divorced, so wrote the accounts separately.) The acupuncture as pain relief wasn't working enough, Dad wrote, so Mom had requested an epidural block. Then:

[Dr. McGary] spoke with me in the hall and said that you were just too big to get through the birth canal, and Karen was then just too tired to push anymore, and of course nobody had slept in a while. So the doctor advised that the stress of pushing on you and Karen was getting risky for everyone's health and she needed the okay for her decision to proceed with a cesarean delivery.

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

My dad had to stay out in the hall, he said, and my mom said she was “out cold” for the procedure. Did I get my prayer?

I had known that I was born by c-section, but until recently c-sections to me had a neutral meaning. It was just one way that people came into the world. (When I was younger I thought it meant I had some bragging rights because I was born the same way Caesar was.) Now that a cesarean has become something Emily vehemently does not want to have, my birth story read to me as a cautionary tale: *You can write the birth plan, it said, but don't think you're writing the birth story.*

In Emily's eighth month of pregnancy she realized something wasn't right. The walls in our bedroom and the office-turned-nursery were scratched and smudged from the former renters. The following weekend, one month before the due date, our landlady and I were pushing our furniture out of the rooms and mixing the squash-yellow paint.

“So,” she said, rolling paint on the wall behind me, “are you having the baby at the U. hospital?” Uh-oh.

“Actually, we're having it here.” I couldn't bear to turn around. “With a midwife and a doula.” I hoped to sound like I knew what I was talking about—which, by this point, I did. More or less.

“Oh really,” she said, whooshing her paint roller up the wall.

“It's legal,” I was ready to say, but the moment passed. Whew.

“Leave it all here,” she said upon leaving. “I'll come back Wednesday to paint the trim.”

On Wednesday at noon I got a call at work. “My water broke?” Emily said. “I called Kathy....” Her throat was tightening. “I'm scared,” she could barely say.

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

I dashed home to a puffy- and wide-eyed Emily sitting on a towel in front of the computer, canceling the classes she was scheduled to teach that day and the appointments she was scheduled to have. She turned to me. "I think we might have to go to the hospital."

"What did Kathy say?"

"It's up to me." At 36 weeks the baby is probably just early, Kathy said, but if Emily felt like something could be wrong, she would meet us at the hospital.

"Do you think something's wrong?"

Emily stared past me, looking inward, her hands on her belly. "No."

"Then why not here?" I was surprised to hear myself say it.

We both looked into the room. All the furniture was still crammed in the middle of our one-bedroom house.

My active role in Emily's labor had begun. While she called Kathy back I threw the drop cloths and paint buckets into the basement, swung the 7-foot ladder through the house (and over Emily) and back into the garage, and shoved all the furniture roughly back into place. I called our landlady, got her voicemail, and hoped to heaven she'd get my message before showing up in her paintsplattered sweatpants.

"I need you to go to the hardware store," Emily said.

"The hardware store?"

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

“For the birth tub.” She gave me a quick kiss and a list: hose, faucet adapter, tarp, pump. “Drive carefully.”

I’m not the handiest guy around the house—my toolbox doubles as the kitchen junk drawer—but I have never before felt like such an idiot at Ace Hardware. While my wife was in labor I was in the hoses aisle wondering, “Do I need the 12- or 25-footer? Better too long than too short, I guess.” I then grabbed the biggest tarp they had and all the faucet adapters they had to offer, thinking one of them must work, but I came to a halt in front of the pumps.

A baby-faced employee in an Ace Is the Place! vest ambled down the aisle.

“Can I help you find something?”

“Um, a pump.”

“What’s it for?”

Well, see, my wife’s giving birth in the living room.... No. “I’m not really sure,” I said, truthfully.

He looked puzzled. “Just something for around the house?”

“Yes! For around the house.”

He handed me the most versatile (most expensive) pump and off I went.

The pump never left the bag. When I got back Emily had already gone, as Monica affectionately

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40

called it, “to labor land.” She swayed, squatted, crawled and moaned with me close behind, trying to give confident encouragement but getting increasingly anxious for Monica or Kathy to arrive. It was now 3 p.m. Emily’s labor was progressing far faster than anyone expected it would. “I need to poop,” Emily suddenly said. I let her have her privacy.

“No—I need to push! I can’t—Where’s Kathy?!”

“She’ll get here,” I said to the bathroom door, desperate to believe so myself, “and if not, I’ll deliver the baby!”

Emily didn’t respond, thankfully, and this bluff was never called. Moments later Monica rushed in—I have never been so relieved to see a person in all my life— soon followed by Kathy. We moved to the bed, me at Emily’s side and Monica sitting behind her for support. For about a half-hour Emily alternated between deep meditation and wide-mouth screams—monk, rock star, monk, rock star. It was awesome. Then Kathy asked me if I wanted to catch the baby, and I didn’t think twice: Two pushes later Theo arrived, glossy and quivering, startled but not disturbed, cradled in my outstretched hands.

“Bring the baby to Mom,” Kathy said, her hands still under mine. Emily reached out to us, and all in the house gave way to the peaceful, blissful rapture of tending to the newborn.

We wiped Theo off, weighed him in (6 lbs. 11 oz.), wrapped him up, and put on his white stocking cap that was improbably teeny until that moment. We took a series of giddy pictures (all of these ones saved), made sure he could “latch on” to nurse, and I took the inaugural load of laundry down to the basement. Kathy and Monica told us to call them at any hour, for any reason, and after making plans to return the next morning, they left.

I then called my parents to tell them the news—and the story.

Furnishing the Homebirth

Written by Brian Goedde

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 07:40



[Article Discussion Order Pathways to Family Wellness](#) magazine, Issue #34.