

Candles Not Required

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I am not the product of hippie parents and I don't consider myself righteous. I am not an atheist, a liberal, or a neofeminist. I am not crazy nor am I from Mars. Yet these are typical assumptions people make when I tell them that my child was born at home. Intentionally.

I did not have the baby in the dead of winter, in some remote locale, alone and stark naked. I did not light candles, play new age music, chant to a birth goddess, or have a séance. I did not have my baby while hugging a tree or squatting in a rice paddy (not that there is anything wrong with the those scenarios). I simply labored, delivered, and birthed at my home.

This may not be not earth-shattering news to you, fair reader, but the reactions I have received from others have ranged from shock and disgust, to awe and praise—and to downright rudeness. More than once, I have been called a martyr.

But the most common response to my homebirth has been the simple question of "Why?"

Good question.

Let me explain.

When I found out I was pregnant, I was at ground zero with knowledge of birth, labor, and hospital rules. It was evident that I knew how to get pregnant, but beyond that, I really had no awareness of how the blessed event worked and what our country's system of maternal care entailed.

I am talking nothing.

Nada. Zilch. Niente, my friend.

At ground zero, I was unsure of what to expect. So I did what I thought I was supposed to do. After visiting the obstetrician, I got a copy of the only pregnancy book I had ever seen or heard about, and read up on what to expect, now that I was indeed expecting.

I dove right into that first book—but the more of it I read, the more I continually felt unsatisfied with its condescending tones and shallow reassurances. I just couldn't get into it and thought that there must be something wrong with me. I thought I was supposed to read the book and then, knowing know exactly what to expect, I'd be cool, calm, and collected. But that wasn't happening and my first trimester was quickly drawing to an end.

What was happening was that I was bombarded with new words, phrases, and concepts from obstetricians, family, and friends. Words such as episiotomy, breastfeeding, and hospital protocol appeared time and time again.

Let's backup here a minute: Epis-i-what-omy? Never heard of it. But, I had heard that sometimes doctors cut the area between where one goes number one and number two. (I later learned that that area in fact has a name. It is called the perineum. Pronouncing it is another thing: is it pur-en-ee-um or para-nee-um? Got me.). The whole idea of getting cut down there did not sound appealing, no matter what the circumstance, and I didn't think I wanted an episiotomy anytime soon.

But I digress.

Back to ground zero and new words.

Breastfeeding? A million questions came to mind. How does it work? How long does one breastfeed? Am I comfortable enough with myself to actually let my mammary glands be used for their primary purpose? Because up until now, they have only been used in one capacity (you know, the capacity that got me in the family way in the first place).

And how about all this hospital jargon? What is going on here? Why is it every time I ask one of the OB's a question about what happens in the hospital, I feel like I am the stupidest woman to ever become pregnant or that I am intentionally insulting the world of obstetrics? Why is it that I wait nearly an hour for a seven minute visit with the OB—and why is she always so tense and impersonal?

So I set aside the book that was failing to reassure me and my expectations, and picked up some other books I had never heard of (which of course isn't saying a whole lot because up until this point, I had never read anything about pregnancy).

The authors of these books did not hold back on their experiences, be they good, bad, and even ugly. They talked candidly of their pregnancies, doctor visits, labors, births, and postpartum periods. Some even talked of midwives.

My brain backtracked: Midwives? Mid-whats? Mid-whos? What exactly is a midwife? Aren't they the women who only deliver babies for the Amish? Don't they wear long, homemade skirts, with their waist-length hair held in place by a bandana? And aren't they all strict organic vegetarians? Don't they all light candles and chant during birth and encourage you to become one with your inner goddess? Again, at this point, remember, I am at ground zero, so forgive my shameful ignorance.

Curiosity and interest kept me reading about the world of midwives. The more I learned about them, the more I thought, why don't OB's just do what the midwives do?

In a nutshell, the midwives used little, if any, medical interventions, depending on where the birth took place. They relied on Mother Nature to take its course and trusted that birth worked and was safe for mommy and baby. The midwives have just as good if not better birth outcomes than the OB's to boot. For whatever reason, that sat well with me.

So, sticking with what made sense in my brain, which may not mean a whole lot to anyone else, I continued to read up on the midwives. The more I read about the midwives, the more I kept coming across an entirely new idea: homebirth.

Homebirth? Why would any woman have a baby at home? Didn't enlightened, modern women just win some big fight with hospitals and insurance companies for the right to remain in the hospital for more than twenty-four hours after the birth of their baby? Weren't they all up in arms because they were being discharged too soon? Again, why would anyone stay at home to have a baby? I was confused, yet intrigued.

Intrigue led me to the library to get more books out about home and natural childbirth. Intrigue also led me to websites and magazines dedicated to natural family living, which of course, I never knew existed. All the while, I continued with my OB visits for prenatal care. I had ultrasounds, genetic testing, weigh-ins, blood work, and expertly mastered the fine art of peeing in a cup with a belly the size of a watermelon. My last trimester was about to begin.

As I entered my last trimester, I felt armed with more knowledge than I ever thought I would have concerning the world of maternal care, homebirth, hospital procedures, labor, and birth. I had read nearly three-dozen books, numerous websites, and magazines out the wah-zoo. I felt informed, educated, and enlightened. Who would have known what this new literary world of motherhood entailed?! Certainly not I.

Feeling informed and confident of all I had learned, I had some questions in mind for my OB at the seven-month visit. Upon deciding that I wanted a natural childbirth, I innocently asked her about her thoughts on all I had been learning: the midwives, homebirth, medical interventions, hospital protocols, episiotomy, and cesarean rates (I now knew what these words meant and I wasn't afraid to use them). I expressed my wishes for a natural childbirth experience, free of unnecessary medical interventions, to her. I thought she would be supportive, understanding, encouraging and perhaps even give me a big, burly, bear hug while smiling proudly from ear to ear.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Boy, was I wrong.

How could I have been so wrong? Or better yet, how could I have been so naïve?

Her face flushed, her spine straightened, and a blood vessel appeared at her temple and pulsed with vigor. She forced a sour smile on her face and told me that if I didn't want to take advantage of modern medical technology, that I should hire a lay midwife and have my baby at home. She then went on to explain to me, step by step, what happens when I enter the hospital in the throes of labor.

To say I was shocked at her reaction is only the half of it. I felt like a balloon deflating as she rambled on about hospital gowns, IV's, fetal heart monitors, emergency c-sections, episiotomies, and paperwork. Her voice faded into the background as she continued dictating what her service and a hospital birth entailed.

My face went flush, my back slouched, and my heart sank. This wasn't what I wanted. This felt all wrong. I felt like I'd gone out to buy a new Jeep and had somehow ended up leaving with a beat-up Yugo. Not one thing about any of this made sense to me. I thought she would be my biggest cheerleader but I slowly realized I was on the rival squad.

Up until that point, I didn't know where I went wrong. Then it came to me. I was asking her to view birth as a normal and natural event, something I had come to believe in seven months time. But she was a medical doctor. An obstetrician. She believed that pregnancy and birth are to be treated as medical conditions that need medical supervision and intervention. We were on different ends of the spectrum that starts with a pregnancy test stick.

It dawned on me that if I was viewing birth as normal and natural, rather than a medical event, I needed a birth attendant who agreed with me. That meant I had to find a midwife.

I checked with all the area hospitals on my insurance plan to find a certified nurse-midwife with whom I could deliver my baby. But I quickly discovered that there were no certified nurse-midwives working in any hospital within an hour drive. Being a first time mom, I could not imagine the pain of contractions, let alone being confined inside a car for an hour while I experienced them. A one-hour drive on a pleasant, sunny day, free of traffic, during labor seemed bad enough. Factor in that my due date was in the dead of a Northeast Ohio winter and that one-hour drive could easily stretch into four hours courtesy of snow, sleet, or freezing rain. Labor, in a car, in winter, for who knows how long? No thank you.

It was clear to me that I would not be having my baby in a hospital with an OB or nurse-midwife, so I moved on to investigate another setting. A birthing center.

A friend suggested I call the only birthing center in the entire state, the Amish Birthing Center, to see if I could have my baby there. Call the Amish Birthing Center? I thought the Amish didn't use phones? But, again, I digress. Ironically enough I learned that there was a phone at the Center so I gave them a holler.

Consequently, I also learned that one does indeed have to be Amish to birth at the Amish Birthing Center. Go figure. Being that there were no other birth centers in the state, I was down to my last choice: homebirth.

I was given the name and phone number of a lay midwife by one of the Amish women. I gave her a call and learned that she did deliver babies for the Amish on occasion, but she also attended homebirths for secular women like me. In addition, she heads up an organization called "The Home Birth Option."

Wait a second: option? What option? There were options in pregnancy and birth and having a homebirth was one of them? Well, hot damn! I was learning something new every day.

At the suggestion of the midwife, I attended a Home Birth Options meeting. I met and listened to women who had had breech births, multiple births, and anywhere from one to eight children of their own, all at home. Yes, I repeat: eight children. Although I don't personally aspire to have eight kids, I

couldn't help but wonder how the hell this woman did it. Come to find out, she was the midwife I had spoken to on the phone.

My preconceived notions of midwives couldn't have been more wrong. The midwife didn't have long hair and I saw no bandana. She didn't wear an ankle-length skirt or look like a hippie lingering around from the days of love and peace, man. There were no candles anywhere. Instead, she had bobbed hair and wore jeans and a cute mocked turtleneck. And, I later discovered she drove a minivan and ate fast food. The horror!

I also discovered that she had delivered nearly five hundred babies in twenty years, all at home. Her statistics and outcomes were excellent and most importantly, she viewed childbirth as normal and natural. This just might work I thought.

From the start, everything was different with her. Prenatal visits took place in my home or hers and lasted for an hour or more as opposed to the endless shuffling which took place at the OB's office. I still received all of the same basic checks as at the OB's office, and I no longer had to pee in a cup (I had advanced to peeing on a pH stick, which was much easier as less aim was required).

I got to know the midwife and she got to know me. In the two short months prior to my birth, I felt more comfortable and at ease with her than I had been with the six OB's at the two practices I tried out in my quest for a birth attendant who was supportive of my desire for a natural childbirth.

To say that things were ducky and all was well would be a lie. I still felt nervous about actually giving birth, but I felt confident in the birth attendant I had chosen. Being that I was healthy and low-risk, I knew that I could have a natural childbirth, free of unnecessary medical interventions, at home, safely and normally. It was the last thing I ever thought I would do when that purple plus sign appeared on that stick of life.

Armed with confidence, knowledge, (or was it blissful ignorance?) and a supportive birth attendant, I patiently awaited the arrival of my first child. My due date came and went, as did week forty-one, and forty-one and half of my pregnancy.

Twelve days past my official due date, I felt my first contraction. Thirty-four hours after that, my daughter was born.

To go into a thirty-four hour blow-by-blow about the experience is fruitless (or perhaps even boring or gross). For me, birth simply is what it is: a twisted, humbling, challenging, empowering path, which Mother Nature has designed and prepared me for perfectly.

The question as to "why" I chose a homebirth is not astounding to me. Rather, it is simple: after exploring my options, I decided I wanted to give my baby and I the best natural childbirth experience I could. That was paramount for me. What I wanted could not be found where I was looking and I chose to look elsewhere.

So think of me as you may. Be it martyr, fruitcake, anti-establishment chick, or hippie-wanna-be. I prefer to consider myself a woman who found what she was looking for in the last place she looked: right at home.

Consequently, I also found out that while having a homebirth, chanting is optional, new age music is your choice, and candles are not required.

Jenna Hull is an aspiring writer and lives in Northeast Ohio. Her family includes a daughter, son and faithful dog- turned- doula, which slept for two days after her daughter was born.