

Home—Our Birth Right

by Judy Edmunds, CPM

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In April, a new North American territory achieved formal recognition. Comprised of vast tracts of sub-arctic tundra and snowy north Atlantic and Arctic islands, Nunavut becomes Canada's largest but most sparsely populated territory. About 85 percent of the 25,000 inhabitants are Inuit. Nunavut means "Our Land" in Inuktitut, the official language. The Canadian government, honoring a unique culture with distinctive needs and values, has agreed to support the fledgling territory both financially and ideologically. Its leaders are new to politics and acknowledge they have much to overcome, yet they proudly state they are primed for the challenge.

The nationally televised inaugural ceremonies were a banquet of poetic speeches, document signing, song, dance, and hoop drumming. Even the most frail community elders were afforded dignity and respect. The audience quieted quickly as an aged matriarch spoke low and slowly in clipped monotones before shuffling over to sign the declaration. Three ancient women with weathered faces formed a little circle on the left rear corner of the stage. Enrobed thickly in colorful cloth, skins, and furs and adorned with bone beads, they began moving in a circle, intoning a rhythmic Inuktitut chant. Out front on the right came a large, round woman—young, with long dark hair, dressed in shiny white skins, tied about with dark cords at her breasts and belly. She stood off by herself, rocking gently in time with the elders' chant. In the middle, between them, another strong-looking woman came forward and began to sing. She gave honor to that which had gone before—motioning back to the three old women chanting softly—and that which was ahead—turning toward the younger one. The singer and the large woman moved to face each other and pressed their bodies close in a strikingly intimate pose. While the elders maintained their chant in the background, the two younger women broke into a loud, panting, moaning, breathy chorus—not quite erotic, yet deeply sensual, powerful, and mysterious. I imagined the governmental dignitaries watching in the audience, blushing and shifting nervously in their seats.

The scene was as immediately familiar as a recent dream; too personal to be shown under these bright lights, yet too compelling for any to dare look away. Electrifying! I recognized it instantly in my heart as a birth dance.

The performance captured labor's essence perfectly. In celebration of their people's triumph, they openly shared this beautiful, sacred song unflinchingly with the rest of the nation. Nunavut was born! "Our Land," our place, our home. For decades the Inuits had struggled toward this homecoming, where their language and ways would be fully honored. Their obvious joy and relief in this accomplishment was exhilarating.

Across the world, even as this event occurred, the dark upheaval in Kosovo was taking place. Families, driven out of their communities, surged into a forlorn sea of distraught refugees. A number of fleeing women gave birth in terror on the road. Tragedy was everywhere. Interviewed by journalists, young and old alike shared one common refrain: "I just want to go home." Even in the face of fear and hostility, returning home remained an essential goal.

This need for a place of our own is at the core of our being—a place where we can be ourselves, where we're understood and accepted just as we are, where we feel safe and secure. A haven, our sanctuary. The place where we "kick off our shoes" and "let our hair down." The specifics may be different for everyone, but the imperative is the same. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and Toto had to travel far and see many things to realize, "there's no place like home." It is the stuff of myth and legend because the concept of "home" is a central, enduring truth in our lives.

Just like Dorothy, young families may have various adventures with living arrangements before they find what they like and put down roots. As their family grows and matures, they accrue shared memories, which often deepen the bond to their home. Many see the world as becoming more frenzied and chaotic; thus increasingly, people are "cocooning," retreating to the comfort of their homes for family and social activity. More and more people are also choosing to stay home to work. Feng shui, emphasizing the significance of harmonious arrangement of one's surroundings, is gaining enormous popularity, as many place increasing importance on their home's contribution to their emotional fulfillment and spiritual well being.

As a homebirth midwife, I'm intrigued by the relationship individuals have with their place of residence. This interest is crucial. We will share some very powerful moments there.

One learns much by visiting another's home, and this goes way beyond a dietary assessment based on what's in the fridge. Is it dirty and messy, casually cluttered, meticulously decorated, or austere? What kind of books, toys, music, and sacred objects are preferred? What is valued the most? Is the prominent form of entertainment active or passive? Are the curtains opaque and occlusive, perhaps highlighting a special need for privacy, or are windows uncovered? Does the home's presentation area focus on pictures of extended family or instead highlight professional and intellectual achievements? Do the people who live there keep pets? Are they shy about certain areas of their house, or do they eagerly offer you a tour? Observations such as these speak volumes, allowing a midwife to sensitively tailor care to individual circumstances.

Everyone is generally more relaxed and confident in familiar territory. We readily acknowledge this provides a "homecourt advantage" for sports teams, and this principle proves true for most birthing teams as well. Since the star player is the laboring woman, I want her to feel relaxed, confident, and secure—on her common ground. From there, we go the distance in beautifying her surroundings so that she feels nurtured and emotionally content. We use candlelight, fragrant oils, soothing music, a favorite blanket, treats, and so on, drawing upon what was learned of her preferences during earlier conversations and observations.

Where in her home will she most likely have the baby? Although limited space governs some decisions, usually we have a choice. In Carlos Casteneda's earliest writings about Don Juan, import was given to finding one's "power-place." The location of this spot was diligently searched out so he could return there to draw courage in times of need. Birth is such a time. A pregnant woman really needs to carefully consider where she feels most creative, relaxed, energized, and "grounded." The same sort of consideration should apply to the people she invites. Encourage her to eliminate any who cannot appreciate her unique beauty or who fail to bring out her very best. It is her land, her place, her home. Each one-of-a-kind birth drama deserves full respect.

Conversely, when the deeply personal and unique sacred rituals of birth are overlooked, such as in a busy clinical setting, much richness is lost. If the woman must leave her place of courage and comfort, her birth dance is often subtly tinged with sadness and fear. This is seldom noticed, however, among those who do not regularly experience the awesomeness of births that incorporate all these elements and thus lack such a point of reference.

For the Inuit, a paternalistic government assumed they would prefer to be flown out to "safer" surroundings of big city hospitals far from home. Stripped of power, those left behind waited anxiously for news. Separation caused grief and suffering among families and weakened bonds. It took strong, determined native midwives to restore the continuity of birth and family care back to their community.

A less drastic form of this social disruption continues daily in the United States. Not even one percent of babies are welcomed directly into the home and into surroundings of what their parents consider important. While it is necessary to have access to high-tech obstetrical care in some instances, most women derive no benefit from such expensive medical attention. Realistically, it is unlikely that 99 percent

of women would identify their personal "power-place" as being on a hospital labor ward if they gave it any thought. Yet that is where they end up giving birth, swayed by reimbursement considerations, inadequate information about and access to skilled homebirth midwifery care, or simply coerced by the relentless "what ifs" of worried onlookers tearing down their courage and resolve.

For some, this is no big deal. Maybe their home is not such a happy place, or they are just not very attached. Others will actually appreciate and get good use out of the hospital amenities. Yet for a significant number, this will be a precious opportunity lost. They will look back on their experience and feel confused by a deep longing that doesn't go away. For their sakes, perhaps more of us can work harder to distribute Dorothy's marvelous ruby slippers to all healthy pregnant women, complete with instructions to tap their heels three times and repeat, "There's no place like home, no place like home..."

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