

INTRODUCTION TO PRENATAL PSYCHOLOGY

by

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'The history of man for nine months preceding his birth would, probably, be far more interesting, and contain events of greater moment, than all the threescore and ten years that follow it.' Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The History of Prenatal Psychology

Many cultures have had an inherent awareness that the time we spend in the womb is of critical importance, not only in terms of our physical development, but also in terms of our psycho-spiritual development. Indeed, many cultures have myths and other stories of how the foetus is protected by a variety of angels, guardian spirits and other beings. The following is taken from the Jewish Midrashim (rabbinical teachings of the Middle Ages):

"Before a child is born, a radiant light shines above her head that sees from one end of the universe to the other. While the foetus grows in the womb, an angel named Lailah tells her all about the history of her soul and advises her as to the rewards and punishments that might ensue depending on how she lives her life. Just before the birth, however, the angel Lailah lightly touches the foetus on the upper lip. At that moment, the light vanishes completely, and the child is born in complete ignorance of her origins and destiny"¹

Many cultures also developed specific practices that were followed by a couple prior to conception, and then by the mother throughout her pregnancy, in order to provide the optimum conditions for the healthy development of the foetus.

In the west, the understanding of the effects of prenatal life on the individual has largely been seen through the eyes of the reductionist paradigm. In other words, the embryo/foetus/infant was typically seen as too small or undeveloped to be adversely affected by its experience, and would certainly be unable to remember them.

"I was assured by neurologists that the nervous system of the baby was such that it was out of the question that any memory to do with birth could be reliably recorded as fact. I relayed my incredulity to my patients, and, as always happens in such cases, they tended thereafter to suppress what I was evidently unprepared, for so-called scientific reasons, to believe."

Frank Lake, Clinical Theology

¹ From: The Genius within us – Psychospiritual guidance during pre-and perinatal development and its connection to human potential after birth by Thomas Armstrong. APPPAH Journal 14 (3-4).

Classical psychoanalysis considered the formative phase for the development of a child's personality as the time from birth to age five or six. In the early twentieth century, Freud even stated "All anxiety goes back originally to the anxiety at birth". One of Freud's closest disciples, Otto Rank, took this original concept, and with the intention of clarifying it further, published a book in 1924 entitled "The Trauma of Birth". This led to Rank ultimately being ostracised by his peers and by Freud himself, who saw his ideas as threatening to the core of psychoanalysis. This was the first time that the birth process had been given a priority in the causation of both psycho-emotional and physical disorders.

Another psychologist and patient of Rank's, Nandor Fodor, developed these ideas further. He went further than Rank and emphasised the importance of the prenatal period as well as birth. He specifically focused on how adverse life experiences from these early periods are reflected in dreams. He was also one of the first practitioners to design specific interventions to help resolve and process the effects of early trauma.

Francis Mott, a student of Fodor's, took this awareness one step further and was able to trace the impact of events and the origins of consciousness back to conception. He also further developed Fodor's work in dream interpretation.

In the 1950's, Frank Lake, a medical missionary and psychotherapist who was strongly influenced by Mott, began using LSD in his clinical regressions with patients. Through this work, and through later work influenced by the bioenergetic tradition of Wilhelm Reich, Lake discovered that clients would regress to traumatic experiences in their birth, or to even earlier during their time in the womb.

*"What we...have become firmly convinced about, is the vulnerability of the foetus to all that is going on in the mother, particularly in the first trimester. Affliction in its worst forms strikes in the first three months after conception...Any severe maternal distress, whatever its cause, imprints itself on the foetus. These damaging experiences are now accessible to consciousness without undue difficulty."*²

A number of other researchers, working at the same time as Lake, also encountered spontaneous prenatal and birth memories arising in clients and have contributed significantly to this growing body of work. They included the Czech-American psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, Donald Winnicott, psychologist R.D. Laing, and the founder of Primal Therapy Arthur Janov.

From these early roots, there has been an explosion of interest in the psychology of the embryo, and early memories. This interest has been in a number of different areas. For example, the physicist Karl Pribram, who pioneered a holographic understanding of the brain, wrote the following:

² Frank Lake, Tight Corners in Pastoral Counselling

*"The holograms of cellular memory are still broadcasting from infinitesimally small, but collectively audible transmitting stations. These minute radio stations belong to successive periods of development, from conception to implantation and the developmental stages of pregnancy. It seems they are still transmitting and it is possible to tune into them."*³

Simon House, in pondering the intimate connection between foetus and mother states the following:

*"However it happens, it is a wonder that echoes chaos theory. Even in one single-cell zygote, a "butterfly's wings", as it were, can be so disturbed as to cause a "storm" in a trillion-cell human being decades later."*⁴

In the 1970's, William Emerson, a psychotherapist, began his exploration of prenatal and perinatal psychology through his own. Emerson studied with Frank Lake, and drawing on a number of different disciplines, both psychological and somatic, he has become one of the leading world authorities in this area, and particularly in the field of early trauma resolution.

"There is a common perception that the prenatal period of development is an ideal time of life, when all needs are met and prenatates are joyful, peaceful and quiet. Actually, prenatates have a rich world of experiences beyond those that are currently recognised. Prenatates experience whatever their parents experience, which can range from tragedy to ecstasy, and they also experience their own tragedies and ecstasies unrelated to those of their parents.

*In addition, because of the relative immaturity of their defensive systems, prenatates and neonates are more vulnerable and susceptible to adversity than their adult counterparts and are so unprotected that the normal distresses of life can be traumatising or shocking. Prenatates and infants are also subject to deep and permanent wounds from commonly occurring tragedies."*⁵

In 1971, Dr. Gustav Hans Graber founded the International Society of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine (ISPPM) in Vienna. The North American equivalent of ISPPM, the Association for Pre- and Perinatal Psychology and Health (APPPAH), was founded in 1981, largely due to the efforts of Thomas Verny, author of *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*. These organisations, which have grown significantly since, have become forums for discussion, research and education in this field.

In the 1970's and 80's, Graham Farrant, an Australian psychiatrist and primal therapist developed a pioneering approach to the field of cellular consciousness. He specifically focussed upon the dynamics of the preconceptual journey of the sperm, egg. He also stressed a distinct spiritual component in which the soul or consciousness leaves the Divine in its journey into form.

Karlton Terry, a student of both Emerson and Farrant, has extended their work further and currently teaches in the USA and Europe.

³ Languages of the brain by Karl Pribram. 1971. Prentice-Hall

⁴ Primal Integration Therapy by Simon House. APPPAH Journal 14 (3-4)

It is largely due to the efforts of Franklyn Sills that both pre- and perinatal issues have become incorporated into the remit of Craniosacral Therapy. Sills worked in collaboration with both William Emerson and Ray Castellino (another pioneer in the area of a process-oriented approach to prenatal and birth work). He has particularly focussed on a detailed understanding of the forces involved in embryological development, and how to resolve early traumatic experience through accessing the potency of the Breath of Life, rather than through the strong cathartic methods of Emerson.

Today, there is a wealth of information available on these subjects, including training courses, conferences and a growing number of publications. It seems that the world of the embryo is coming ever more strongly into the public domain.

⁵ Dr. William Emerson, Shock: a universal malady, Emerson Training Seminars, 1999