

Babies Remember Birth

by David Chamberlain, Ph.D.

Although the idea of babies remembering birth seems a recent one, birth memories have shown up periodically for the last hundred years, accidentally and uninvited in doctors' offices. They have puzzled patients and doctors alike. Because they were not supposed to exist, they were something of an embarrassment. The memories often took a disguised form of recurring dreams, thoughts, habits, fears and resolution. Birth memories have come forth in response to hypnosis, psychoanalysis, LSD, psychodrama, submersion in water, and yogic breathing techniques. In unexpected ways they continue to make their way into conscious awareness.

Mentions of birth memory began appearing in the 1890's. What was at first a trickle from an underground stream in scattered locations has become a torrent breaking out virtually everywhere. If you have recalled some part of your own birth experience you are in a select but rapidly growing group.

Remembering birth may be a special feature of life in the twentieth century. If the people of antiquity remembered their own birth, little evidence of it can be found. It would seem that birth memories, if they did exist, went unrecorded, were kept private, or were dismissed as incredible, as they still are today. But if you ask your child (or even if you don't) it is possible that he or she will share some memory of birth with you as soon as talking is possible.

In the late nineteenth century when physicians were learning the advantages of putting people into a sleeplike trance and making "suggestions" for medical improvement, a few made a surprising discovery. Some subjects in trance could regress in memory to earlier and earlier times, even to birth and life in the womb. Experiments in Paris and New York left tantalizing records but no verbatim accounts. The idea itself seemed farfetched; it received little scientific attention. Hypnotic explorations of birth consciousness remained little



more than a parlor game until the middle of the twentieth century.

However, the idea of birth memories was kept alive by a handful of therapists, most of them psychoanalysts, disciples of Freud. With strong convictions about the influence of early life experiences in the development of psychological problems, these therapists sometimes discovered dream images and behavior patterns in their clients that seemed related to birth. Freud popularized the idea of conscious and unconscious parts of the mind to explain everyday processes of remembering and forgetting. Freud wrote that we only "forget" things on a conscious level, while the real memories are stored in the unconscious, where they go on influencing us for years. We "act out" our buried memories, repeating the behavior over and over without realizing the real cause.

While he was busy treating clients suffering from various fears, compulsions, and anxieties, Freud speculated that traumatic birth could be the prototype for outbreaks of these feelings later in life. Freud thought adult anxiety could represent the trace of some previous upheaval, which might be a traumatic birth. He was not one to consider all

births traumatic, but he acknowledged that there was always some risk of birth becoming so.

Freud stopped short of believing there could be a real self or mental life active at birth, so when his patients had any type of birth memory he considered it a fantasy constructed by the mind at a later time. This view was adopted by psychoanalysts generally and has changed little in the years since.

Another visionary therapist who saw links between birth and many life problems was Otto Rank, a friend and early associate of Freud. Rank went far beyond Freud (much too far, Freud thought) in believing that virtually all psychological problems, if not all human behavior, could be understood as reactions to trauma at birth.

Rank saw the womb as a primal paradise painfully lost in the separation at birth. Accordingly, he thought all later pleasure-seeking actions were attempts to re-experience the pleasure of the womb. In his view, the game of hide-and-seek recapitulates the seriousness of separation from mother and the pleasure of finding her again. All swinging games repeat the rhythm felt in the embryonic state - mothers walking about, starting and stopping, working and resting. Phobias of tunnels, travel, and being trapped repeat the anxiety of birth. Even sleep and sex were considered unconscious attempts to return to the darkness and pleasure of the womb.

By 1950, L. Ron Hubbard, the controversial founder of the Church of Scientology, developed a method of lay counseling (called auditing) that, among other things, frequently uncovered birth memories. His handbook of techniques for "auditors" taught a method of tracing symptoms back to their origins, some of which were at birth or in the womb.

In Hubbard's terms, he found that people were capable of going into a mental state called "dianetic reverie" (not hypnosis) in which they could have access to painful "recordings" (not memories)

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Janov observed that repeated use of certain phrases and expressions could represent a breakthrough of birth memory, expressions like "My head is up against a wall," "I can't break through," "I'm in a tight squeeze," "I can't see daylight," "can't get started," "can't find my way out," "don't know which way to turn," "can't do anything right," or "just can't get enough." Frequent use of words like *pressed*, *pulled*, *gripped*, *weighed down*, or *pushed* may also carry overtones of birth.

A method introduced by psychologist Leslie LeCron, dating back to 1953, led to additional revelations about the connection between birth and later illness. The special usefulness of this method was its indirectness in bringing up information from an unconscious level of memory. In contrast to Janov's method, which gives priority to feelings, LeCron's method gives priority to information, quickly obtained, and with a minimum of emotional upset.

As a result of a very different type of therapy making experimental use of the drug LSD, psychiatrist Stanislav Grof found his clients constantly returning to aspects of their birth experience. Grof developed the conviction that labor and delivery exerted a profound and lasting effect on personality. During one session, a patient reported hearing distant human voices laughing and yelling and sounds of carnival trumpets. Later, his mother independently verified that this was a womb memory. She had attended the annual village fair, against the advice of her mother and grandmother. According to them, it was the noise and excitement of the fair that precipitated the delivery - a story the patient denied ever hearing and one his mother did not remember telling him.

Since his pioneering work with LSD, Grof has developed a system of "holotropic" therapy in which-by a variety of sounds, music, and movements memories of childhood, birth, and before birth are evoked without drugs. Because this therapy is more centered on feelings, birth memories in narrative form are rare, though birth insights are common.

In 1977, an important lay movement, "rebirthing," began with the book *Re-*



birthing in the New Age by Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray. In this system, breathing is the method used to evoke traumatic moments of the past, including birth. Breathing and repeated positive affirmations are then used to resolve these traumas. For example, an affirmation used by someone who was the "wrong" sex (as far as the parents were concerned) might be: "My sex is right for me," or "Thank God I am a man/woman."

Rebirthers share with Grof and Janov the idea that virtually all birth is traumatic, as well as the idea that birth is such a sensitive time that whatever happens then is likely to create a lifelong pattern. For example, a person born prematurely acts differently in the same situation than a person who was born late. Unwanted children may invite rejection, those breech-born may go at relationships backwards, the cesarean-born have trouble completing things, and incubator babies may grow up acting as if they are separated from love by a glass wall. In a book on birth and relationships, variations in birth conditions are related to disturbed patterns of relationship.

Truly narrative moment-by-moment birth reports are rare, perhaps even unique; one looks in vain for them in published records. Using hypnotic memory techniques, cogent, detailed accounts of birth do emerge. These rather amazing stories have all the advantages of mature language (since the babies have grown up) but they reveal lucid thought processes and deep feelings which were going on in the infant at the time of birth. From them, we can learn what birth is like from the baby's point of view.

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