

*What led to your discovery that birth and pre-birth experiences can impact adult relationships and behavior?*

I accidentally dropped into a womb experience during my own therapy. I had no education or training to validate the experience. My therapist didn't understand it. I didn't understand it. But it was so real and made my entire life make sense. It was a shock to realize that the major pattern of my life was made so early. That started my quest to learn about Pre and perinatal psychology. Back in the seventies I couldn't find many people who knew much about the subject, let alone anyone who could teach me. Then I discovered that Otto Rank, Winnicott and many others had talked and written about Pre- and Perinatal memories. Even Freud mentions it as possibly being the "seat of all anxiety". In the early days, if I mentioned this to my colleagues, they thought I was really off the deep end. The accepted "scientific" belief was that babies could not remember anything, certainly not in utero, and that no learning was taking place. Now we have The Association of Pre- and Perinatal Psychology and Health (APPPAH) and people all over the world studying and doing research in this field. So, for the last 20 years this has been my quest.

*Can you describe your experience and why it made such a dramatic impression on your life?*

I found myself in a sudden state of absolute panic. The words that came out were, "Don't puncture me, don't scrape me away!" I had no cognitive understanding of this at all. I was lost in the past, in a regressed state, and so very frightened. After several similar episodes, I added, "Don't kill me and I'll make you happy." That promise became my life's basic script. I spent my entire childhood trying to make my mother happy. My basic defense and way of relating was based on pleasing everyone - on sacrificing myself.

*How do you get to those memories? Where are they?*

Memories of early trauma are there, underneath the surface. They're there, in our dreams, attitudes, even in our vocabulary. People unconsciously walk around in them all day but are not aware of where they come from. Many times after a birth regression clients say, "I live this pattern every day. It never occurred to me that it might start that early." There are different techniques to reach these levels. Some people use hypnosis. Sometimes in therapy or in a deep regressed state, feelings, words or memories will erupt from the subconscious that don't make sense in present time.

*These memories echo or ripple through our everyday experience.*

Early memories are like pebbles thrown into the water. The experience creates ripples that continue and expand. They affect people's lives profoundly.

Often when clients look at Pre- and Perinatal experiences they discover that they hold the key to understanding themselves. This is the moment where our first decisions are made, “the world isn’t safe” or “I’m not good enough.” Eric Ericson, in his child development scale, used trust or mistrust as the first building block. The one which is chosen is the result of our first learned experience and that first experience is in the womb, during birth or that very critical period immediately after birth. Early messages create life-long patterns of trust or distrust.

*Let’s explore this sense of being safe.*

One thing I find very powerful is to reconnect people to their original state using whatever term they choose, their essence, spirit, or soul. Whatever it was, it was a place where they were safe. Some people have difficulty finding that, remembering it or even believing that it is possible. They literally cannot remember a time when they felt safe in the world. It still staggers me to see the amount of fear in people and how many have never, ever felt safe.

In reconnecting people to that essential self, safety, peace and connection they can begin to have faith in themselves and in their original innocence. This awareness has the possibility of supporting and empowering individuals. It gives hope and purpose. Many people come into therapy with no sense of self at all. They say to me, “I don’t know who I am, I don’t know anything about me. I feel like I’m phony and I don’t think I’ve ever been okay or safe.” Somewhere within however, there is a consciousness and a memory of wholeness. From that context one can look at purpose and meaning. What do I want that gives my life meaning and satisfaction?

Of course, its all about choosing love instead of fear. There’s something wonderful about people who have an original undamaged connection to themselves, that comes from proper bonding and a good birth and a good womb experience. They have a sense of trust in life at a deep level.

When there’s a crisis they fall back to that sense of self and trust in the universe. Their context is trust and love. People, who had early severe trauma, especially if it was prolonged and reinforced, live in a context of fear. They fear not being in control. In a crisis they automatically revert back to their original defensive imprints. They become prisoners in their own walls of attack and defense. When you reconnect them to some sense of Self, and move forward, it’s a very powerful and potentially transforming experience.

*None of the current models account for how an embryo can know whether it’s wanted or not. Help me understand how this is possible.*

We know that cells are intelligent. Creatures in the sea respond to threat, though they don't intellectualize it. If there's poison in the womb, if it's filled with alcohol or cocaine, the baby responds to that danger at a very physical level. We know that feelings are related to the endocrine system and to the hormones, which affects body chemistry. The mother's feelings create a chemistry that surrounds the fetus.

I've had so many cases where people have gone back and experienced this. Suppose, for example a baby is unwanted emotionally and/or physically rejected by the mother. The baby's cells will react, laying the seeds of fear and mistrust at a visceral level. The experience of such early pain is visceral, a biochemical jolt of terror which imprints the organism at a cellular level. As Dr. Bruce Lipton says, "The melody is laid down in the womb. Later the words must fit the melody." Later the intellect assigns meaning and "gives words" that fit the physical/emotional reaction. At some level the guard is always up.

*Ashley Montagu and others have described how cells respond to external changes, and how this response can become a pattern.*

It's a bit like rolling yarn into a ball. If there's a knot or lump at the very beginning, the ball is not round, it takes an odd shape. The abnormality seems to manifest larger and larger as you continue to roll the yarn. It starts with threat and then gets larger and larger and is acted out on a more sophisticated level, in defense mechanisms, in attitudes and the way people think, feel, believe and relate.

*What is it going to take to have mainstream society, or even the therapeutic community, accept what you're describing?*

It's going to take a lot of research, which has been taking place all over the world. I was talking to a couple who had just adopted a baby. They attended classes before the adoption so they would learn how to be good parents. Not once was the word bonding mentioned in their class. They did mention how important love was, but not the critical elements of bonding which create love.

Bonding is a loving experience. The absence of bonding is fear. In Poland they've been teaching this since 1986, behind the Iron Curtain, and yet there's no accredited school in the United States that teaches pre and perinatal psychology. Those of us who are in this field are willing to go almost any place, talk to almost any group, just so people begin to open to the possibility that this is an important subject.

*Can you describe a case history, which shows how important these early traumas can be?*

I have a client right now who had a wonderful birth, born at home, accidentally, as she says - she "just plopped out." Her mother became ill.

She went to the hospital and didn't see the baby for three months. Again when she was 18 months old she was badly burned and had to go to a hospital where they left her for another 2 months.

Later in life, when there is a loss, the earlier pain erupts. As an adult there is a great fear of abandonment which impacts her relationships and her ability to trust. Most people feel they can't handle it. Really what they couldn't handle as an infant they actually can handle now, but all of the early, immature emotions are flooding the system.

No matter how much they try with their adult self, they're overwhelmed by the feelings they never dealt with. That pain is now projected on something in present moment, which is seen as the source of these overwhelming feelings.

*Are you saying that emotional maturity develops independently of physical maturity?*

We assume because we have big bodies that we're grown up. But many of us are emotionally frozen because of traumas that happened very young. People are arrested at different stages of development, like frozen ego states. Circumstances that happen today can stimulate those early traumas. Then all the repressed pain floods the person and the pain or fear of the immature ego state is very real. We find ourselves, even in our 30 year old body, reacting as a baby and we don't understand what's wrong. Nobody else understands what is wrong either. We are out of control because we never resolved the trauma or hurt when it was happening.

The main issue with birth or early childhood injuries is that nobody thinks these early wounds make any difference. Most people don't believe babies really have feelings or are conscious, feeling, sensing, human beings. Wait two or three years when the baby can talk - maybe then it will matter. Just because you don't have the vocabulary doesn't mean you aren't having the experience and are not recording it. In fact you are!

By not understanding and validating the baby's experience the world is saying, "just forget about it". This creates the knot. The experience is denied by the only reality check the baby has, which are the parent's reactions.

If they don't mirror, acknowledge and show empathy for the baby's pain, they deny it. The only thing the baby can do then is repress it - which ties the knot. Denial insures that this block will be there forever. I try to untie the knot so that the ripples don't go on and on.

*So deep feelings of relationship, sensitivity and empathy are critical?*

Bonding is very significant. It builds the foundation for trust in relationships for the rest of your life. Because of the safety, honesty and the validation that is being given in therapy the client and the hurt child experience, perhaps for the first time, that somebody is really listening. They experience bonding. We need to honor and respect that space and be very gentle. Also we need to maintain our boundaries allowing the frozen child to grow up through the experience. For a therapist to reject the patient at that particular time is a reenactment of the original pain. You must be very careful.

*This seems much more risky than more traditional forms of therapy.*

This is a much more volatile process because the therapist has to, in a way, relinquish control. That does not mean the therapist relinquishes responsibility and accountability. The therapist has to relinquish control over the client's process. My job is to help people work through the maze of their own consciousness. I don't hold their truth and I can't do their work for them, but I can help them recover it for themselves.

*What should parents understand about the subtle and not so subtle influence they have on their unborn and growing children?*

My children were all taken away from me in the hospital and I saw them three times a day. I didn't even know there was such a thing as bonding. Today, I tell people how important it is to stay with the child. The mother should not be separated from the child, unless there is a compelling medical reason. When we ignore or violate nature we suffer the consequences.

We do know the right thing to do, our instincts know, but we don't trust our instincts anymore. We've been brainwashed into ignoring our deeper wisdom. We read books by people who are supposed to be experts. We don't listen to our own intuitive sense, especially as women. We have had a maternal instinct since the beginning of time. The more educated we become the more we have been taught not to believe our instincts.

It's also important to work through our own birth traumas before we give birth. Giving birth can restimulate a woman's own birth memories. If one had a birth trauma, it is possible to slip back into one's own regressed emotional infant state, which does not help a woman during birth, nor does it serve the baby.

I suggest that people start talking to the baby from the very beginning, to create a relationship, to begin to bond before the birth. It also helps to define the kind of birth they want ahead of time, who they want to be with them, whether it's a home birth or hospital birth.

I encourage them to review all the medical knowledge that's available, but not at the exclusion of their own deeper instincts. Set the birth up as a sacred event. Coming into this world should be a ceremony, a celebration. It's a holy time and it should be treated with that atmosphere. The mother and baby's birth should be respected. Bright lights, loud sounds and too much high tech machinery do little to create a sacred space.

The most important thing is the way the woman feels about herself, the birth and her child. She needs to feel loved, loving and supported. Fear causes a woman's body to tighten up. This causes more medical intervention, and with intervention there comes a much greater risk of trauma.

*Let's talk about fear.*

Our western culture has been sold a bill of goods. We have been taught by religions, in our schools, by our parents, our mothers, grandmothers, that birth is always traumatic, that we give birth in pain and suffering.

*If you look at native cultures around the world, they don't hold such fearful attitudes. They have a different mind set.*

No one ever told me 30 years ago what to expect when I was about to give birth. Fortunately women are getting more information now, but much of the information is wrapped in a blanket of fear. Women are taught that fear and birth are twins, wedded together.

When you're born into a fearful situation, that fearful shadow follows you until you stop, turn around, and confront it. I don't believe women, as biological organisms, are created to do something, which is the most natural act in the world, in pain and suffering. Fear prevents women from moving with the natural rhythm of the experience. Our minds are very powerful. What we believe we tend to create, and we believe that birth is going to hurt.

*What kind of support are you getting from traditional medicine?*

We live in a system where insurance policies and litigation are realities. When I speak to medical professionals about pre- and perinatal psychology, the majority of the people are hostile. They're not open. They're threatened on many levels. I think the resistance is more male than female, though female doctors can be very, very hostile. You can bring them a hundred case histories that show a correlation between birth trauma and a person's later adult pathology, but if it's not a double blind study, it's not a statistical analysis, they simply write it off.

Pregnant women have said to their doctor, "You know I've learned something about the importance of bonding from prenatal research," and many doctors will say that's totally ridiculous.

Some women, who are particularly conditioned and believe that the expert knows best, will come back and say, “Well my doctor said that it doesn’t matter what you do because the baby won’t remember or learn anything, and it’s much easier to have a c-section.” These women are already programming a c-section. They don’t realize how dangerous it can be. They do not consider the emotional side of c-sections. They don’t want to and the doctors don’t want to either. We need much more sensitive education.

*Have you worked therapeutically with adults who have had traumatic births? What are the long term patterns this may cause?*

Pre- and Perinatal imprints have a decided influence on later patterns of behavior and attitudes. Claustrophobia is often a direct result of lack of oxygen at birth, or in the womb. Individuals from toxic wombs, or suffering from pre- and perinatal suffocation syndrome, feel anxious in closed spaces, such as tunnels, elevators, airplanes or even in turtle neck sweaters. Conversely, individuals with positive pre- and perinatal imprints and good bonding, enjoy cozy places as well as open spaces. They do not tend to have the fears traditionally associated with claustrophobia. They are generally less anxious, more open and relaxed.

Another statement I frequently hear is, “he was born angry, he’s always been like this.” The tragic mistake here is the assumption that the baby is innately this way and therefore that change is not possible.

The truth is that it is not natural for a baby to dislike being touched or to be angry and stand-offish. Those feelings and behaviors are the reaction to some earlier fear-producing situation. We must become aware of the cause and effect connections between pre- and perinatal pain and trauma to later behavior. Until we do, we will not take the steps to prevent it, or correct it.

The good news is that these early imprints and their effects can be changed, but not without awareness. If parents and professionals had this knowledge, the patterns could be prevented or healed. After all, we can’t always have a perfect pregnancy or birth, but we can learn ways to avoid long lasting damaging psychological effects. The earlier the treatment, the easier and quicker the healing, precisely because the personality has not formed on a basis of fear and hypervigilance.

*Is it something you can learn from books or is something deeper required?*

The books are there but they’re not in the medical schools. I’ve had clients who were physicians who had a personal experience around their birth, who tried to put pre- and perinatal psychology into the curriculum or go back and talk about it to their colleagues and they were ridiculed.

It's not a credited subject. This is a shame, because doctors and nurses have a tremendous influence. They educate millions of parents and parents believe them. If we make a difference at the very beginning, there is a ripple affect. It will spread and keep spreading. If you don't have those knots at the beginning, you're not going to have the bumps as an adult. If we make a little error at the beginning of a moon shot, we may miss the moon completely. That's the way it is at the beginning of life. The first things children learn determine the degree of aliveness or pathology they have in their life. Mistakes are correctable, but not if we don't know we are making them and continue to justify and defend our old beliefs. It all starts at the very beginning and we can't do enough to make sure people understand this.

*The consequences of the unbonded child are compounding.*

Most of our compelling challenges are the result of children born with no bonding - the children who are born unwanted - the children were born without a matrix, without a family. No wonder they're so angry. These children are going to take it out on somebody. They're going to try to get their needs met some way, perhaps with drugs or guns. Gangs are a poor substitute for parental bonding, but gangs give these kids a sense of power and belonging. Because they didn't have that original bonding experience these children are substituting power for safety. It's an epidemic. We have an epidemic of children who are unwanted and unbonded.

Look at the way babies are born in hospitals. I was working with a physician who told me that during his internship as an Ob/Gyn, working in a large city hospital, he delivered 36 babies in one day. He said only one mother wanted to hold her baby. That is a tragic statement of the quality of life for children in our society. We are paying the price for this right now and it is going to get worse before it gets better.

*What can we do?*

How do we correct it? Certainly by education. Certainly by really good birth control. I don't believe any woman should have a baby she doesn't want. I sit and listen to the life long pain stemming from original rejection or abandonment. It's a shock and it doesn't easily go away. We should teach birth control and make it readily available. I think early stage abortions should be available to anyone, anyone who needs it at little or no cost. We need to educate people in a real way about the importance of community, of family and belonging. We don't have that structure any more. The ghetto becomes a community. A gang becomes a community.

The nuclear family never really worked very well. A single mother without support cannot do everything. No father can be uncle, grandfather, provider, helper, dishwasher without support. We used to live in communities, with somebody you trusted who could hold your baby.

Now we hire somebody that we don't know to take care of and teach our children. We leave our babies and children, our most precious resource, in the hands of strangers or even alone. We can start this healing by doing all we can possibly do to ensure that all children are wanted. Children need to be born into a matrix where their parents feel supported in communities.

*The value we place on women, motherhood, and babies is obviously the ground for this support. Do we value and support women as mothers?*

I don't think we really value intimate human relationships. We give it lip service. The whole society needs to take a look at its values and we had better put our money where our mouths are - into programs that help mothers who want to stay home and care for their children. Remember the saying "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." Whose hand is it or even is there a hand to rock the cradle? Our values and our priorities have gotten very distorted.

In the 70's and the 80's we began to believe a myth that "real women", were out there earning as much as men. With this modeled in the press and TV, many women began to feel guilty because they wanted to have children and stay at home. My own daughter says to me, "You know mom, I feel a little bit out of sync. I want to get married and have children and be a homemaker." She's well educated and knows what she wants and her friends say, "You're too smart to do that." What does that say about our society?

*What does this say about our values - that only dumb people should be mothers? This is insane, absolutely crazy. What are we doing? And are we willing to pay the price? We are paying the price.*

I am hopeful, because now I see some women who really want to devote attention to raising healthy children. If we, as a culture, really valued women as mothers and raising healthy children, mothers wouldn't have to work outside of the home. It would be much more cost effective to support mothers at home than to pay for the crime, the juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, the violence, self abuse, suicides, the police, and prisons - not to mention the broken lives of millions of human beings. We do not behave or legislate as if our children, their care and education are our most valuable resource. It seems to me we've got it all backwards. My faith and hope is that it is not too late to turn it around. At least that is what I choose to spend my life and energy doing.

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