

The Genius Within Us: Psychospiritual Guidance during Prenatal and Perinatal Development and its Connection to Human Potential After Birth¹

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Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: This paper examines the cross-cultural appearance of myths, stories, customs, and legends that refer to images of protection and guardianship of a fetus before, during, and after birth. Included in this discussion are the Jewish angel Lailah, the Christian guardian angel, the Greek daimon, the Roman genius, the Chinese goddess Kuan-yin, the Mauri goddess Hine-Titama, the Egyptian god Bes, as well as a look at indigenous peoples' mythologies that appoint guardianship status to trees, land, animals, and inanimate objects. An attempt is made to make sense of these images through an examination of the biological aspects of prenatal development and birth, as well as through a more transpersonal or spiritual perspective on human development. It is concluded that further research into these images can help shed light on specific aspects of human development including understanding our need for inner images of protection and guidance, and comprehending the deeper passions or stirrings of "the genius within us," who assists us moving through our lives. There is a wonderful story from the Jewish midrashim (rabbinical teaching tales of the middle ages) that 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 fetus 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 upon how she lives her life. Just before the birth, however, the angel Lailah lightly touches the fetus on the upper lip. At that moment, the light vanishes completely, and the child is born in complete ignorance of her origins and destiny. It is said by some that this is how we came to have the crease (or philtrum) that we have in our upper lip. This indentation is the mark of the angel. It is also suggested by a few that this is why, when we have forgotten something such as our car keys, and we suddenly remember where they are, we instinctively put our finger on our upper lip and exclaim: "Ahhhhha, I remember now!" We reconnect, albeit momentarily, with the angel of conception. This story suggests that during the moments before birth, the fetus had access to a higher wisdom, a broader consciousness, a depth of vision that was mediated by a spiritual being. I have become fascinated with this image of the prenatal adviser, because this type of image occurs in many different cultures, and has been present crossculturally since ancient times. We can go back to Plato's Republic, for example, for evidence of this kind of prenatal guardian spirit. At the very end of the book, Socrates (through Plato) tells the story of the myth of Er, a soldier who died in a war and whose soul journeyed to Hades. While there, Er watches souls draw lots to determine the circumstances their next lifetime. Socrates relates: When all the souls had chosen lives, in the same order as the lots they had drawn, they went forward to Lachesis [one of the three Fates, along with Clothos and Atropos]. And she sent with each the demon he had chosen as a guardian of the life and a fulfiller of what was chosen. The demon first led the soul to Clothos under her hand as it turned the whirling spindle, thus ratifying the fate it had drawn and chosen. After touching her, he next led it to the spinning of Atropos, thus making the threads irreversible. And from there, without turning around, they went under Necessity's throne. And, having come out through it, when the others had also come through, all made their way through terrible stifling heat to the plain of Lethe. Now it was a necessity for all to drink a certain measure of the water, but those who were not saved by prudence drank more than the measure. As he drank, each forgot everything. And when they had gone to sleep and it was midnight, there came thunder and an earthquake; and they were suddenly carried from there, each in a different way, up to their birth, shooting like stars. This demon or daimon (a Greek word meaning divinity) served in Greek culture among other things as a guardian spirit throughout the lifetime of

the soul. Socrates spoke of his own daimon and how it served him as an inspiration and guide. During Roman times, this guardian spirit or daimon was called a genius. Etymologically, the word genius is related to the word genesis meaning: "to give birth." The word genius is also related to the word genial ("to give joy, pleasure, or zest"). The Roman genius was then, by definition, the creative force that engendered each individual. When a Roman was born, its genius was born at the same time as the child. It represented a kind of abstract double. The genius accompanied the individual through his or her life. When a Roman citizen celebrated his birthday, he also celebrated the birthday of his genius. His genius was there during times of crisis to help him move through obstacles, and to fill him with inspiration. This image of a protective spirit at birth can also be found in non Western cultures. Certainly the best known example, would probably come from the Sidpa Bardo of the Bardo Th'dol or Tibetan Book of the Dead, where the voice of the reader of the book, heard by the departed soul, assists the soul in choosing a womb for re-birth (having failed to achieve any of the greater spiritual goals in earlier bardos). In Far East Buddhist culture, the figure of Kuan Yin (Chinese) or Kannon (Korean) is worshipped by those who seek children, and is represented, like the Christian Mother of God, with a child in her arms, or alternatively as caring for and protecting the fetus before birth. In ancient Egypt, the god Bes presided over childbearing, protecting mother and child-to-be from evil influences, and also was a protector of the dead. In New Zealand, among the Mauri, this guardian spirit is represented by Hine-titama, Goddess of the Dawn who bound earthly day to earthly night, protected children as they came into the world, and also assumed the form of Hine-nui-te-Po, Goddess of the Darkness, and helped souls across the threshold of death. Prenatal and perinatal guardian spirits could also assume non-human forms. In many cultures around the world they are associated with trees. In Germanic culture, for example, it is a custom to save the placenta after birth and plant it under a tree, which then becomes associated with the life and development of the child. In Sweden, a tree planted at the birth of a child becomes that child's "tree of destiny" (vorltdrod). Interestingly, it's not a fairy godmother that helps Cinderella in the classic Grimm's brothers folk tale of that name (the fat little cheery godmother who sings "Bibidee-bobidee-boo" was a fabrication of Disney studios), but rather a little hazel-tree that Cinderella sings to: "Shiver and quiver, little tree, Silver and gold throw down over me." In Australian aboriginal tradition, the spirit guardian is strongly associated with the land. Wherever a pregnant woman happens to be when she first feels the sense of quickening within her (the feeling that there is life in her womb), she believes that a "spirit child" has entered into her body from the earth. David Abrams writes of the person that is born from, "his land is that part of the Dreaming from whence his life comes. It is that place on the earth where he most belongs, and his essence, his deepest self, is indistinguishable from that terrain." Through this land he connects with his Ancestor's songlines which are part of the Dreaming that represents the individuals connection to the timeless realms preceding Creation. He orients himself to life through his relationship to his conception site, and seeks at life's end to return to this point, where he can, at death, "sing" himself back into the land. Prenatal and perinatal guardian spirits may also take the form of animals. In the case of Australian aboriginal culture, if the Ancestor associated with a person's conception site happens to be named for animal, for example, Wallaby Man, then that individual has a special link to and responsibility for wallabies that he may encounter during his life. In similar fashion, certain Native American cultures link an individual to a particular animal or animal spirit based upon the mother's having witnessed that animal during conception, pregnancy, or birth. In Icelandic tradition, the caul or fetal membrane appearing at birth, is associated with a guardian spirit called a fylgja. This fylgja can take many forms after birth, including an animal, an inanimate object (such as a cloak), or another human being, and often serves as a kind of warning against potential danger. Interestingly, the caul itself has been regarded as bestowing a protective influence against drowning in Anglo-Saxon culture (it was cited in this context, for example, at the beginning of Charles Dicken's classic novel David Copperfield). Having reviewed just a few of the many cross-cultural images related to prenatal and perinatal guardians, I would like to reflect upon the implications of these images to our understanding of human development. It would appear that the widespread appearance of a perinatal guardian in so many cultures around the world, suggests

that it arises from a universal or collective need among humans for the assurance of protection during the dangers of biological birth. Strictly from an evolutionary standpoint, it might be postulated that those human beings who possessed the necessary brain power to create (or alternatively, access) such systems of perinatal guardianship might well have stood a better chance of surviving the birth process and hence of reproducing their kind. It is rather interesting to speculate upon the actual physiological correlates of some of the legends cited above. For example, in the introductory Jewish legend, the infant has a bright light above it which sees from one end of the universe to the other and then vanishes at the strike of the angel. In the Greek myth of Er, there is also a light cited earlier in the text: "In four days they arrived at a place from which they could see a straight light, like a column, stretched from above through all of heaven and earth, most of all resembling the rainbow but brighter and purer" (p. 299). There is also a forgetting after drinking from the waters of the river Lethe. One might speculate that this represents a prenatal memory of the birth experience. The light itself might represent anything from the mere sensation of electrical phenomena in the brain of the fetus to actual access on the part of the fetus to cellular awareness of its own DNA codes that contain imprints of past experience and future (i.e. genetically programmed) possibilities. The forgetting of the light (and other prenatal memories) may be associated with the hormone oxytocin which initiates the birth process. It is known that oxytocin is an amnesic neuropeptide. It has been used to stimulate amnesia in rats. It also appears to facilitate bonding between mother and off-spring in rats. Consequently, it may be the psychobiological correlate of the waters of Lethe in Greek mythology or the angel's striking blow to the lip in the Jewish legend. It may assist in "grounding" the psychobiological functioning of the child to the earthly plane. Who the counselor represents in terms of neurological correlates is more problematic. Clearly some cultures see in the placenta a kind of advisory or protective "counselor" (in terms of customs in which the afterbirth is saved, or planted under a tree, which itself is a kind of representation of the "life-giving" placenta). It is also possible to regard the prenatal biological relationship of the mother's body to the fetus as that of a biochemical guardian. However, the fact that in many of these myths the guardian image persists after birth as well should give us pause to consider a deeper level of interpretation. While the post-birth relationship of the mother to the child becomes increasingly personal over time, it's possible to view the persistence of a guardian spirit after birth as the continuation of the transpersonal or cosmic dimensions of the prenatal mother-child relationship. Going even further, I would like to suggest that many of these images of perinatal guardianship represent the soul of an individual, or some other being represented within a broader spiritual context. In my writings, I have made a distinction between two different lines of human development: the biological (or "body-up") line, and the spiritual (or "spirit-down") line of development. The biological line describes the purely physical growth of an individual, from one-celled zygote to fully-formed adult human being. The spiritual line, on the other hand, describes a "hidden side" of the life span, not usually mentioned in textbooks or courses on human development. This hidden side describes the descent of the spirit or soul from a broader state of being into a narrower or limited sphere (i.e. the physical world). In this context, one might postulate that many of the images described in this paper represent the "soul" of an individual, or a "higher being" who assists the soul in moving toward salvation, liberation, or whatever state is considered desirable by a specific belief system. These guardian spirits are mirrored in the outer world by individuals who provide a similar function. In the case of Judaism, for example, the Saddik, the holy man of Hasidism, which is the mystical Jewish movement dating from the end of the 18th century, is said to "find that which has been lost since birth and restore it to men." Similarly, the shaman, guru, sheik, lama, or mystic of other spiritual traditions represent higher beings who can reconnect an individual to those psychospiritual dimensions that were "lost" during the birth process. In the final analysis, then, these images seem to represent buried aspects of ourselves, covered over by the trauma of birth, the impact of physical existence and the layering of social conventions that do not support the spiritual life. As such, it appears to me crucial that we study these cross-cultural forms, so that we can learn more about those parts of ourselves most closely associated with our deeper spiritual nature. James Hillman has written about the daimon within people that

impels them to follow destinies that can not be explained by genetics or the environment. In my own work as an educator, I've used the term genius to describe, not the person who scores 140 on an I.Q. test or paints like Picasso (the typical associations to the word in today's competitive world), but rather our passions and creative impulses, in line with this deeper psychospiritual meaning. Every child is a genius in this sense, endowed at birth with an instinct to create, invent, imagine, reveal, wonder, and rejoice. And each one of us is a genius as well. It is my hope that research will continue into investigating these cross-cultural images of perinatal guardianship, so that we might further learn about protective influences that guide the fetus and the growing child, and so that we might understand more about the wellsprings of creativity that animates life, and that assist each one of us in moving joyfully through our lives!

Footnote 1 This paper is an edited version of Dr. Annstong's presentation at the 9th International Congress of the Association for Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health, San Francisco, California, 1999. Dr. Armstrong is the award winning author of eight book relating to learning and human development. He may be contacted at P.O. Box 548, Cloverdale, CA 95425; email: thomas@thomasarmstrong.com

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