

Wanted at Birth: Clean Hands and a Clean Heart*

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Full Text: He was known as "the savior of mothers." He changed the course of obstetrics, though not easily. And while ostracized by his 19th century medical colleagues, and little celebrated today, Hungarian physician Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis will forever hold a place of honor in history: He taught doctors to wash their hands before approaching women in childbirth. This year marks the 175th anniversary of his birth—a time to remember one giant step toward antisepsis at birth, and a time to propose a new level of antisepsis. CHILDBED "FEVER" As a young physician, Ignaz Pihpp Semmelweis became assistant director of an obstetrics clinic in Vienna. This clinic, like other lying-in hospitals of the time, provided training to medical students and birthing services to women who were unmarried, sick, or impoverished. While the majority of childbearing women were content to give birth at home, those who came to the clinics faced mortality rates as high as 30 percent.¹ The culprit was a mysterious disease known as "childbed fever," which struck a few days after birth, causing initial symptoms of delirium, high fever, and convulsions. No one suspected that the illness was spread by students and doctors who, committed to business as usual, made their way freely from dissecting rooms to laboring women, with hands still bloody from the cadavers of diseased patients. The clinic where Semmelweis worked was divided into two wards: one run by doctors and medical students (Ward 1), and one run by midwives and nuns (Ward 2). Laboring women were assigned randomly to one ward or the other. Even so, those in Ward 1 were dying at three times the rate of those in Ward 2. Semmelweis was deeply concerned. Then a physician friend of his died of a wound infection that showed up shortly after he had examined a woman who had succumbed to childbed fever. Aware that the infection might pass not only from patient to doctor but from doctor to patient, Semmelweis ordered his students to wash their hands in a solution of chlorinated lime before touching patients. Immediately thereafter, the mortality rate in Ward 1 dropped from 18 percent to zero.² The medical world was slow to accept Semmelweis's brilliant discovery. Doctors, reluctant to assume responsibility for spreading the pestilence they were supposed to be treating, quarreled for 20 years over the theory of antisepsis in general and the need for hand washing in particular. In the meantime, disgruntled superiors had removed Semmelweis from his position at the Vienna clinic. Undaunted, he took his methodology to a hospital in Pest, Hungary, where he succeeded in putting down an epidemic of childbed fever there while hospitals in Prague and Vienna continued to report mortality rates of up to 15 percent from the disease. Recognition came, at last, with his appointment as professor of obstetrics at the University of Pest. From this new position, Semmelweis continued his campaign to promote antisepsis in childbirth. In 1861, he published a major work on childbed fever, which he sent to all prominent obstetric and medical societies, only to receive many adverse reactions. He addressed open letters to professors of medicine in numerous countries, also to little avail. Although the government of Hungary soon began ordering district authorities to implement the new method of antisepsis, journal editors and other medical authorities continued to resist all such teachings. The years of unending controversy gradually undermined his spirit. Semmelweis eventually suffered a breakdown and was taken to a mental hospital, where he died on August 13, 1865. Also in 1865, ironically, an English surgeon named Joseph Lister was able to convince the surgical community of the need for sterilizing instruments with carbolic acid before use. Upon his success—aided by Louis Pasteur's discovery that microorganisms could indeed cause infection—Lister hailed Semmelweis as "the father of modern antisepsis." A HIGHER ANTISEPSIS The call for clean birthing, so vehemently contested by the 19th century obstetric community, is resurfacing in today's world. The current plea is not simply for clean hands, but for clean hearts, words, attitudes, and behaviors. The hope is to spare the needless suffering of

childbearing women and their newborn babies. The problem today is that the majority of practicing obstetricians have not been able to break away from the 19th century psychological perspectives embedded in the foundations of their discipline. Nineteenth-century practitioners maintained that babies at birth are not yet equipped with senses, do not feel pain, are unable to truly communicate, and are incapable of cognitive activity. The conviction was that newborns do not care how they are treated, do not remember how they are treated, and cannot learn from the experience no matter how gentle or violent it may be. Rooted in this false psychology is today's prevailing approach to obstetric routines: Never mind the cold temperatures, bright lights, repeated needle jabs, wisecracks, wrenching manipulations, and other ritual indignities that are offered to parents as "the ultimate in medical science," babies will not know the difference. Over the past three decades, while obstetricians consolidated their hegemony over birth in the United States, a new field of psychology was coming of age known as prenatal and perinatal psychology. Its findings were drawn not only from therapeutic data but from new experiments conducted by teams of scientists. Focusing objective attention on newborns as never before, diverse researchers pronounced that babies were "amazing," "talented," "socially attuned," "precocious," and even "rational." Babies, they concluded, are definitely equipped with all their senses, definitely capable of emotion, definitely communicating, and definitely learning. Leni Schwartz's *World of the Newborn* (1980) and Thomas Vernis best-selling *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* (1981) introduced parents to the sensitive baby within. My own *Babies Remember Birth* (1988) brought together the emerging scientific evidence of the newborn's unexpected capabilities. Among the discoveries unpredicted by earlier theories on the newborn brain was the ability of babies to remember their own births. I knew from my research with mother and child pairs that children were capable of recalling details from birth which their mothers could independently confirm. I presented this finding to a scientific conference in November 1980.³ In October 1981, *Mothering Magazine* published priceless evidence for birth memory and newborn cognition in an article by Linda Mathison, a Seattle mother.⁴ Mathison described the birth memories her son Todd had shared shortly before his third birthday. She included a cornucopia of birth memories other mothers had heard from their three and four year olds. One child had asked, from the backseat of the car, "Mom, do you remember the day I was born?" He proceeded to explain that it was dark, and he was up real high and couldn't get through the "door." "I was scared," he said, "so finally I jumped and got through the door. Then I was okay." His mother validated the report, stating that he had remained high in the pelvis throughout 20 hours of labor, whereupon things changed suddenly, and he was born in a 10-minute second stage. Spontaneous first-person recollections by very young children are a scientific treasure. They innocently prove what both psychology and medicine have been unable to accept—namely, the existence of consciousness at birth. Today, evidence of full awareness at birth comes from other sources as well, including meditation, bodywork, deep relaxation, evocative music and movement, yogic breathing, psychedelics, and other means of inducing "altered" states of consciousness. In my own work as a therapist, I have relied primarily on hypnosis to discover birth memories, demonstrate their reliability, and help adults come to terms with unexplored parts of themselves. OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES Nothing had prepared me for the authoritative, emotional, and intellectual content of my clients' personal birth memories. The entire spectrum of human awareness, expressiveness, thinking, and learning seemed present from the start. While recalling their earliest experiences under hypnosis, teenagers and 40-year-olds alike pointed out flaws in modern obstetrics, probed family relationships, and described not only their immediate impressions but also their decisions about the future. Gordon Remembers His Doctor Gordon came into the world in a California hospital. The dramatic sounds, sudden jerks, and gasps that accompanied his retelling indicated that his passage was painful. He spoke of getting the "shakes" from medicines his mother had been given, and the dread of arriving with the cord around his neck. Once out, he slipped to the floor and was quickly yanked up "by the hand and the balls," he said. The following moment-by-moment report of the doctor's words and actions was interspersed with explosive sounds too guttural to transcribe: Here it comes; here it comes! Something's wrong here. Not coming out. Damn! Umbilical cord. Push him up! Not you. Let me do it; let me do it. Push! Damn! Give me scissors-

anything to cut. Got to cut the damn thing! Ohhh! Damn. Dropped him. Get him up! Pick him up! Goddam thing's slippery. Damn! Put him in the water, cold water. Ain't breathing! Smack him on the ass! Put him upside down. Shit! He ain't breathing. Cut off that damn thing. He's still bleeding! Tie off the other end. Clamp it or something. Shit! Well have to mouth-to-mouth this thing. Do you have a . . . ? I need something to go down the throat. Nope. Shit! I'll do it myself . . . There he goes! Squealing like a stuck hog! You take this thing now. What a mess! Okay, Mrs. H., a few more minutes, and it will all be over with. His mother, according to Gordon, did not want to have a baby, did not act friendly, and was completely unaware of his ordeal. He remembered her waking from her anesthetized sleep with the words: "What took so long? Thank God that's over with!"

Eve Is Held to the Stars

Eve was born at home, in New Zealand. She, like Gordon, remembered personal feelings and perceptions, as well as the voices and actions of those present. Her account further illustrates that both birth place and birth practitioner can have a profound effect on the psychological quality of birth.

Pulsating. Pressure on my head and shoulders. Voices: "It's coming!" It was quick, very quick. "It's coming. Quick. Quick!" It's a man's voice. My right shoulder is out first; left one twisted. Feeling warm. Hearing a voice: "She's here!" I'm seeing bright light. Somebody is hovering around. It's my father. They brought a light' into the big bedroom with the fur bedspread. There's a swimming, smooth sensation. And then the bright light. It's very quick. I can feel something with my hands. [She explores with her fingers as she speaks] Somebody is holding my two hands together. I'm trying to move. There's lots of confusion, like no one knows what to do. I'm struggling to breathe. I'm being held down and I want to be free. The lady is a midwife who is holding me, a nurse. A very clear, calm person! Mother turned away, wants to avoid it. "I don't want to hold her," she said. Not interested. [Raising her voice] The midwife is very warm and lovely. She is Goodness itself! I'm looking and looking, getting the whole impression of what the problem is: I'm in the way for my mother, a big nuisance for her. She's not ready at all . . . [Later] I feel the sensation of being loved, being held in arms. It's an older lady. We're outside. She's wearing black. Gray hair. Very loving, cherishing. I feel cared for-a lovely feeling! It's nighttime. Black. She's looking up, holding me in her arms. Reading the stars! She's saying things like, I'm going to have a good life! Reading the stars. She had to take me outside with her. Very gentle, very loving. She put on a coat to take me out to the stars . . . I met her again when I was eight or nine years old. My mother took me to meet her-an old, old lady. She gave me a necklace, a heart carved with roses. She remembered when I was born, and it's a special gift on a long gold chain. I had forgotten all about it!

David Finds Love

David was born in a hospital, engulfed by a cloud of uncertainty because his mother had been forced to place him for adoption. He remembered his birth as "businesslike, impersonal, and dismal" except for a special doctor and nurse who made a permanent impression on him. The doctor held me by the feet with one hand. It felt good when he put his arm under me to lay me down. It was the first indication that somebody cared. My face is being wiped. Now he's checking me over . . . stuck a finger in my mouth . . . I'm still in the room with my mother but not with her. The whole room is very silent, like there is death in the room . . . The nurse just came banging in through some swinging doors with a little cart, a four-wheeled cart with an open shelf underneath and a little bed on top. I just know they are going to put me in that thing, and I have the feeling I don't want to go in it. But she is very gentle. I'm wrapped in a blanket now, too. She's hovering over me. And I like that. I've got my hand on her arm. She seems reluctant to let go of me. And I have the feeling I don't want her to leave. That image just seems to be moving very, very slowly. She's setting me into the bed and leaning over me, still with her arms under me. just her touching me seemed to make things okay.

THE NEED FOR CLEAN HEARTS

These memories, along with hundreds of others, reveal human consciousness at work. They show that an acute awareness of events is available to newborns despite the size of their bodies and brains. Indeed, the smallness of babies is misleading. They know things before we have "taught" them. They communicate without language-probably by tapping into that mysterious octave of telepathic dialogue in which the direct exchange of thought is possible. This quality does not make babies strange and unbelievable; it makes them just like the rest of us! Because of this consciousness, babies can be hurt by the words, attitudes, and painful procedures which greet them at birth.

Current knowledge of the newborn sensory system alone provides reason to treat babies with disciplined sensitivity and respect. What we know of their cognitive capacity provides ample justification to engage them in direct, interpersonal dialogue. Despite the wisdom of our times, however, most babies are still treated as objects. And we persist in arranging for them the worst possible learning experiences during gestation and birth. Standards of antisepsis beyond the mere physical cleanliness advocated in 1850 by Philipp Semmelweis are long overdue, delayed primarily by doctors who have not yet accepted the intelligence of babies at birth. Today, hospital birth attendants with hands properly washed, of course, are permitted to spew forth trivia, prejudice, anger, and fear; to plant seeds of despair; inject crippling attitudes; and introduce dire predictions and degrading commentary-which someday will have to be cleaned out in psychotherapy. My son-in-law, filled with reverence during his daughter's birth, felt compelled to address a clamor of boisterous small talk among the doctors in attendance: "Excuse me," he said in a firm voice, "we're having a birth here." Psychological pollutants need to be controlled as stringently as we now control staphylococcus aureus, the typical hospital pathogen. Mental and emotional toxic spills, while not virulent enough to kill, can sicken, debilitate, discourage, and frighten for decades after birth. Footnote * This article was prepared for the readers of Mothering magazine and was published in the Winter issue, 1993. It celebrated the 175th anniversary of the birth of Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis. NOTES 1. Encyclopedia Britannica 14. Chicago: William Benton, 1983: 529-30. 2. Arms S. In her classic book Immaculate Deception (1975), points out that the women in Ward Two were spared much suffering because the midwives and nuns avoided internal examinations during labor and because they did not dissect diseased cadavers. 3. Chamberlain D. Reliability of birth memories: Evidence from mother and child pairs in hypnosis-A paper presented to the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 1980. 4. Mathison L. Does your child remember? Mothering Magazine, 1981;21, 103-7 (Fall). AuthorAffiliation David B. Chamberlain, Ph.D.

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