

## My First Heartbeat

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**Full Text:** Headnote ABSTRACT: From memories of his prenatal life the author presents a recollection, in the form of a poetic narrative, of how he started his heartbeat. He then gives a personal and transpersonal interpretation of the narrative in the adult-life context and proposes a theory of how an unborn may start its heart and what it learns from the experience. In support of his ideas he draws on examples from mythology, a modern-day ritual and common beliefs about the heart. INTRODUCTION Prenatal studies have been and will continue to be advanced in a major way through personal memories of people who have the courage and make the effort to journey back into their prenatal life. Usually, the purpose of such a journey is to retrieve personal knowledge. However, if the memory relates to a type of event common to everyone's life, the retrieved knowledge will also be of transpersonal value, i.e., of value to other people or all humankind. I believe that starting one's heart is such an event. I will use the personal "I" to express a personal experience or opinion and the transpersonal, collective "we" when my intent is to speak for the collective. First, I will present the memory of how I started my heartbeat as a narrative in a poetic form. This poem is part of a collection of poems about my prenatal life (Vlcek 1989). I will then interpret the content of the piece in an adult-life context, examining it from a psycho-physiological point of view, and then formulate a theory about how the human heart may be started and what this essential step in our development means to our subsequent psychological and spiritual life. I will then support the theory by discussing the fire episode of Prometheus from Greek mythology, the symbology of the dancing Shiva from the theology of Hinduism, the ritual surrounding the Olympic games and other images and common beliefs about the heart.

### Flame and Friendship

Above me a source  
beams life toward me.  
I listen and watch  
drawn more and more  
by this joyous force,  
its radiant light.  
It seems that it  
wants my attention,  
as if to say:

"I am your friend.  
I invite you  
to join me.  
I can show  
how you, too,  
can do  
what I can.  
You can be  
like I am."

I hesitate,  
not knowing  
if I am able to join  
the energetic friend.  
I need more time,  
more strength.  
I need to grow.

The beaming source  
continues to prompt me:  
"Try".

Now I will.  
I feel more energy,  
more confidence.  
I am ready.  
I gather all my strength.  
A flame engulfs me and  
I leap toward my friend.  
I savour the new experience:  
the surge,  
the flame,  
the leap.  
I try again  
and again  
and soar  
and join my friend.

We embrace  
and start to dance  
turning to the left.  
My friend teaches me  
how to keep in step.  
We whirl and celebrate  
our friendship.

I have learned the step  
and now return  
and try it on my own.  
I strike a spark  
but cannot jump.  
Again I strike,  
a stronger flame  
and succeed, jump.  
Another spark, another  
jump,  
spark-jump, spark-jump . . .  
in rhythmic harmony.  
I delight in my skill.  
Grateful to my friend  
I relax.

Now I hold my own flame.  
It gives me courage  
to face every task  
with confidence.

I shall try  
my new-found power.  
Right now  
I need to move,  
to find a larger place  
to my growth.  
I feel the flame  
and courage  
and I use it  
and descend . . .  
Successful, I have found  
a new place,  
more room to spread.

The power of the flame  
will help me do  
all I need to do  
in my life ahead.

INTERPRETATION The notion of the presence of consciousness and intelligence in the unborn child has a wide acceptance, I assume, among the readers of this journal. However, we still know very little about the scope and dimensions of consciousness and intelligence in the unborn. Based on my personal experience I would say that consciousness in the unborn is a paramount and wide-ranging faculty (if one can call it a faculty), with far greater depth and subtlety than that of the adult. I propose that consciousness is the unborn's primary tool of communication. For example, I believe that, via consciousness, the unborn can access and communicate with its physical parts and with external objects that it perceives through its delicate and finely tuned sensorium. Although we may lack understanding about how this is accomplished, for the purpose of interpretation of the above poem, I ask the reader to keep an open mind about the subject. In the poem, the developing unborn tells us how it "spark-jumped" its heart. First it became aware of an energetic "life-beaming source above" that kept inviting the unborn to join it. This "joyous force" is, I believe, the heart of its mother. The developing heart, as yet sleeping, hesitated at first, not feeling strong enough to accept the invitation, but after some growing it gathered enough "flame" to "leap" (in consciousness) to the mother's heart and "dance" with it and "celebrate friendship". Having learned the "step" the incipient heart tried it on its own, eventually succeeding in mastering the beat. The unborn then applied its "newfound power" to execute a move, succeeded, and looked forward to use "the power of the flame" in all its future life tasks. The ideas and images introduced in the poem describe not only the process in which the unborn started its heart but also, more importantly, they imply the psycho-spiritual meaning of this essential primal experience to its subsequent life.

THEORY OF FIRST HEARTBEAT Based on the recollection of how I started my own heart beating I wish to propose a new theory on how the unborn starts its heart and what this experience means to us in our lives: \* The unborn enters into heart-to-heart communication with its mother's heart that stimulates and encourages it to start its own heart beating. \* When physiologically and psychologically ready, the unborn produces the first electric spark, leaps up and joins (in consciousness) its mother's heart to learn the rhythm of the heartbeat. \* Having learned the rhythm the unborn turns its consciousness to its own heart and, after a few trials, succeeds in carrying the heartbeat on its own. \* The unborn discovers that its pulsating heart gives it courage and strength for life tasks that lie ahead and uses its heart as a starting place for all future actions. Two psycho-spiritual aspects of the heart have their origin in the primal experience of starting it: \* Heart is the place from which we start a friendship. \* Heart is the seat of courage and strength and a starting point of action. Both the friendship (love) aspect and the courage and strength aspect of the heart will be briefly explored through examples from mythology, symbology, rituals and common beliefs about the heart. These examples will form the support for the theory.

HEART AS SYMBOL AND MYTH I stated in the Introduction that a key to prenatal knowledge is a conscious recollection or re-experience of one's own prenatal life. Such knowledge, though subjective, can form a basis for a more objective study of prenatal life, since it provides the enquirer with the clues of what to look for in support of theories that may be put forward on the subject. The examples given below are only a small sample of such clues. The reader may think of and find others. While examples drawn from such areas as mythology, symbology, folklore, etc., do not constitute a proof, their reinforcement of the ideas proposed in the theory makes them noteworthy. Several ideas, images and word symbols can be extracted from the poem "Flame and Friendship" that are consistent with beliefs about the role and meaning of the heart in our lives. For example, the heart is associated with the idea of "friendship", the images of "embracing" and "dancing", the words "spark", "light", "flame", "courage" and "power", and the root of action. The association between the heart and the feeling and expression of friendship and love is universal in every domain of our daily lives, including language, music, arts, religion, etc. Such expressions as "sweetheart", "to wm/leave/break one's heart", etc. are commonly used. The image of the heart as a symbol or sign of love and friendship is also common. In an Italian icon, a woman holding a heart personifies female friendship. Saints have often been painted with an open heart to symbolize pure love. The heart is also a symbol of will, courage, strength and power (De Vries 1974, Cirlot 1962, Jobes

1961). It has been said in many different ways and in many different times that man's true strength lies within his heart. Such statements as "hearts are stronger than swords" and so on are common. Flame, fire and light (of the heart) have long been used as symbols of life force, supreme deity, purification (destruction of evil), authority and control. Threatening forces or entities (e.g. in dreams) are often said to be warded off or dispelled by light or flame. From Greek mythology comes the legend of Prometheus, who was considered to be the father of mankind. In his most daring deed, Prometheus stole fire from the sun to give it to the people. The reigning god, Jupiter, strongly resented this act and punished Prometheus by nailing him to a rock. My interpretation of this well-known myth is that Prometheus put the flame (fire) into the hearts of people. This act gave the people courage and power to challenge the supreme power of Jupiter, who felt threatened. In the ancient Olympic games, brave men performed feats of enormous strength, skill and bravery under the Olympic flame, a symbol, in my interpretation, of the fire of the heart. In the modern Olympic games, an athlete from the country hosting the Olympics is sent to light a torch from the ("mother") flame in Olympia. This torch is then used to light the Olympic flame in the host country, which will burn for the duration of the games. We have here the symbology both of the flame as a source of courage and strength of the heart and of the passing of the flame from mother's heart to the incipient heart. Meanwhile, as the modern Olympic games were conceived with the ideal of promoting friendship among nations, both aspects of the heart-flame and friendship-can be said to be embodied in the rituals of the Olympic games. Dancing Shiva One of the most powerful symbols of the heart, in my view, is the dancing Shiva of Hindu theology (see Fig. 1). This symbol combines not only the physical aspects of the heart, namely the flame, beat, rhythm (dance) and action, but it also expresses more subtle aspects of the heart connected with spiritual and religious values.

**Figure 1**

**Dancing Shiva. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto  
(Used with permission).**



My interpretation of the main aspects of this powerful symbol is as follows: Lord Shiva dances within a circle of flames that represent both the electric signals to the heart and the spiritual sparks (light) of life. He holds one such spark in the extended left hand. In the extended right hand the dancing god holds a hand drum denoting

the heartbeat or the rhythm of life. The circle of flames symbolizes the continuous supply or continuity of life. Shiva's right leg stands on (controls) a dwarf, Tripurasura, that represents forgetfulness (fear). The position of the inner right hand is, in Eastern traditions, said to be a gesture of fearlessness, while the inner left hand is in a position signifying the act of teaching. This left hand points to a raised left leg, which is said to signify release (from fear). We have here not only the symbolism of the physical action and spiritual value of the heart. We also have a teaching lesson by god Shiva, who shows us the correct attitude and action of the heart through which we can gain release from the fear and uncertainty of life caused by forgetfulness. When this lesson is learned, our life becomes a joyous dance and a spiritual journey. To students of yoga, dancing Shiva represents creative energy (heart as the starting place of action) and thus becomes a symbol of personal growth and transformation. Joseph Campbell (Campbell 1974) gives an elaborate interpretation of the Shiva symbol based on the beliefs of Hindu philosophy. He notes that it is Shiva's great mastery of the dance which has led to its name, Shiva Nataraja, "Lord of the Cosmic Dance". Campbell interprets the hand drum as representing the beat of time (the temporality of this world). The extended left hand is said to hold spiritual light that burns away the veil of temporality by annihilating the world and revealing eternity. Forgetfulness drives souls into the vortex of rebirth that is necessitated by the psychological attraction of man to the realm of his worldly bondage (symbolized by the snake). Campbell goes on to link the symbol of the dancing Shiva with the sound OM, the hum of the creative energy of the universe. He notes a similarity between the outline of dancing god and the shape of the Sanskrit symbol for OM. This sound is associated with enlightenment (reaching for the Mother Light in Buddhist teaching). My interpretation of the Shiva symbol is, in comparison, simple and worldly. However, it does lead to the same message as that indicated by the deeper, more spiritual/religious view: if we adopt a pure attitude and start all our actions from the heart in this life we will be on a path toward enlightenment. The life after will, perhaps, take care of itself. EPILOGUE Connections between key events of prenatal life and mythology, religion, folklore, art, and literature, etc. have been advanced by many writers. My personal re-experience of prenatal life and subsequent search for its transpersonal meaning has led me to believe that in prenatal life we are "alive and well" to a much greater degree than we may think and that prenatal events have a deep impact on our lives, whether the adult is consciously aware of this or not. Note the famous lines of William Wordsworth, from the poem "My Heart Leaps Up": My heart leaps up when I behold A rainbow in the sky: So was it when my life began: So it is now I am a man ... Was this great poet remembering his first heartbeat when he wrote the third line? Or was the just the feeling of that joyous moment revived with each similar type of experience? I believe that humans have been and will always be resonating with the important events of their prenatal life. I feel that the prenatal period lays down for all of us an important spiritual foundation.

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6. Vlcek, J. (1989) *Journey into the world: My life before birth*. ELF Publ., Don Mills, Ont., Canada M3B 2P4. AuthorAffiliation Jaroslav Vlcek, Dr.Sc. AuthorAffiliation Jaroslav ("Jerry") Vlcek, B.Sc.F., M.A.Sc., Dr.Sc. is a professor emeritus at the University of Toronto where he taught photogrammetry, photointerpretation and remote sensing in engineering and forestry. He published widely in his fields of study. While on his sabbatical at the University of California at Berkeley in 1972 he began a journey of deep self-awareness, which eventually led to the recovery of his prenatal memories described in his book *Journey into the World: My Life before Birth*, Address correspondence to the Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto, 33 Willcock's Street, Toronto, Canada M5S 3B3.

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