

Sharing Space

Life Before Birth: Lessons from the Womb

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Abstract: This poetic reflection comes to us from Bernard Levinson in South Africa. In this article you will be transported to an idealized womb experience, as well as being invited to reflect on ways in which this experience is unconsciously expressed in language.

Keywords: womb experience, idioms of language, enteric nervous system

*There are many events in the womb
of time, which will be deliver'd*
Shakespeare. Othello, 1, iii.

Everything that makes my life possible and meaningful I learnt in my mother's womb. An intense nine months learning experience that I use every single day of my life. The primal rhythms that I identify with for the rest of my life.

An angel sits in the womb with the baby. It comforts the child. Sings to it. Whispers to it. Cradles the baby in its wonderfully secure arms. It softly whispers all the secrets of life. The sorrows and the joys. At the moment of birth the angel places its forefinger against the baby's lips creating the central indent from the baby's nose to the upper lip... Swearing the baby to a vow of silence. The baby then enters our world.

The Talmudic scholars who wove this tapestry created a wonderfully simple philosophical thesis out of this moment in time. It is easy to accept that baby's urgent need at that moment would obviously be to return to the safety, the dark blue serenity, the total reassuring presence of the angel. But at that moment the uterus is getting smaller and the baby is getting bigger. There is no going back. For the rest of one's life. This is certainly true for some situations. Go back to the boulevard memories of your childhood and discover how you bump your elbows on the narrow streets of reality. Everything is suddenly small. You have gotten bigger...

We never stop trying to return to the womb. And we happily do re-enter it in many ways on a daily basis. For the rest of our lives we recreate unconsciously the reassurance, the serenity and calm of that intrauterine existence.

In the beginning the uterine wall supports the baby's back. As the baby grows the uterus grows. Completely in tandem. Finally at term the uterine wall is stretched to its own magical limit and it then squeezes baby out of the vagina. Pregnant mothers are aware of moments of relaxation during the pregnancy when the uterus seems to let go, and the baby moves freely. A flutter of arms and legs. Then the comforting embrace of the uterine wall returns and baby is again still.

Leboyer (1994) the French gynecologist understood this. He understood the dark, muffled sound-proof world of the uterus and the ubiquitous support of the uterine wall. On delivery he dimmed all lights and insisted on silence in the delivery room. He made entry into the world as comfortable as possible for this new arrival. On delivery he immediately supported the baby's back with his hand. Gently squeezing the back was enough to reassure the child that its old friend the uterus was still there. His babies rewarded him with a Buddha smile...

We carry this need within us forever. The need to be held. To have our backs rubbed. To be supported.

This nine month back support is so profound and primitive that it has seeped into the basic body idioms of our language.

If you feel unsupported, I will send you “a backup”...

If you feel totally unsupported you have “your back against the wall.”

A “pat on the back” reinforces the good feeling of being supported.

We return to the security and serenity of the womb the moment our backs are supported. The simple universal procedure of having a back massage is always deeply relaxing. Many countries have made this an important national pastime. It goes with a sauna culture.

By the twenty fifth week of uterine existence baby is actively listening. The baby is bathed in the sound of the mother’s heartbeat. A seventy two beats a minute rhythm in a relaxed mother. This rhythm dominates our entire lives. Montague (1971) records the amazing re-creation of this rhythm in the basic nurturing of our children. Mothers instinctively place their baby against their left breast, closest to their hearts. They then gently rock to and fro. This is always around seventy two beats a minute. All cradles and prams are rocked at seventy two beats a minute. Videos we have of Khoi shaman dancing around a fire in a nomadic Kalahari setting clearly have a seventy two beats a minute rhythm. The identical rhythm is demonstrated in the American Indian shaman shuffling around his fire. The ultra-orthodox Jews praying in the synagogue wrap their prayer shawls over their heads creating a womb-like sealed off intimate space. They gently rock forward and back while reciting their prayers. The rhythm is seventy two beats a minute. Music played at this amazingly hypnotic beat “sends” the dancers. Any club with this relentless beat fills their dance floor with mesmerized swaying dancers. Everyone is “out of themselves.” They are no longer aware of their bodies. They are in the music.

The idioms here are complex. This eternal echo creates a state of mind. A stillness. A serenity. A state of “being out of one’s self.” We speak of “being sent,” “of being in grace,” “in sync,” of being “at one with.”

For nine months the baby swims through the rush and flow of Mothers breathing. This is at about twenty beats a minute rhythm. This too remains a powerful backdrop to the entire uterine existence. It sends out a never ending nostalgic memory. All relaxation and meditation techniques revolve around “watching the breath,” “controlling the breathing,” slowing the breathing,” “bringing the ancient twenty beats a minute rhythm into the minds ear,” “blocking all distracting stimuli and highlighting the moment.

The familiar idioms are:

- To be overwhelmed one might say, “It took my breath away.”
- In apprehension, “I held my breath.”
- A moment of respite could be “a breathing space,” a space where one can for a moment regain the reassurance of a twenty beats a minute relaxed unthreatened breathing memory.

The baby floats in the dark purple-blue aura of the great placental venous pool. This becomes a significant color for everyone. It is the royal color. The purple trimmings of royal cloaks. The blue blood reference to an upper class is a memory of a serene, unhurried, harassment free complacency. In Turkey the blue nazor boncugu beads are everywhere to ward off the evil eye. In Greece, doors and sometimes window frames are painted sky blue. This soft turquoise creates an invisible shield protecting them from the evil eye.

Ancient eastern writers knew that if you went to bed, listened to your breathing, and visualized the color dark blue, sleep would be almost instantaneous. In the Brahmin Upanishads this color dark blue is associated with the Crown Chakra. The crown of the head, ensuring connection to the universal sources of energy. It is the color of serenity. It’s the color of peace and tranquility.

For its entire mystical journey in the uterus the baby sleeps snugly in a nest of small bowel, to the accompaniment of the endlessly curling, gurgling, mumbling dance of the alimentary canal, intimately caressing the womb, talking to the womb. That beautiful onomatopoeic word borborygmus describes this. Perhaps even transmitting important messages to the womb. A unique personal rhythm. We now know that neuronal tissue actually exists in the bowel walls. Gershon (1998) calls this the “enteric nervous system.” It has a basic electrical rhythm of thirteen waves a minute. There are sheaths of

neurons embedded in the walls of the entire gut, estimated at some 100 million neurons. This makes it more extensive and sensitive than the spinal cord or the peripheral nervous system...Gamma-aminobutyric acid the chief inhibitory neurotransmitter is present in the enteric nervous system. This has a calming effect on the individual. This further suggests a possible profound relationship between the growing fetus and the insistent surrounding bowel. What is the bowel saying to the baby? The fact that we are capable of totally focusing our awareness in that moment of “feeling out of it” is highly suggestive of the neurological role gamma-aminobutyric acid plays in the brain. This enzyme enables the individual to inhibit unwanted stimuli, leaving a powerful beam-focus on wanted activity. Knowing that this enzyme exists in the gut, is this the message, the built-in capacity to shut out the world and return to the calm womb-like existence that the restless nest of bowels shares with the growing babe? Does the nest awaken in the babe the entire augmented neurobiochemical capacity to ‘switch off’?

Is this the secret source of all intuition and coincidence? Is this the home of synchronicity? We speak of having ‘a gut feel’ about a situation. A primitive internalized unconscious knowledge that is so basic it seeps into all languages.

- In German “Mein bauch sagt mir.”
- In Russian “Ot moux kumok.”
- In French “Je le sens dans les tripes.”
- In Ethiopian (Amharic) “Behodish ya jue.”
- In Ghana (Akan) “Di wo yem.”
(These last two African languages unrelated to each other. Both describe holding feelings in the gut.)
- The Dutch call the amniotic fluid that bathes the baby “Vruchtwater,” which translates as fruitwater. The idiom in Dutch is “ik voel het aan mijn water,” feeling it in the amniotic fluid... An amazingly primitive direct reference to the gut.
- In Afrikaans we say “Ek voel dit in my binneste.”

There is a powerful primitive drive to lose our moment-to-moment awareness of ourselves. Our bodies. The very clothes we wear. Our life events. The awkward, uncertain, embarrassed, sometimes threatening interaction with our dynamic environment. For that moment of being out of ourselves we are not afraid, not alone, not intimidated by life. We are happily in the moment. We can shut out the world and return to the calm womb-like existence.

We lose ourselves in many ways. Some fortunate individuals can do this happily in a religious experience. A shared sense of being in touch, out of the body, and totally in the experience.

Many individuals experience this in the act of loving. In the moment of ecstasy. The out of time moment of being pain free, time free, body awareness free, in a divine free fall of completeness. An “addiction” to sex may have this as an element of that desperate drive.

Music does this for almost everyone. From the unique whirling Dervish dancers to the ordinary individual on the dance floor. The music takes us. Envelopes us. Wraps us in a cocoon of wellbeing. We become the music. Free and unshackled. For that moment we have returned to the mystery of the womb.

We lose ourselves in work and in play. At its most divine, the act of creating takes the artist into a timeless world. They become part of the creation. Not only have we a memory of a rhythm that blots out all stimuli leaving us amazingly focused, we also have a primitive neuronal system reinforcing the ability to shut out unwanted distractions. In the womb all is calm, focused, and certain. The child’s gut is being triggered to augment this ability to protect itself.

Part of the real distress in severe pain or in grief is the individual’s inability to escape the moment. To be even momentarily distracted. To lose themselves. To be away from their grief. To be outside the pain.

The ever present momentum of the uterine teachings save us. Our conscious moments are softened and life is bearable. Nine months in the womb makes it all possible.

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