

Father to Son: A Chronicle of Your Life Before Birth

Author: Grider, George

Publication info: Journal of Prenatal & Perinatal Psychology & Health 17. 1 (Fall 2002): 29-39.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: This chronicle is what one father wrote for his son, offering a world of personal information about himself, his wife, and his culture embracing the courtship, conception, and important events of pregnancy leading to his birth in the late 1960s. The Editor sought this story in the hope it would inspire other fathers and mothers to share similar priceless information with their own offspring about their common life before birth. Thirty years ago, long before the days of computers and CD's, driveby shootings and AIDS, there was a country where people had children but rarely discussed childbirth. It was a violent land, though sugarcoated by ignorance and tradition. But it was not so unpleasant. Your mother and I had much to make us feel alive: Beatles songs, televised space shots, good food, TV sports, airplane rides, and each other's companionship. It was in this turbulent, cloistered world where you spent your first nine months. Contrary to what we believed back then about prenatal children consisting of isolated organisms, you were not alone. Your senses were keen and you were tuned to the turmoil of those times, perhaps more than we were. Your conception began as an idea. Your mother and I met when my all-men's college choir was performing at her woman's college campus. At a dinner to welcome us, I chanced into the dining room late and was seated at the one open seat next to your mother. History is made from such improbable connections. We agreed to meet after the concert, and later at the door of the dormitory we kissed goodnight. One fine spring day three years later we sat at the edge of a stream outside of town. In the afternoon sunlight your mother told me that she'd always wanted to have boys. Two would be enough, and certainly not four. It was a once-in-a-lifetime proposition, and it made me giddy. The notion of having children with one so fair as your mother seemed at that moment sufficient to make my future, which, of course, it did. The wedding was strictly a technicality, carried out to honor our families. We'd decided to wait on having children, at least until I could complete my obligated Naval service. Four years earlier I'd enlisted with the hopes of becoming an aviator, but substandard eyesight relegated me to a career of sea duty. Having a family now seemed ludicrous. There's an old Navy saying about a sailor's limited parental obligations: to attend the ceremonial keel laying but not be present for the launch. I had no intentions of letting this happen to me. I spent my first two years at sea, taking in a tour off the coast of Vietnam. We protected the aircraft carriers that had begun to bomb the rice paddies. My job was to help defend against any planes bearing the Communist red star that might come out to bomb us. Even after returning to home waters our rigorous training schedule demanded we stay at sea. The lack of time to be with your mother strengthened my resolve to leave the Navy once my obligated service was complete. Relief came in 1966 when I was transferred to a civilian shipyard in Mobile, Alabama. Our job was to prepare a mothballed ship for sea duty, and eventually to set sail for southeast Asia. The crew spent its days in an office building drinking coffee and swapping sea stories. Every evening I returned to the two-story duplex where your mother and I lived, watching TV and eating shrimp dinners. This was the good life. I began renting small airplanes. I'd obtained my student's permit while I'd been a Midshipman, but the Navy turned down anyone with substandard eyes. If I couldn't fly for the Navy, hell, I'd fly for myself! One year before your birth, the ship headed for the east coast, there to train and complete the outfitting before sailing to Vietnam. Your mother had driven ahead to Norfolk, the ship's new home port. She found an apartment and landed a job working with the welfare department. I settled into my role as weapons officer. The ship was armed with WW2 vintage guns, possessing no automated system for tracking incoming enemy planes. Everyone knew how futile these guns would prove in the event of an air attack. They were window dressing, plain and simple. But they were my window dressing. If the ship were going down, it

would go down with me at center stage. Norfolk meant more time at home, a treat for any seagoing serviceman. There I discovered an airport where they rented Piper Cubs. I preferred the one that had no door, leaving a gaping hole in the side of the fuselage through which I could smell the landing strip's freshly mowed grass over the engine's exhaust fumes. This site would later give you a dose of the world which you would soon enter. The final lottery that would determine your genetic makeup was about to be held. Your mother's maturing eggs were shuffling for the starting line. She'd recently stopped taking her birth control pills. I remember nothing of our words, our conversation. Nor do I remember that moment when the cosmos drew your number. Long after we knew she was pregnant, the obstetrician seemed as unsure of the date of conception as we were. On November 6, 1966 I was flight tested for the Navy flying club's most recent acquisition, a fully aerobatic Navy T-34 trainer. I was thrilled at my newly won prize, and today I can imagine that later in the evening my euphoria may have aided in your conception. Two days later, cognizant of a whole new life about to begin, I flew to Washington D.C. to visit my assignment officer. He congratulated me on my selection for the Naval Postgraduate School, but cautioned that I couldn't count on receiving orders any time soon. He advised I sign up for another sea tour. This forced a decision on my part as to whether to stay in the service or submit my resignation. By now your mother was working at the welfare office on the waterfront in the old Portsmouth city hall. Most of her time was spent in the notorious Jeffery Wilson housing project. She recalls the dingy brick buildings where people lounged in the concrete hallways. During one particular "home call" she peered into the back room. The floor was covered with newspapers, insulation against the outside cold, helped by a small wood stove. A gray shape zipped across the floor, then went up her leg. She looked down to find a mouse that had become snagged in her stockings. How to dislodge the animal gracefully was a skill to she'd not yet acquired, and today she still worries how well she carried it off. "I couldn't very well say, 'eek, a mouse!" she remembers. In the chill of those late autumn days came your mother's first missed period. We'd been watching her biorhythms since Thanksgiving, though we rarely talked about it. Perhaps it was too important for words. By December all signs pointed to her being pregnant. We'd not yet consulted a doctor, but thought we should go public first. Our neighbor George arrived home from a sales trip, and we shyly told the news. My mission now became that of finding a way to be home for your birth. In our minds you did not yet exist. In those days pregnancy was viewed as a mild disease, an unpleasant but necessary condition required for parenthood. The word "pregnant" was rarely spoken aloud. Women used cute terms such as "PG" or "preggers" to defuse the embarrassment. Pre-borns remained invisible in those pre-sonogram days. Its gender was a matter of speculation. It was not until the 1980s that parents were first introduced to the idea that babies in the womb could be cognitive beings, largely through Thomas Verny's *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* (Summit Books, 1981) and David Chamberlain's *Babies Remember Birth* (Tarcher, 1988). Work by numerous researchers demonstrates a remarkable ability for "prenatal learning and memory for stories, music, voices, specific words and sentences, and particular languages." I'm quoting from Chamberlain's compilation *The Sentient Prenate: What Every Parent Should Know* (Pre- and Prenatal Psychology Journal, 9(1), Fall 1994), the basis of much of the information presented here. We now know, for instance, that prenatal babies learn songs. At what age, I do not know, perhaps as soon as the fetal listening system is developed, believed to be as early as 16 weeks. During the early weeks of your existence, the blockbuster song "Winchester Cathedral" often played on the radio. Perhaps one day you'll recognize it. Also "Georgy Girl" and "Thoroughly Modern Millie." Around your 12th week the Beatles released a single "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Penny Lane." I was hearing a lot of the Beatles back then, including the ever popular songs "Norwegian Wood," "Michelle," "Eleanor Rigby," "Yellow Submarine," and "Yesterday." This could be called the heyday of that incomparable group. I remember Petula Clark's voice on the radio singing "Downtown" the day I drove to downtown Norfolk to take a series of vocational tests. My aim was to shake myself free of my indecision. The orders to the Postgraduate School had come in, and required a reply. In the counselor's office we went over the results. I confessed my confusion over my career loyalties and life's ambitions. Most psychologists would have insisted that such choices could come only

from me, and thus could not be coached. Dr. George Cole had the courage to offer me his mature insight. "I've known a number of men in your shoes," he said, "After what you've told me today, I really don't see why you'd want to stay in the Navy." Dr. Cole's blunt, caring advice gave me my first ray of sunshine. I left that office feeling like a man released from death row. This was it. I was leaving the Navy to enter a new world. And I was taking my family with me. I drove to the airport and checked out the T-34. On that day, December 16, my log book reads: "wingovers, loops, barrel rolls." On Christmas Day we flew to Baltimore, taking off on an ice-covered runway that rendered the airport closed to commercial traffic. The highways were impassable, so that flying over the snow covered landscaped, we enjoyed the privilege of being the only family in Virginia going out of town for Christmas. The next day on the return trip home, I performed a barrel roll, thus introducing you and your mother to upside down flight. Research shows that by the time a fetus has reached 15 weeks it has mastered the movements of "reaching and grasping the umbilical cord with their fingers, finding their feet and toes and sucking on them, stretching, scratching, yawning, and rubbing their hands and their feet." By 26 weeks babies can do an elegant longitudinal spinal roll! You may not have yet acquired the ability to perform such intricate movements in your amniotic sky, but I imagine you were keenly aware of the outside forces that were beginning to shape your world. Meanwhile, my ship was leaving the shipyard for a three-month shakedown cruise. I would be returning to sea and absenting myself from you and your mother. You probably needed the rest. In late January, while crossing the Atlantic Ocean, news came that the Apollo One crew had died in a fire that broke out during prelaunch testing. In February, 2,500 women stormed the Pentagon demanding an end to the war. In March, 10,000 hippies swarmed Central Park for a "Be-In." And I received word from Washington that my resignation had been approved. Your mother continued with her job, the two of you going to work every day. The welfare office had just moved from its location in City Hall on High Street. At home she sewed some A-line dresses designed to accommodate her changing shape. She was feeling vulnerable to physical falls, taking extra care walking in the snow. There was also an added feeling of vulnerability to strange men who loitered about the projects, and this may account for her tendency to wear a trench coat. A woman tenant once made a sneering comment about her "nice" clothes. She left the job in March. The pregnancy, she recalls, gave her a good excuse to quit. She suffered little morning sickness. Money was no issue, nor job advancement. There was never any doubt that we'd be moving away as soon as you were born and I was released from active duty. In March the ship returned. It was a warm spring day as the ship's wives stood on the pier. From my vantage point on the bridge, I witnessed your mother's swollen shape for the first time. How to describe the feeling? That the world and I were one. That you and your mother were the sun and moon revolving around me. You'd arrived in time to deliver me from the stifling military life. You would usher me into a world where I could become myself, which, as we both matured, changed. Finding you a hospital was the next step. The Navy's all-expensespaid facilities were available, but I discarded the idea. The Navy did not allow fathers to be present during birth or labor. In those days, a man's wish to witness childbirth was regarded as shameful. Even the medical community viewed it as such. Later, in 1969, a Seattle obstetrician I spoke with about viewing your brother's birth frowned at the idea. "Is this some kind of morbid curiosity?" he asked in a light, embarrassed tone. Yet DePaul Hospital, the most liberal in the area, offered me the chance to be present during your mother's labor. The costs of attending a civilian hospital were steep. No matter which hospital we chose, I would not be allowed in the delivery room. We had not yet decided that day in early April when we drove to the airstrip for a ride in the Piper Cub. The three of us flew over the Virginia forest that afternoon. After circling the field, we dropped in over the trees with one wing pointed down to accelerate the fall, then leveled off in time to touch lightly down. The sounds and feel of that flight may have guided you later in life. You were in your 22nd or 23rd week by then. Babies that age, while their eye lids remain fused, do react to light shined on the mother's abdomen. Your skin sensitivity would have been fully developed, and you probably showed facial expressions. Around 12 weeks babies can squint and scowl, and by 14 weeks they are able to show a sneer of dissatisfaction. In cases of therapeutic abortion, babies of 21 weeks have been heard crying audibly in the

uterus (the phenomenon, appearing throughout the literature, is termed vagitus uterinus, or "squalling in the womb.") The combined faculties of sight, dexterity, and sensitivity allows mid-term fetuses to do some amazing things. In 1978 researchers reported that while being viewed via ultrasound, a 24-week fetus who was accidentally hit by a needle twisted his body away, located the needle with its arm, and repeatedly struck the needle barrel! At 23 weeks babies also show signs of dreaming, with rapid eye movements reported by a researcher in 1981. We also know that amniotic residents are sensitive to unusual external movements. A 1981 paper reports that fetuses inside mothers during an earthquake in Southern Italy showed intense hyperkinesia which lasted from two to eight hours: "movements were numerous, disordered, and vigorous." Researchers reported in 1989 that fetuses inside mothers waiting for amniocentesis are more active than when mothers are waiting for a routine sonogram. These are obviously young fetuses, probably not as well developed as you were that day we flew in and out of the South Norfolk airfield. There is no way of knowing what you may have felt. Minutes after returning home that day from the airport your mother discovered she was spotting. We drove to the Naval hospital. There the doctor jotted down the information and began to escort her to the X-ray room. I asked if they might want to consider the fact that she was pregnant. "You didn't tell us," the doctor said, turning around. He concluded that there was no real cause for alarm, but suggested that we might restrict our flying to smooth concrete runways. The incident might have saved your life. To my way of thinking, it proved that military hospitals were no place for your delivery. The staff's haste at ordering an X-ray without first asking about the patient's condition provided an irrefutable warning, one that underscored family lessons learned prior to my own birth. My mother's first born child, a boy I was told, had suffered traumatic head injuries and died at the hands of an inexperienced military doctor. For that reason my parents wisely chose to have my birth in the city's civilian hospital. The spotting episode led your mother to insist that we stay away from the grass airport. Perhaps she was still feeling nervous from an earlier near-miss. In January while I was away she had been driving home after a visit to Baltimore. A car driven by an unlicensed teen roared out of a side street onto the main highway and clipped the bumper of her car, sending you both careening off the highway and into a gas station. Her quick reaction brought the car to a stop just feet from the pumps! The officers told her she was lucky. That month the ship returned to sea to prepare us for Vietnam. It seemed likely I'd be released from active duty prior to the sailing date, but I wanted to leave the Navy on a good note. I'd been training for years to defend my notion of "freedom." North Vietnamese pilots might wish to sink our ships, and only my guns could stop them. It took me years to understand all this was posturing, pretending that our guns might deter modern jet fighters. In my case, fighting behind long odds was a family tradition, and the best thing any male could do for his reputation was to die fighting. Which rendered my job supervising an obsolete weapons system the perfect role. The nation's obsession with death grew stronger. In April, the State of Colorado passed the nation's first legalized abortion bill, allowing fetuses to be neatly disposed of. That same month, one man who publicly refused to kill when ordered to do so was made an example of: Boxer Muhammad Ali was stripped of his heavyweight boxing crown and indicted on a felony for refusing to join the military. In May, 1967, I returned home and began my aviation training in earnest, considering then a career flying for an airline. You and your mother spent the days lounging around the apartment and baby-sitting a neighbor's dog. In New York, 70,000 people marched to show their support for the Vietnam War. It was time to find an obstetrician. Our doctor was recommended by our neighbor Pam who did his laboratory work. It was rumored that he'd undergone some recent scandal, a malpractice suit perhaps. We felt it was not our place to inquire. Our hesitancy to look into this important matter gives a glimpse at our innocence. The residents of Apartments #9 would often speculate as to the nature of the scandal. I complained about the doctor's habit of being tardy for his appointments, but our neighbor, also named George, staunchly defended him. George was a natural salesman. "Who do you want?" he argued, "someone who's busy, or someone with time on his hands?" The doctor's waiting room was almost always empty, but your mother thought it best to stay with him, and, later to my regret, we did. About that time a former Naval Academy roommate now stationed at the Newport News shipyard invited me to go sailing. Bill owned a small sailboat and

needed a crew. On weekends Bill and I would head out on the Chesapeake Bay in search of adventure, once at night with gale force winds ripping at the sails and unlighted buoys springing from the frothy waves. In June the FCC ordered all television and radio stations to air health warnings with broadcast cigarette ads. The long-awaited war between Israel and Palestine broke out; it ended six days later. My shipmates and I were delighted at the Israeli victory, until word came that one of our own ships positioned in the Mediterranean near Israel was fiercely attacked by the Israeli air force, resulting in the death of 34 Americans. At this same time, Mohammed Ali was sentenced to five years in prison. I remember hearing the title track of the film "Born Free," about a captive lion returned to the wild. Bill and I often played it on his boat. I would sing it at home. I knew nothing of the concept of astrology then and would not learn my own birth sign for another year or two. Looking back I wonder what astrologer today would not exclaim "Ha!" to learn that you would be born in the sign of the lion. In June I passed my Commercial license flight test and continued with the arduous instrument syllabus. On the day the ship sailed for Vietnam without me, I rented a Cessna and flew east toward the sea. The day was overcast, but the visibility remained clear. From a distance I easily spotted the ship. She was steaming against a stiff breeze, and I flew alongside the bridge, maintaining my station as might an escort or oiler. From my small seat in the cockpit I grinned and waved at my former shipmates as they waved back. Then I turned toward home. I spent my days doing odd chores around the house. I barely noticed world events. In July the American poet Carl Sandburg died. General Westmoreland requested another 100,000 troops for Vietnam. Your due date was drawing close. During those long summer days there was only the wait to see who you'd be. Your mother had once said she wanted boys, and so she went through a list of names and picked out your name. To which I replied, "sounds good to me." There was something embarrassing about the personal, an attitude I believe derived from my membership in the warrior class. Fighters were meant to be sacrificed, to have their names etched in granite, their faces not to be seen, at least not up close. On August 3, your due date, you remained firmly in place, savoring the comfort of your amniotic bed like an old man sleeping in. President Johnson ordered 45,000 additional men to report to the Asian rice paddies. I was happy that my time was up and I could start living. My sailing partner Bill suggested it was time to take you two on a sailboat ride. Bill thought of himself as a lady's man and having your mother aboard was a special event. We headed out one morning, our destination a small town near the mouth of the James River. There we anchored, devoured a picnic lunch your mother had prepared, then headed home. The wind began to blow, and with it came the inevitable seas. The boat began slamming into the waves, causing discomfort and slowing our progress. By nightfall we were still miles from home. Today your mother remembers the helpless feeling of throwing up. A week or two later, in the midst of a leisurely weekend, your mother felt the first pangs. A full moon was rising. We calmly drove to the hospital, and she was admitted and prepped. We were assigned a curtained cubical in the labor room. I took a chair next to the bed. There I recorded the durations of your mother's contractions. For the first hour they occurred every three or four minutes. Sixteen entries were made in all before the measurements were abruptly brought to a halt. For years afterward the memory of what happened next could cause me to break into a sweat. A nurse opened the curtain and told me she was sorry but that the visiting time was over. I explained that I'd been cleared to stay. The nurse replied that the plans had changed. Another woman had been admitted and was about to occupy the adjacent space. "You wouldn't want another man to hear your wife's labor cries," she said.[dagger] I thought she must be joking, but she insisted that she was not. I pointed out that a male orderly was attending to the patients, but that had no effect on the nurse. I spent the rest of the night telephoning our doctor. The answering service took my calls, but the calls were never returned. I remembered back to the doctor's tardiness at appointments and how I argued this was no small matter. Now I was learning the hard way. There was no one to represent us that night. "Why don't you go home and get some rest?" the head nurse suggested. "There's nothing for you to do. Your wife is in the hands of Jesus Christ." She disappeared through a door and left me alone in the darkness. There was a moment when I considered an act of folly. It occurred to me that my life had been shaped to strike at the evil of the medical profession. The airport was but a few

minutes' away, and there would be parked the T-34. The hospital lobby was fronted by a two-story tall pane of glass. Cities name their plazas for men who are unafraid to strike at oppression, I told myself. History celebrates the German satchel bombers who tried to assassinate Hitler and even the Japanese kamikaze pilots who courageously targeted their enemy ships. I would take off and fly the plane toward the hospital, then aim it directly at the dimly lighted lobby. Small planes rarely explode when they crash. No one would be hurt, save for myself. At that moment death seemed the best option. There'd be paperwork to fill out and explanations to be made, but years would pass before this hospital and others would dare issue false promises to their patients again! I had risked my life to redeem other countries' broken promises in Asia, I reminded myself, why couldn't I do it here? I experienced a giddy sense of knowing what it was I was meant to do in life: to die for a cause of my own choosing! The memory of that terrible moment haunts me today, and lends sympathy to others who, after a long night alone with their demons, decide to end their lives and others with them, in the manner in which they have been trained. I was pacing the lobby when a young nurse walked in. She asked if I would like to see my wife. I went into the room where you were, in your final hour of darkness. Your mother was in a daze, and I knew she was owned by the medical establishment, just as we all were owned. There was someone else now I had to consider, someone who had nothing to do with any of this, who in a few years might become a person I could hold a conversation with. How little did I know then of the vastness of life and its unexpected pleasures and enduring satisfactions. How could I have imagined the stunning look you'd soon be giving me, that of a mature man studying the face of someone he'd known for so long in every way but by sight. And the decades of conversations we would be having. And the thrill I would experience on that day standing on the tarmac looking up as you made your first solo flight. I returned to the lobby as the hospital began waking up. The nurse came out to tell me your mother was entering the delivery room. Any minute it would be over, and the rest of it would begin. July 1998 San Diego Sidebar I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dorothy Grider in recalling many of the important events which occurred in my absence. Without her enthusiastic support this article could not have been written. I also want to thank David Chamberlain for providing the inspiration and factual material about the life of babies in the womb found in this Chronicle. Footnote [dagger] Weeks later, in a letter from Dr. Fred Given, Jr., then director of the DePaul Hospital Ob/Gyn department, replying to the complaint I'd filed, he wrote: "Some patients have objections to other strange men being around, although it might be in the adjoining room . . . [For] husbands to be with their wives ... is not always possible." Sister Anne, the administrator, showed a more tolerant stance when she wrote: "As a result of your letter, I am going to investigate this a bit further and see if we can accord this opportunity [to view the mother in labor] to any father who wishes to make use of it." The days of routinely allowing fathers to view their children's entry into the world was still about two decades away. AuthorAffiliation George Grider, P.E.

Publication title: Journal of Prenatal&Perinatal Psychology&Health

Volume: 17

Issue: 1

Pages: 29-39

Number of pages: 11

Publication year: 2002

Publication date: Fall 2002

Year: 2002

Publisher: Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

Place of publication: Forestville

Country of publication: United States

Journal subject: Medical Sciences--Obstetrics And Gynecology, Psychology, Birth Control

ISSN: 10978003

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: General Information

ProQuest document ID: 198696461

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198696461?accountid=36557>

Copyright: Copyright Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health Fall 2002

Last updated: 2010-06-06

Database: ProQuest Public Health

Contact ProQuest

Copyright © 2012 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - **Terms and Conditions**