

## **50 Years Exploring Pre- and Perinatal Psychology: A Personal Journey**

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Looking back many years, I believe this is how my interest in early memories was awakened. One day, while working with a young man in therapy on his dream, he suddenly, without any input from me, started to cry like a little baby. He cried for close to ten minutes and then stopped on his own. "What just happened to you?" I asked him. He told me that in his mind he found himself in a crib and that he was crying for his mother. Then, he recalled that he had seen photos of himself as an infant lying in a blue crib, whereas the crib that he had just experienced was definitely white. He wondered about the discrepancy. I suggested that he ask his mother to resolve this question.

The next week he returned for his regular appointment and told me that according to his mother, when he was born his parents lacked money for a new crib but were able to borrow one from a neighbor. The borrowed crib was white. A few months later, they were able to buy a new crib for him and that new crib was blue. That crib is the one that appears in all the early photographs.

I felt both intrigued and mystified by this experience, since throughout my studies first at the University of Toronto then Harvard University I was taught that children remember nothing before the age of two. And yet as I continued to practice psychiatry, I repeatedly encountered patients who would tell me about events in their lives that reached far back in time to infancy, birth, and even womb life. A few of these memories may have originated from overheard conversations by family members or gleaned from photo albums or videos.

On the other hand, a considerable number would not have been easily available and were corroborated by evidence supplied by parents, hospital reports, and other documentation. I wondered how to explain these memories scientifically. It was then that after considerable study, I submitted a paper, "The Psychic Life of the Unborn Child" to the 5th World Congress of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynecology in Rome, Italy, November 1977.

To my great surprise, my paper was accepted. Even more surprisingly, I was given prime time to present it. My paper was so well received that at the end of my talk I suggested that anyone who wanted to continue the

conversation could please come to my room at 5 pm. At the appointed time people were lining up to get into my room. There was much excitement. I met R.D. Laing, Sheila Kitzinger, Frederick Leboyer, Louis Mehl, and Susanne Arms among many others. It became very apparent to me that this was a subject that was of immense interest to some of the brightest, most accomplished healthcare providers in the world. Perhaps, a good subject for a book, I wondered?

So, I started to read scientific papers on birth psychology. That's how I came across the ISPP and submitted a paper, "Tapping the Natal Memory Pool" to their next meeting. My paper was accepted, and I went to Salzburg, Austria in March 1978 to present it at the 5th International Congress, International Study Group for Prenatal Psychology (ISPP). There I had the pleasure to meet Gustav Graber, Igor Caruso, Friedrich Kruse, Sep Schindler, and Peter Fodor-Freybergh. It turned out that Peter and I were childhood friends and lost touch many years ago. Small world. The same year I presented a paper "The Embryology of Consciousness" at APA and Societe Medico Psychologique in Paris, France, where I first met Michel Odent.

After participating in the 6th International Congress of Obstetrics and Gynecology in West Berlin in September 1980, my wife and I drove to Cagnes-sur-Mer in the South of France and spent time with psychologist Ann Marie Saurel, director of The Tomatis Centre there. On another trip we went to Holland and spent a lovely afternoon with Lietaert Peerbolte, author of *Psychic Energy*.

Based on all these experiences and researching many scientific papers and books, I started to write the book that eventually was published as *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* (with John Kelly) in 1991. Simon & Schuster, the publisher, sent me on a coast-to-coast book tour with the usual daily TV, radio, and newsprint interviews. In the course of my travels, I met many like-minded obstetricians, psychologists, midwives, and other health care professionals and academics. Most importantly, as it later turned out, after a guest appearance on the Merv Griffin show in LA, I met Dr. David Chamberlain. We started to correspond. David suggested we present a joint workshop on Birth Memories at the 1982 American Psychological Association Annual Meeting. Our proposal was quickly rejected. Disappointed as I was, I rather impetuously said, "If they don't want us in their club, let's form our own."

By that time, I was corresponding with many scientists, obstetricians, psychologists, and others interested in early development. David also had a list of similarly inclined people which he shared with me. I called on these contacts when I organized the First International Congress on Pre- and Perinatal Psychology in 1983 in Toronto. This was before computers. My secretary, God bless her, hand typed every letter of invitation and all subsequent correspondence.

Some of the biggest and best known speakers were Ernest Freud from the UK, Michel Odent, Anne-Marie Saurel and Alfred Tomatis from France, Stan Grof, David Cheek, Lewis Mehl, Gayle Peterson, Judith Kestenberg, Eva Reich, Sylvia Klein Olkin, Sondra Ray, Barbara Findeisen, Lloyd de Mause, and David Chamberlain from the US, A Earnshaw from Australia, Arnaldo Rascovsky from Argentina, Peter Fodor-Freybergh from Sweden, Sepp Schindler from Austria, Ivan Milakovic and Franz Rausch from West Germany, and Marcia Penner, Marion Woodman, Beverly Stokes, Murray Enkin, and myself from Canada. About 500 people from all walks of life and from many countries attended the Congress. It was a resounding success.

Immediately following the conclusion of the Congress, some of my colleagues and I had a meeting and founded the Pre- and Perinatal Psychology Association of North America (PPPANA), later renamed APPPAH. I was elected the Association's first President in which role I continued until 1991.

Two years later under the chairmanship of David Chamberlain, we held our 2nd International Congress on Pre- and Peri-Natal Psychology, in San Diego, July 1985. We followed this by Congresses every 2 years in various locations in the USA.

In the Spring of 1986, I met with executives of Human Sciences Press in New York and entered an agreement with them to publish our Association's journal. The first issue of the Pre- and Peri-Natal Psychology Journal was published in the fall of 1986. I edited it from its inception until 1990. For the last ten years I have acted as the journal's Associate Editor. The journal (*JOPPPAH*) has been published quarterly since 1986 and is currently published triannually.

In 1995, I initiated a program on Pre- and Perinatal Psychology and Health in the Department of Human Development at Saint Mary's University, Minneapolis, MN. There was much opposition from conservative faculty to this program. Though we had many well qualified students, the university shut down the program after three years.

However, the example and the curriculum inspired Dr. Marti Glenn to start the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute where I taught for eight years. SBGI tried for many years and at great expense to become accredited as a university, but no matter how many hoops they jumped through, the authorities always came up with another one. Finally, SBGI was sold to The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, where then-enrolled SBGI students were allowed to complete their studies from an accredited university and SBGI closed its doors. That represented a huge loss to Pre- and Perinatal Psychology.

In 1987, Human Sciences Press published the best papers given at the First PPP Congress in Toronto under the title *Pre- and Peri-Natal Psychology: An Introduction*, with me as the editor.

I followed this up with several books dealing with Pre and Perinatal Psychology, namely:

- *Parenting Your Unborn Child: A Practical Guide and Permanent Keepsake*. 1987. (Also published in Japan)
- *Nurturing The Unborn Child* (with Pamela Weintraub). United States and Canada, 1991. (Also published in Italy, Brazil, Japan, and Spain)
- *Tomorrow's Baby: The Art and Science of Parenting from Conception through Infancy*, 2002. (Also published in Spain, Germany, Italy, Brazil, and Japan)
- *Pre-Parenting: Nurturing your Child from Conception* (with Pamela Weintraub. This is the paperback edition of *Tomorrow's Baby*) 2003. (Also published in Japan)
- Additionally, I contributed to three anthologies:
- VERNY, T.R. (2013). Working with pre- and perinatal material in psychotherapy. In L. Janus (Ed.), *Die pranatale dimension in der psychotherapie*. Mattes Verlag.
- VERNY, T.R. (2013). The pre- & perinatal origins of childhood and adult diseases and personality disorders in K. Evertz, L. Janus, and R. Linder (Eds.), *Lehrbuch der pranatalen psychologie*. Mattes Verlag.
- VERNY, T.R. (2021). The inheritance of change in O. Gouni, JRG Turner, and GN Troya (Eds.), *Change: Birthing & parenting at times of crisis*. Turner.

Starting in 1981 with the publication of *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, like Johnny Appleseed I set out to plant seeds of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology throughout Canada, the United States, Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia. I was invited to present lectures and workshops in many countries. Some that stand out were:

- The International Childbirth Education Association (ICEA) Conference, Toronto, ON, Canada. Aug 1985
- 1st German Rebirthing Congress, University of Osnabruck, Germany, Oct 1989
- Five city tour of Brazil sponsored by ABENEPI (Brazilian Association for Infant Neurology and Psychiatry) to Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, Recife, Sao Paulo, Porto Alegre, Oct 22-31, 1990
- University Homenskeho, Bratislava, CSR, and Charles University, Prague, CSR, May 1992
- World Congress of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine, Cracow, Poland, May 11-16, 1992
- Hua Chiew General Hospital, Bangkok, Thailand, May 1993
- University of Udayana, Denpasar, Bali, May 1993

- 2nd World Congress of Prenatal Education, Athens, Greece, May 1994
- XI International Congress of the ISPPM, Heidelberg, Germany, May 1995

My very worst experience at a conference was in Brussels at Koninklijke Belgische Vereniging Voor Gynecologie en Verloskunde, Affligem, Belgium in 1995 where I spoke on, “Pre- and Perinatal Obstetrical Procedures: A Psychosomatic Critique.” In this talk, I addressed what I called “gyne-gadgetry”—like amniocentesis and fetal heart monitors. To say that it was not well received by the obstetricians present is an understatement. But they did so very politely.

In 2004, *Mothering Magazine*, in recognition of my contributions to the field of parenting and child rearing, named me one of their “living treasures.” In 2005, the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute bestowed on me a Doctorate of Humane Letters (DHL). Recently, I have spoken at conferences in India, Italy, Spain, Chile, and England.

When I wrote *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* almost forty years ago, I had much solid scientific evidence to back up the central premise of my book, namely that an unborn child is a sensing, feeling, conscious, and remembering being, at least three months before birth. However, I had little or no scientific evidence to support cognition or memory of any kind reaching back further in time. Of course, given the rapidity of development and change in the biomedical sciences these past decades, forty years is practically an aeon ago. Much of what is now known in cell biology, genetics, and more importantly, epigenetics, not only confirms my claims in *The Secret Life*, but enables me to put forward the bold new concepts in my latest book, *The Embodied Mind: Understanding the Mysteries of Cellular Memory, Consciousness, and Our Bodies*.

What set me on the path towards writing *The Embodied Mind* was an article I read six years ago reprinted from *Reuters Science News* entitled, “Tiny brain no obstacle to French civil servant.” It seems that in July 2007, a 44-year-old French man went to a hospital complaining of a mild weakness in his left leg. When doctors learned that the man had a spinal shunt removed when he was 14, they performed numerous scans of his head. What they discovered was a huge fluid-filled chamber occupying most of the space in his skull, leaving little more than a thin sheet of actual brain tissue. It was a case of hydrocephalus, literally “water on the brain.” Dr. Lionel Feuillet of Hôpital de la Timone in Marseille was quoted as saying, “The images were most unusual...the brain was virtually absent.” The patient was a married father of two children and worked as a civil servant apparently leading a normal life, despite having a cranium filled with spinal fluid and very little brain tissue.

To my surprise, I found in the medical literature an astonishing number of documented cases of adults who as children had parts of their brain removed to heal their persistent epilepsy. Following

hemispherectomy, most children showed not only an improvement in their intellectual capacity and sociability but also apparent retention of memory, personality, and sense of humor. Similarly, adults who have had hemispherectomies enjoyed excellent long-term seizure control and increased postoperative employability.

If people who lack a large part of their brain can function normally, or even relatively normally, then there must exist, I thought, some kind of back-up system that can kick in when the primary system crashes. I devoted the next six years studying the medical and scientific literature searching for clues to this puzzle.

While many scientists have contributed greatly in advancing science in their own areas of expertise, be that genetics or cellular biology, I have synthesized here these disparate findings, “connected the dots,” and in the process, arrived at some significant new insights about the brain and the brain-mind relationship and how memory works. Delve into my newest book, *The Embodied Mind: Understanding the Mysteries of Cellular Memory, Consciousness, and Our Bodies* (2021) for more information.