

I D E A S

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BEING BORN

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David Cayley

"In the evening they camped by the Forgetful River, whose water no pitcher can hold. And all were compelled to drink a certain measure, and those who had no wisdom to save them drank more than the measure. And as each man drank, he forgot everything. They went to sleep, and when midnight came there was an earthquake and thunder, and like shooting stars they were all swept suddenly up to be born."

Lister Sinclair

Good evening, I'm Lister Sinclair and this is Ideas.

Teaser

"Death can be an embrace, a benediction. It's pain and striving and longing, and joy and exultation and ecstasy."

Teaser

I was rebirthed to the time when I was just coming out of the birth canal, when my head was crowning. And the next thing I remembered was my entire nervous system just contracting. As I felt the abrasiveness of the lights, the harshness of the lights and the coldness of the room after coming from this dark, safe, warm environment I'd been in for nine months, all of a sudden it was like wow, it's cold, it's too bright and too loud. And that was the first real trauma that I consciously remembered.

Teaser

The memories that come from birth are sophisticated. They're not infant memories. Now, the situation gets even clearer as you go back from birth into the uterine period, and you get memories from there. They're the same kinds of memories. You can push it all the way back to the third month in gestation, the second month in gestation -- even back to conception. It doesn't seem to matter a particle, you get the same, profoundly sophisticated memories about what's happening.

Lister Sinclair

In 1981 Dr. Thomas Verny published The Secret Life of the Unborn Child. This book was a survey and a synthesis of contemporary research into the startling mental, physical and emotional capacities of babies before, during and after birth. Its publication and its subsequent popularity signal the coming of age of a school of psychology which had previously led a fairly marginal existence. This past summer, Tom

Verny again played a catalyzing role in the organization of the first International Congress on Pre and Perinatal Psychology, held in Toronto in early July. The Congress brought together midwives, obstetricians, childbirth educators, psychologists and psychoanalysts, with a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, but with a common commitment and a shared interest in birth and prenatal life.

David Cayley attended the Congress for Ideas, and has prepared a three-part documentary about Being Born. The subject matter of his series has been drawn from interviews recorded during the Congress, supplemented occasionally by excerpts from our recordings of the Congress proceedings. David Cayley presents Being Born, part one: "Memories."

David Cayley

Most of us have no conscious memory of our beginnings. We cannot recall the confined watery world of the womb or the earthquake and upheaval of birth. Indeed, most modern psychologies have denied the very possibility of such memory, claiming that the brain at birth is too immature to retain such impressions. And yet it seems that the memory is there, its meaning inscribed in our bodies and our behaviour. Again and again I heard of cases in which events from birth and before had exerted a decisive influence on the personality later in life. I'll be discussing how this is possible later in the program, but I want to begin by presenting a case that was typical.

It was reported by Helen Watkins, a psychologist at the University of Montana. A student had come to see her, complaining of inability to concentrate and anxiety about examinations so severe that it resulted in almost total blocking. Under hypnosis, he regressed to his birth, and at the Congress she showed a videotape of the results.

Helen Watkins

What had occurred in the process of birth was that he was stuck -- and that's exactly what he experienced under hypnosis. This being stuck, and then feeling ambivalent in terms of going back or being born. He felt that ambivalence inside the birth canal. Now, he psychologically, in a sense, never faced life, never was psychologically born, you see. He was still stuck back there at this level, so that his whole attitude to life was -- be careful, watch out --

never reaching out, never getting angry, ever. Always being the good little boy. So he was afraid of life and afraid of living. By going back there and redoing that and having him experience breaking through, he was finally able to be born. And on the videotape you can see the kind of physical fear, the spasms of the muscles as he's trembling uncontrollably. And you can just feel and see his whole process of birth.

David Cayley

Helen Watkin's videotape is a convincing demonstration of the fact that birth can be both remembered and re-experienced. It also demonstrates that our experience at birth or before can produce continuing results in our lives, even though we may have no conscious memory of these experiences. Birth and prebirth memory has been and remains a controversial subject. When Otto Rank published The Trauma of Birth in 1923, his supposition that the child is conscious during birth angered Freud and resulted in Rank's excommunication from the psychoanalytic movement. The mainstream of psychoanalysis continues to believe today that apparent birth memories are really fantasies. But there have been exceptions, and their number has increased as more and more clinicians have sought and found convincing proofs of the validity of very early memories.

Tom Verny is the author of The Secret Life of the Unborn Child and the prime mover behind the Perinatal Psychology Congress.

Thomas Verny

I began once in a while to come across patients who very spontaneously, without me doing anything except giving them the space and the comfort and the security to do so, would regress to some very, very early experiences around the time of birth and sometimes even prior to birth. So that what would happen is that suddenly, for example, a man would start crying like a little baby and I would leave him in that state of, I guess, altered state of consciousness. And then ten minutes later he would come out of that altered state of consciousness and report to me that he found himself in a white crib, and he was crying for his mother, and his mother wouldn't come. And then when we checked out these experiences, they proved to be valid -- they proved to be valid memories which he could not have really obtained in any other way. So when I began to see this kind of occurrence in my

practice, I then began to wonder whether anybody else had had these kinds of discoveries in their practice. And then I gradually came across some psychoanalysts, and I came across Stanislov Grof with his LSD experiences, and R.D. Laing, and many other people who in fact have reported on their patients recalling things prior to the age of two, which was always given as a sort of the demarcation point. So then, when I reached that conclusion in the clinical sciences, then I thought, okay, now all these people say that their patients have had these memories, but who is going to believe me unless I have some hard scientific research to back it up? And so that's really how I spent the five or six years prior to the publication of the book, that's how I spent my time, just reading an incredible number of very hard scientific research journals and papers, and trying to piece together research data which would in fact support the clinical findings.

David Cayley

Other clinicians were having similar experiences. In San Diego, psychologist David Chamberlain was hearing convincingly detailed birth memories from his clients, and wondering how he might prove their validity.

David Chamberlain

I was startled to find people telling me that they were remembering their births. And this was quite fascinating, because what they have to say is totally unexpected. They talk in great detail, they tell you not only how they feel, but they have a sense of how other people are thinking and feeling too, like their mothers or the doctors. They sometimes quote verbatim what is said to them at their birth, and oftentimes these remarks are very negative, actually poisonous in nature. They serve as a kind of bad inoculation that the people have to recover from. And that's how the memories kind of bubble to the surface when I'm doing therapy. People come with problems, I suggest to the mind that we go back to the beginning when this first happened, and then they tell me, "Gee, I can't believe this, but I seem to be at my birth."

Well, I was fascinated with this and impressed by it, but had no idea of how significant it might be. But when I started to share with my colleagues about it, they would say, "Oh, that's interesting, yes, we know, but the brain isn't properly developed at that time and so what you're getting is just a fantasy." I didn't think it could

possibly be a fantasy, it was just too good. It was absolutely, clearly and directly connected with symptoms, things like that. And it was often things that no one had ever told them. And when they asked parents about it, they would usually get confirmation of the fact that what they had told me was true. Sometimes there were secrets involved the parents had never told the child.

After a while I had 25 cases of this, and a local journalist got interested and tried to write an article about this work for a national magazine. When it was finally done, the editor wrote back and said "This is not believable, we can't publish this." So I realized I had to do something formal in the way of research to clear up the matter. So we hit on this idea in our staff in San Diego of taking mother and child pairs, and hypnotizing them separately, where the mother said that she had never told the child anything in detail about the birth, and the child said she or he had no memory of the birth. I managed to find ten of these pairs after months of searching around, and hypnotized them, separately of course. I got the full record from each of them about this particular birth. Well, I found that the memories matched very well. The stories were coherent, they didn't go off in strange different directions. They dovetailed at as many as 22 points in the story. You could just look through stories and see them saying the same thing. Sometimes the very same statements were quoted verbatim, sequences were right, children were able to describe things like the mother's hairdo in the delivery room, or the arrangement of the furniture in the mother's room after the delivery. So many details, that I just thought it was impossible to explain it as any kind of imagination.

David Cayley

The type of memory evoked by David Chamberlain under hypnosis is technically known as "hypermnnesia" and it seems to produce a multisensory awareness of past experience which is virtually equivalent to being there.

David Chamberlain

In that state of hypermnnesia people seem to have unusually detailed memory. It's not vague, it isn't general, it's not abstract. People would say, "I'm in my crib," and they can go on from there to recover these very small details about what they can smell, what they taste, what they hear, what they can see, what they're thinking --

things like that. Now, I happen to believe that we all record in some manner our significant life experiences. We record a lot that are not significant too, but I would say at least we record the significant ones. And so they are recoverable. Some people remember birth without any special help at all. They have always tried to persuade others of the fact that they have legitimate memories of birth, but nobody believes them generally. It's also known that very young children, maybe up to the age of 2½ or 3 sometimes have spontaneous memories of birth. If you simply ask them about their birth, they can tell you. And they startle their parents in the information that they come forth with -- things that the parents just didn't know that they could know in any way, but they do it.

David Cayley

A case in point was reported to me by Tom Verny from a letter he recently received. Here he reads an excerpt from that letter.

Thomas Verny

"One evening when Gretchen was 3, we were sitting at the dining table and remembering some pyjamas I wore when I was pregnant with her. Just kidding, we asked her if she remembered the pyjamas, and her answer floored us. 'I couldn't see what you were wearing, I could only hear what you were saying.' We just couldn't believe it, so we began questioning her. 'What was it like?' 'Dark and crowded.' 'What else?' 'It was like a big bowl of water.' 'What did you think when you were born?' 'I could stretch. It wasn't crowded any more.' This child could carry on a conversation without ever saying she saw things, only what she heard and how it felt. We said, 'What was your favourite food?' 'I didn't get any food.' She never answered a question wrong. I know she really knew what she was saying." And there's a tiny little postscript which I think is really, really important. "I called a few child psychologists, and they either thought 'who cares?' or 'so what?'. One even said -- listen to this -- 'Don't encourage her or the kids on the street will not want to play with her.' So much for scientific curiosity, eh?"

David Cayley

One of the reasons for rejections of this sort may be the fact that conventional psychological wisdom denies that this kind of memory is possible, and we tend to ignore what we can't explain. Indeed, if we think of memory as a verbal and exclusively mental process, then birth

memory is impossible to explain. But a number of people who addressed the Congress were using a very different construct. Psychologist Arnold Buchheimer, for example, supposed that early memories are part of the cellular chemistry of the body, and that although the brain surely plays a role in retrieval, memory storage takes place throughout the body. Obstetrician Robert Doughton likewise spoke of birth memories as part of the anatomy and physiology of the body itself.

Robert Doughton

Most people, including me, have the thought that consciousness happens somewhere in the line that's between our ears and our eyes, you know, somewhere inside of our head. The reason that that's where we think our consciousness is, is because that's where the upper pharynx is, and that's where we hear ourselves talk, and that's where we think we are. And we aren't there at all. The cell of the skin of your kneecap, I assure you, is just as intelligent and causes just as many results in your life as any other cell in your body, and the idea that the brain does it or anything like that is simply not true. It's a total illusion that thought happens in our head more than thought happens in our big toe.

David Cayley

Robert Doughton's idea that the body as a whole is intelligent helps explain the idea of physical memory. Obstetrician David Cheek also believes that our earliest memories are physical.

David Cheek

We know that they can remember muscular action because this is very easy to do, to get somebody to remember how their head turns as it comes down through the birth canal, how an arm delivers, first which one, the right or the left. You can get physical memories that are valid. I've checked four of my own babies where I had the records at home, but I didn't look at my records until I interviewed these kids that I'd delivered. And all four of them were exactly right on how their head turned, which side of the mother their body was. Well, if they can remember physical things, they're taping a whole bunch of information and it's coming in at a primitive part of the brain -- the reptilian part of the brain seems to register, just as I learned about 23 years ago that people under general anaesthesia, where the cortex of their brain is out with the anaesthetic, they're still getting input through their ears into the very primitive

part of the brain, the brainstem.

David Cayley

This is where hypnosis becomes a particularly useful tool, because it seems to reach this older more primitive part of the brain. David Cheek has been a pioneer in the use of hypnosis in an obstetrical practice. He says that the ability to go into a trance is a survival skill which gives us instant access to information about what we have done in critical situations like birth in the past.

David Cheek

We can see from a biological standpoint that an animal that's in a critical situation where its life depends on acting quickly, needs to have an automatic quick flashback mechanism that allows it to do whatever it did before in a similar situation and got away with it. Do you see what I mean? This instant replay which is characteristic of hypnotic behaviour. I found years ago that in inducing hypnosis with pleasant suggestions, for example, that people would suddenly remember falling out of a tree as a child, or being hit by a car, or being put to sleep with an anaesthetic. So this is what makes hypnosis a tremendously valuable tool for picking up the traumatic experiences in a person's life. Psychiatrically they will immediately have access to the things that have changed their behaviour. And the way we've been able to convert a birth memory, for example, into conversation is to consider the mind as at least three parts. First a physiological part that reacts primitively. Babies are reacting at a physiological level, then they can move, and then later they learn to speak. And if we get a person to review physiologically over and over again an experience like being born, finally they are able to transfer it up to a highly developed part of the mind where speech occurs.

David Cayley

Memory at what David Cheek calls a physiological level was referred to by another congress participant, Judith Kestenberg, as kinesthetic memory. Dr. Kestenberg is a psychoanalyst and a Professor of Child Psychiatry who works with mothers and babies.

Judith Kestenberg

The way the mothers hold their babies, that's the way they themselves were held. That is a kinesthetic memory, it's not a memory in words. And I do believe there should be some

kinesthetic memory from birth because I have seen children, for instance, who were delivered in such a way that the head was tilted backward. And those babies would lie down on the mother's arm and push their heads backwards -- and that certainly was a kinesthetic memory -- so that the mother couldn't even hold the baby up. We had to get the pillow underneath and show them how to help the babies not to push their heads backwards.

David Cayley

The idea of physiological memory causes us difficulty because it combines two types of functioning which we like to keep separate: the mental and the physical. If we react to and remember things from long before we learn language, then obviously we have a kind of intelligence which is quite different from the purely mental process which we usually interpret as thought. We begin life at least with the unified intelligence of an undivided body-mind. The possibility of very early memory in some sense negates the body-mind dualism which has informed the mainstream scientific culture of the West. This partly explains why it is only now beginning to be recognized by those who put their faith in science. But there may be other reasons as well.

Although unaided birth memory is possible, most instances of such memory are observed in clinical settings where powerful therapeutic techniques like hypnosis, psychedelic drugs or altered breathing are being employed. And so it was only with the widespread adoption of these more radical and more powerfully experiential therapies from the 1950s on that clinicians began to recognize the extent to which regression to birth and uterine life was actually possible. One of the most important tools was LSD, first synthesized in Switzerland in the early 1950s. Stanislov Grof, then a Czech psychoanalyst, became a pioneer in LSD research. In his address to the Congress he recalled how it all began.

Stanislov Grof

One day a package came from Switzerland from Sandoz, and when we opened it, it said in large letters "LSD -- 25". And there was a little insert saying that this was a fascinating investigational tool, a new drug developed in Switzerland that was a drug that could induce an artificial state of schizophrenia for 6 or 8 hours -- a very, very unique opportunity to study

schizophrenia, create it in the laboratory as a kind of model state. So I wouldn't have missed this opportunity for anything in the world. I became one of the volunteers in this clinical experiment, and I had such a powerful confrontation with my own unconscious that it somehow overshadowed anything that I experienced during my training analysis. And I had this idea that maybe this was something that would accelerate or deepen or intensify the psychoanalytic process.

David Cayley

This was in 1955 in Prague. Grof worked with LSD for the next 17 years, first in Czechoslovakia and then in the United States, where he now lives as scholar in residence at the Esalen Institute. As he worked, he began to discover regions of the unconscious which his Freudian training had taught him nothing about. Freud had supposed that the unconscious contains only what the individual was unwilling or unable to think about. Grof discovered that this was only the first level of the unconscious which he called the biographical. As LSD sessions progressed, people characteristically moved beyond it.

Stanislov Grof

When people move beyond biography, what would happen is that they would start experiencing themselves as dying. These experiences of dying were also connected in some peculiar way with experiences of being born -- that frequently these experiences of being born and dying were alternating, but in many instances they were actually coexisting, so that people didn't really know whether they are dying or being born, or whether they are dying in the context of being born. And a number of these people then came to the conclusion that what they experienced must have been somehow a reliving of their own birth.

David Cayley

What Grof was beginning to notice was the connection between memories of biological birth and the symbolic sequence of death and rebirth observed in almost all religions. He concluded that between the biographical level of the unconscious and the transpersonal domain, which Jung referred to as "the collective unconscious," there must exist an intermediate level. He called it "the perinatal level" and noted that experiences at this level are somehow organized around a core of actual birth memories. He

finally concluded that there were four of these cores or stages, the first corresponding to uterine life before birth, the second to the onset of labour when birth contractions have begun, but the cervix remains closed, the third to the period in which the baby actually enters the birth canal and the fourth to the birth itself.

Stanislav Grof

Each of these stages can be actually relived as a concrete biological memory. You literally would feel that you are the fetus. In these different stages you are suffocated, you have pain, you experience pressures. In the final stages it would be forceps or the umbilical cord, anaesthesia, whatever else is there. But each of those stages also seems to be something like an experiential stencil. Being tuned into that aspect of the unconscious seems to provide a certain selective access to other aspects of the psyche.

David Cayley

Grof's use of the term "experiential stencil" here is an interesting one. Characteristically he does not attempt to reduce religious or transpersonal experiences to their perinatal origins. Rather he notes a correlation or resonance between them. At each stage there are a set of characteristic images and experiences, and because Grof's observations were made in therapeutic settings, there is often a bias towards the negative. Here, for example, he describes some of the images associated with the onset of labour and the subsequent movement into the birth canal.

Stanislav Grof

A characteristic experience would be free-floating anxiety and a kind of paranoia. Your whole world is kind of collapsing. Then as it develops more, you would start experiencing a gigantic vortex or whirlpool pulling you towards its centre. A lot of people have these kinds of experiences in childhood as nightmares, or when they had fever, and so on. The corresponding experience would be the archetypal experience of being swallowed by some kind of monster -- a dragon, a leviathan, a crocodile -- descending into the underworld -- getting lost in some caves, getting lost in a labyrinth. You know how many mythologies have the hero's journey that is a journey into the underworld, struggling with monsters and emerging. Dante's Divine Comedy, you know, all those kinds of images can be seen as kind of perinatal cartographies.

David Cayley

In Grof's third stage, which corresponds to the second clinical stage of labour when the baby enters the birth canal, the accompanying images are of purgation or of natural and political upheaval. Then comes the opening to the final stage of birth itself.

Stanislav Grof

The opening into the fourth stage frequently comes with enormous images of fire or passing through fire, which seems to be somehow in correspondence with the experience that the vagina is on fire that delivering women frequently describe. And then we have a very significant transition from three to four, which is quite critical for the clinical work with these states, because it involves an experience that we call the "ego death". When you feel that you are almost out, all of a sudden you start losing it all and it almost seems like you are where it started, in a kind of vortex situation where everything is collapsing. And it's important to allow here, to experience total surrender, total destruction, total annihilation, because ultimately victory and success in this process is in destruction and surrender. After hitting the bottom there is opening into light, typically sort of bright light, if it's an uncomplicated delivery without heavy anaesthesia. Opening into white light, golden light, spiritual liberation.

David Cayley

Stanislav Grof's discovery of the relationship between birth and the structure of the unconscious suggests that the experience of birth remains a core element in our subsequent experiences. Lloyd DeMause, a psychoanalyst and historian from New York who has studied Grof's work, believes further that the reenactment of birth is the stuff of politics as well. He came to this conclusion while pondering the question of why nations go to war.

Lloyd DeMause

It wasn't until a specific moment when I actually ran across a statement by Henry Kissinger, who said that we shouldn't have gone into Vietnam -- probably it was a mistake, it's hard to get out of wars like that. And he said, in fact I probably don't think we should get into another one like that unless, of course, we were being strangled. And I thought to myself, that strikes a bell -- strangled. When did I read that before? And I went back to my great stack of material and I said, Gee here it is, right here. Wilhelm II says

that everybody was strangling Germany before World War I, and there was a noose around their neck, and there were people that were suffocating them, and so on. And I began to look through all the rest of the material I had, and this was the key. And not only was it just the strangulation and suffocating and squeezing of the head, but there was a sense that there was no room left, that you were going down long tunnels which you couldn't see the light at the end of, that you were going off cliffs, that you were being picked up bodily and carried along, that diplomatic relations were rupturing. The imagery that was being used was one of being trapped in a birth canal and having to fight for your freedom, regardless of whether you were a bad person like Hitler or Wilhelm who started a war, or a good person who thought the war was started against you.

David Cayley

Lloyd DeMause has been a controversial figure in both historical and psychoanalytical circles. In 1976, at the beginning of Jimmy Carter's presidency, he decided to test his hypothesis that politics involves the periodic reenactment of the trauma of birth. Accordingly, he published a set of predictions of what would happen during Carter's term of office. These predictions endeared him to no one, but they all subsequently came true. His equally accurate predictions about the Reagan administration, so far, have sustained his notoriety. DeMause's basic view is that American presidents characteristically pass through a four-stage political cycle. This cycle corresponds to the four stages Grof observed his patients reliving under LSD.

Lloyd DeMause

The kinds of cartoons and the front pages of Time magazine and Newsweek magazine and so on, are very similar in each president's term. When he comes in, what's called the honeymoon period, he's got a year perhaps of a strong imagery. This is as though we were back in the womb and actually connected to somebody who is going to take care of us. He becomes a container that actually can handle it, and his boundaries and the world and the walls in the cartoon are shown strong, standing and sufficient for the job. In the second stage, generally during the first part of his second year, cracks begin to appear, and I call that the cracking stage, just very simply. Walls begin to crack and water leaks through, we begin talking about leaks, and

all of the things start to crumble including the picture of the globe next to the president. It shows cracks in it. During that period of time, generally he is shown as far less able to do things, he's shown as more impotent, the gun he's carrying has a drooping barrel, and so on. Somewhere around the third year we begin a collapse phase in which he is totally falling apart as a container for our emotions, and we're really afraid we're going to die.

At that point you get real beginnings of birth imagery. You get images of long tunnels, you get images of falling off cliffs, you get images of strangling, you get actual concern about the birth rate. "Exploding birth rate!" says Time magazine a year ago. There wasn't an exploding birth rate, it was on a slow uphill swing as it's been for the last nine years. But suddenly they paid attention to an exploding birth rate and showed a picture of a pregnant woman -- I think it was Jill Clayburgh on the cover. And birth becomes the password.

Well, from that point on, we move into the point where the president has to do something about his own popularity collapse, and of course at that point his popularity is the very low. And what he generally does is pick an enemy. Occasionally we pick an enemy for him, that is to say like Nixon, we picked him as the enemy, and he was the one who was going to have to die. But for the most part, a good president, if he hasn't just finished up a war like Nixon did, can find somebody exterior to do it.

Now it may or may not eventuate in a war. The Cuban missile crisis did it for John F. Kennedy, and then his popularity bounced back up because we humiliated the Russians, and we didn't actually kill anybody. But for the most part, these collapse cycles, at least once every three or four times, will require somebody dead. And what you do then is you split off the rage that you feel toward this container which had collapsed, and go into a fourth phase, called the upheaval phase in which you actually go to war with some foreign enemy.

David Cayley

Lloyd DeMause and Stanislav Grof concur in finding revived birth memories hidden right before our eyes in the upheavals of political life. Alvin Lawson finds them in close encounters of the third kind. Lawson is a Professor of English at California State University, and it is his view

that birth memories form the substrate of UFO abduction experiences. He began to form this conclusion when a group of volunteers with no apparent knowledge of UFO phenomena produced under hypnosis accounts of abductions which were virtually identical with the "real reports."

Alvin Lawson

For several years we heard this data that was incredible, and so we didn't believe it. And we began to test it, first setting up a group of people that we were pretty sure knew nothing about UFOs, and we hypnotized them and gave them imaginary abductions thinking that they would use stuff from Star Trek and the movies. And we found that the data we got from the imaginary people was no different from the data we got from the "real" people.

David Cayley

This led Lawson to speculate that UFO experiences might have a universal psychological origin. He had already noted the extent of perinatal imagery in abduction narratives. His next step was to try and discover whether these narratives corresponded with their narrator's actual experiences at birth. Would birth complications, for example, show up? A small study was undertaken with volunteers who had had complicated births. And although the results were mixed, some remarkable correspondences did turn up. A subject born with the aid of forceps reported being pulled onto the UFO. Another with a breech birth reported leaving the UFO by "sitting down over a trap door." And yet another, who had been a footling breech, exited by walking backwards.

Lawson eventually came to the conclusion that what he was seeing was just a technological variant on the same universal death-rebirth sequence observed by Grof.

Alvin Lawson

I think there is something very psychologically valid going on about abductions. I don't think there are little green men, but I think whatever is happening is very intriguing and, I think, a novel psychological area. And it's very similar, we find, to a whole range of other well established psychological events such as shamanic trances, the near-death experiences, mystical or religious ecstasies, and so forth. The substrata of all of these experiences, I'm convinced, is the birth experience. And when we have a mystical experience, whether it's a near

death or a shaman's trance, or an abduction, I think it's some sort of a reliving of the birth experience interpreted differently, but still in that kind of an echo. When Black Elk, the Sioux Indian, fell into trance, a spirit bird came down to heaven, brought him upwards through a kind of tunnel aperture in the sky. He goes up into the other world, into a flaming rainbow teepee, and he visits there with a half a dozen grandfathers. And while he's there, some shaman -- Black Elk didn't have this happen, but the Indian shamans sometimes are visited by Vishnu or a god that takes them apart, piece by piece, you see, and puts them all back together again, and they're reborn spiritually. They come back to earth -- Black Elk comes back in a little UFO-like flying cloud, and then he is renewed, he is able to spiritually re-energize his flock. The parallels here are enormous, and it's world-wide. In the 20th century, it's fashionable for people who have this kind of thing happen to them spontaneously, to identify it as a space visitation. But that is a projection of our own futurism. I don't think we have to see it as physical evidence of alien visitors.

David Cayley

The research of Lawson, Grof and DeMause supposes that the memory of birth is not only retained but is somehow fundamental to the structure of both politics and religion. These hypotheses may seem far-fetched, but they have certainly been made more plausible by new research which shows the newborn to be far more aware than previously supposed. Until less than 20 years ago, it was the received view of medical science that the newborn was an inert, vegetal sort of being without sense or sensibility. This view has now been revolutionized.

David Chamberlain, in an essay called "Consciousness at Birth," has summarized the evidence for considering the fetus a conscious being.

David Chamberlain

The evidence is absolutely overwhelming. The only reason I can think of that doctors don't already know it is that they're just out of touch with the research, tons of it, hidden away in dozens of journals, that they just don't have time to get to it. And perhaps there's a psychological resistance to getting to it too, because if they really believed that the baby was fully conscious, they would have to revise obstetrics practically from start to finish. The evidence really falls

into every area of human existence. For example, a group of researchers at the University of Pittsburgh did famous studies with aborted fetuses of every age, stroking them with a fine hair on certain parts of their bodies immediately after delivery, and took motion pictures of the reactions of the fetus to, for example, a little stroke on the cheek. At 7½ weeks, they got the first clear evidence that the nervous system was functioning, when the fetus displayed a head turning reflex. That's the first sign of sensitivity. Following that 7½ week reflex, you get a development of tremendous complexity of reflexes. They have traced all of the human reflexes through the entire period of gestation and are able to assign certain weeks to this in gestation.

Well now, all of these, from 7½ weeks on, are clear signs of sensitivity. And to me, sensitivity means consciousness. To say that a reflex is nothing but physical, I think, is really strange reasoning. It seems so clear to me that when a fetus avoids a certain stroke, it's telling you something. Now, an incredible amount of sophisticated testing has been done on exactly what a newborn can taste, smell, just what newborns can do when they're given learning tasks, for example. They've been shown to do every form of learning that we know about formally: classical conditioning, reinforcement learning, imitation. Let me give you just one illustration of how clever we sometimes have to be to find out what babies can do. Two researchers designed this ingenious experiment with a nipple that a baby could suck on, that didn't have anything nutritive flowing through it, but it was just a nipple that they could suck on. Well, this sucking apparatus was hooked up to two recordings. One of the recordings was of that baby's own mother reading a Dr. Seuss story, and the other recording was some other woman reading the same Dr. Seuss story. Now it was arranged that if the baby sucked at a certain speed, slow or fast, it would get one woman reading or the other. Well, they discovered that in a matter of 20 or 30 minutes these babies immediately learned to suck so that they got their own mother's voice, and sucked more often to produce that voice. Now the researchers were looking at certain aspects of hearing, and they were able to point to at least half a dozen elements of hearing that the baby was proven to be using in order to be able to do that task. These are obvious kinds of consciousness and caring.

David Cayley

The profile we now have of the fetus as a conscious being may go a certain way to explain the enduring effects of birth and prenatal life. But there remains a class of apparently verifiable birth memories which cannot be explained by the neurological sophistication of the baby alone. These are remembered scenes which seem to be observed from a disembodied point of view, and which contain information obviously unavailable to a baby enclosed by the uterus. David Cheek has run across a number of cases of this kind.

David Cheek

We do know that there is such a thing as clairvoyance. Not all people have it. But it's really impressive that the babies inside the uterus seem to be able to go out of body and to perceive what's around them. This sounds like way-out stuff, but it's true that we only see things that we're ready to see and understand. It took me years to recognize that what I had learned about the neurophysiology of the unborn was all wrong, that they are able to perceive, they are able to react. I couldn't believe it at first. I had to get the evidence given me each time I went over a life situation that seemed to date back to prenatal experience.

David Cayley

You've checked out more than one of these cases, of seeing what someone was wearing, say?

David Cheek

Yes. I have one at 4½ months. I know it, because it was my patient that was delivering, and I interviewed this woman who was a very nervous, neurotic woman, in the presence of her little daughter, 13 years old, who was a wonderful kid. And I wanted the child to sort of help show the mother that she was a lot better mother than she had thought. So I was working with the mother, and then I looked at the child, and she was in a deep trance. And I said, "Let's get your fingers -- this one for yes, this for no, and this is I don't want to answer. Does your inner mind know why you're such a great kid, that you've done so well -- A student, president of your class?" Her finger immediately went up to say yes. I said, "Well go back to when that was." I thought it was when she was born, but I was wrong. She signalled, and I said "Where are you? Look around and see where you are." And she made her head move around, and pretty soon she said "I don't see anything, I guess I'm inside

the uterus." I said well, "What's happening? Why do you know what it is?" And she said, "Mother's sitting on a couch, and she's knitting something" -- this was spontaneous -- "she's knitting something for a girl. My father comes into the room and he says what are you doing that for a girl for?" And she quoted her mother with the accent -- her mother recognized this -- she said "It's a girl, I know it's a girl -- has to be a girl." And then she beamed all over, this little kid -- this acceptance. And I said, "Well can you see what your mother's wearing?" And she described the mother's dress. The mother came out of hypnosis, almost fell out of the chair because the kid described that maternity dress -- it was a green plaid. And the father was wearing just an ordinary T shirt, one of those grey things, sweat shirts in the old days. And he was kind of offhand about this, but the mother really wanted that child to be a girl.

And later when I delivered this baby -- and this is what particularly struck me, because I remember while I was doing it I must have gone into hypnosis myself, because this was one of my early deliveries. And at that time, I was holding babies by their feet. And I held it up, and the little kid grabbed my thumb. And I said, "See, your baby's got good reflexes." She'd been afraid the baby was abnormal, first baby -- mothers often do this. And so I said, "Well, how's the doctor holding you?" And she described it as though looking at it. She said "He's holding me by the feet, and he's saying something about my reflexes." But she said, "I was just scared" -- grabbing the thumb. A baby feels very insecure dangling like an old dead chicken or something. Right after that I gave up holding babies by the feet, I supported them, because they've been supported all their life inside that warm, nice uterus, and you shouldn't change it too quickly.

David Cayley

Experiences like those reported by David Cheek have convinced psychologist David Chamberlain to adopt a metaphysical explanation for early memory. He believes that the kind and quality of information which we retain from our life before birth simply cannot be accounted for in any other way.

David Chamberlain

The memories that come from birth are sophisticated memories -- they're not infant memories, not little. Memories don't get bigger and bigger as the brain grows bigger. They're

either there or they're not there. It's like all or nothing. Now, the situation gets even clearer as you go back from birth into the uterine period, and you get memories from there. They're the same kinds of memories. You can push it all the way back to the third month in gestation, the second month in gestation -- even back to conception. It doesn't seem to matter a particle. You get the same profoundly sophisticated memories about what's happening. Now, here you have to acknowledge that you've run out of any physical basis of explanation. If it was the brain that was doing it, there's no way to understand this kind of information. And I don't think it is the brain that is doing it. We have to admit that. And before it just seems totally incredible to you, let me remind you of memory at the other end of life. The new studies in the area of near-death experiences, these are fascinating because they reveal exactly the same thing that I've found about uterine memories. When people report being dead, being declared dead, they report leaving their bodies and going to other places, picking up information in those other places, and bringing it back. This information has been confirmed. A recent study by a heart surgeon was a study of patients who reported while they were dead certain physical places, instruments and things, that they could not have seen physically from where they were, where the doctors were operating on them. In other words, they went out of body somehow, and they gathered information and brought it back, and were able to tell people afterwards. Now to me that makes it very clear that it is not the brain that is the mind -- it isn't the brain that picks up information or stores it. To say it in a word, the mind is very different from the brain.

David Cayley

These remarks from David Chamberlain conclude tonight's program. I hope you will join me at this time next week for a more detailed examination of life before birth, and again two weeks from tonight when birth itself will be the subject.

PART II

Lister Sinclair

Good evening, I'm Lister Sinclair for Ideas. When we speak of the baby at birth as being new, we sometimes forget the fact that he or she is already nine months old. Folk wisdom allows that the baby is a distinct personality at birth, but perhaps the implications of this sometimes escape us. We may forget that during pregnancy a real person makes an appearance. That this person listens to the sounds and the voices of the world. That the fetus reacts and adapts to the changing environment, and above all, that the fetus responds to the emotional tone of the world it shares with the mother, the family, and society. In recent years a number of both clinical and experimental psychologists have begun to claim what many parents already believe, namely, that the unborn child, interacting with its environment, is actually showing a form of consciousness.

Last July in Toronto, many of those who have championed this theory in the face of academic scepticism, joined together in the First International Congress on Pre- and Peri-Natal Psychology.

David Cayley attended the Congress for Ideas and interviewed most of the participants. From these interviews and from our recordings of the Congress proceedings, he's composed a three-part documentary series entitled, "Being Born", and tonight we present part two of that series - Life Before Birth.

David Cayley

Beginnings are always critical. It is at the beginning that any process of development is most vulnerable to disruption, and the nearer to the beginning, the more profound and far reaching will be the consequences.

The events of pregnancy therefore, have a unique importance for the unborn child. At no other time will the child's environment have as great an influence, for good or ill, as it does during these nine months.

Within the last forty years, it has been

established, beyond doubt, that the unborn child responds to his mother's emotions. He literally feels what his mother feels, but since he cannot in any cognitive sense understand these feelings, they are for him simply a given, the basis on which he builds his very sense of how the world is. David Cheek is a San Francisco obstetrician, who has pioneered the study of how pre-natal impressions influence later development. Here he relates a case from his own practice.

Dr. David Cheek

I'm thinking of one that I just saw the other day, a woman that I've known for about forty years. Her mother was unhappy about being pregnant because the mother's brother was dying of tuberculosis. Three days before labour started, the brother died. And this poor woman who is now in her fifties, recalls in a present tense, her mother beating on her abdomen and saying: "I wish to God I didn't have this baby inside me, because if I had not been pregnant, I could have cared for my brother." And her sister, Phoebe she called her, was saying: "Don't be silly, this baby has a right to be itself and your brother was dying, our brother was dying anyhow." Now when her mother died just a few months ago, she put her arms around my patient, Margaret, and she said: "You know, I've loved you all your life, and I love you now, bye bye baby" and she waved her hand to her daughter and just died. And the daughter said, "What a tremendous relief this was because it seemed to resolve something that I've vaguely known about all my life, that I wasn't wanted, that I was a nuisance, and I've been trying like hell to be worthy of being a person, and now I don't have to try anymore".

David Cayley

The David Cheek story, a single incident translates into a life-long feeling of unworthiness. The incident however, may simply be the decisive moment in a continuing process. Precisely how the baby apprehends maternal rejection is not clear, certainly there is a physical channel of communication via the placenta, through which the baby is exposed to the bio-chemical forms of his mother's emotion. Whether there is another psychic channel of communication is a more difficult question. There is certainly evidence, like David Cheek's story, to suggest it, but it is hard to see how it could be proved. The least we can say, is that the baby is critically dependent on the physical life-support system which centers on the placenta. If this malfunctions in any way, the

baby is exposed to the painful experience of oxygen deprivation. At its most extreme, fetal oxygen deprivation can result in what Dr. William Hull, a clinical psychologist from California, calls Pre-natal Suffocation Syndrome. The syndrome is formed when the baby actually blacks out from lack of oxygen. Dr. Hull believes that up to twenty percent of the population may have experienced this. He recognizes a variety of possible physical causes, ranging all the way from heavy smoking to a kinked umbilical cord. But he believes that the primary cause is the kind of powerful maternal emotion which might result from shock or grief.

Dr. William Hull

As far as my observation has been concerned, the emotionality of the mother-to-be is the prime factor. It is her own emotionality, that sets up the fight or flight syndrome within the mother herself redistributing her own blood supply to the large muscles, where of course she really doesn't need it. We don't respond now to fear and anger as we did thousands of years ago, but our physiology is the same. So this redistribution is taken care of at the expense of the viscera where the uterus is located, and so when the mother gets upset about something, it tends to cause a reduction of the blood supply to the uterus which means a reduction of oxygen supply to the uterus. Now the uterus will take its oxygen first, the part that it needs to survive, and the fetus gets what's left over, which usually isn't enough.

David Cayley

How is this experienced by the fetus?

Dr. William Hull

It is experienced by the fetus in about the same way that it would be experienced by you or me. It experiences seven precise feelings in a particular order. Panic, helplessness, hopelessness, exhaustion, depression, rage and breathlessness. And this becomes a syndrome for this particular problem which, once the individual experiences this to the point of unconsciousness, and unconsciousness is the key, because it's equivalent to dying. So then we feel it has this pattern of emotionality which will stay with it throughout the life until or unless it can be resolved by therapy. The fetus relates to unconsciousness as an escape from these feelings. And it has the ability to psychologically induce this coma feeling, in

other words, the fetus - or the person later on in life - faced with a problem reaching a point of maximum nervousness, all they can stand, they're so uptight they can hardly stand themselves, if they can't get out of it any other way, then they sort of withdraw from reality they sort of turn their mind off, they're not gonna be anything, they're not gonna do anything, they're not gonna feel anything, they just want out of it. It's like going to bed and pulling the covers over your head, and pretending that the world isn't there for a while, and this provides a relief.

David Cayley

What William Hull calls Pre-natal Suffocation Syndrome, is the result of severe physical or emotional trauma. Many of the events or feelings that might set it up are exceptional. Other effects are more subtle. For example the effect of a mother's basic attitude towards the pregnancy. In The Secret Life of the Unborn Child, Tom Verny cites a number of studies which have all concluded that this attitude is the single most important influence on how the birth and pregnancy go, and how the baby turns out. At the Congress itself, obstetrician David Cheek stated that a fifteen year check of his records had revealed that most complications of pregnancy and labour, occurred in cases where the mother hadn't wanted to be pregnant to begin with. And Barbara Findeison, a psychotherapist from Palo Alto California, added the idea that the baby herself knows whether she is wanted.

Barbara Findeison

I am now absolutely convinced that a child, very early in utero knows if they are rejected or accepted. And I don't mean a time where the mother feels- O gee, I wish I wasn't pregnant and maybe this isn't quite the right time - but I mean basic deep, deep feelings of rejection of - "I don't want this baby, I am not pregnant" - denial of the pregnancy and denial of the child. And the clients that I get very often go back to that. And at that point, even though we can't understand how it happened, the child gets the message of fear, gets the message of not being wanted, of rejection. And it is so deeply buried in the unconscious, that they live it out the entire life. But they aren't aware of where that decision came from. It's like they'll spend their lives chronically being nervous or feeling unworthy. Feeling... like some people feel that they don't even belong on the earth.