

SKULLS AT THE BANQUET: NEAR BIRTH AS NEARING DEATH

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ABSTRACT: This paper concerns the psychological encounters with death reported by fathers during their participation in the birth of their children. Anthropological research with forty first-time fathers yielded high instances of what psychiatrist Stanislav Grof and anthropologist Joan Halifax have termed the human 'psychological encounter with death' (1977). Grof has suggested that the encounter with death is a central cog turning the ritual process and often presages or accompanies the emergence of transpersonal comprehension. We may then ask: are procreative males at the birth of their children in contemporary Western culture, such as those studied in this research, in a ritual process similar to those engaged in rites of passage in more traditional cultures? I will first outline some anthropological reference points and the transpersonalizing social context of the 1960's birth revolution before moving on to the contemporary male encounter with birth and death through an extended Grofian analyses and construction.

Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet (William James, 1902, p. 121 cited in Ernst Becker, 1973, p. 16).

TRANSPERSONAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The material examined here emerged from transpersonally oriented anthropological research conducted in New Zealand with procreative fathering males and concerns the potential emergence of transpersonal states of consciousness or 'comprehension' during the birth of their children. Anthropology is, arguably, the earliest of transpersonal disciplines since the experiences of anthropologists in spiritual shores (far flung from Western hyper-rationalism) have contributed much to transpersonal theory (see Laughlin, McManus, & Shearer, 1993). Briefly, transpersonally oriented anthropologists are interested in the 'sacred' dimensions undergirding the mind-worlds of different cultures. They explore the rituals, spiritual practices, and significant figures in healing systems, apprentice themselves to shamans, undergo initiation and conversion, practice consciousness expanding techniques such as meditation, or ingest psychotropic plants as forms of radical transpersonal participant-observation (see Laughlin, 1988, 1994; Young & Goulet, 1994). Information gathered in these states of consciousness is deemed valid, if not essential, ethnographic data.

Mine, however, was 'insider' anthropology in that I am a New Zealand male and an insider of the dominant culture. I was looking for signs of transpersonal life not in a traditional indigenous culture or among shamans, healing ceremonies, possession cults or monasteries, but within secular, Westernized, hyper-medicalized birth sites.

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Furthermore, rather than entering a non-ordinary-state-of-consciousness myself, I was simply gathering the fathers' testimonies of unusual states and uncommon psychic experiences. I took a transpersonal frame (e.g. Anderson, 1998, p. xxiii) into so-called 'normal' Western birthing sites, working on the assumption that if birthing has a ritual side to it (e.g. Kitzinger, 1982; Davis-Floyd, 1992) then fathers too, could be conceived as ritual participants. And ritual participants, it is well known by anthropologists, can undergo a process of "cognitive transformation" (Davis-Floyd, 1992, pp. 15–16). This is something like a 'breakthrough' leading to a new order of consciousness similar perhaps to *communitas* (a sense of oneness and ecstatic communion with the society, nature, and cosmos promoted by ritual) (Turner, 1969; d'Aquili, 1985).

APPROACH TO INQUIRY

Unstructured hour-long conversations between my 40 participants and me were tape-recorded. This was 'conversational' anthropology (Kuper, 1994) in that these conversations were the main method of gathering ethnographical data. I asked participants to "tell me your experience of childbirth" and left it to them to tell me what they wanted to. I informed them that I was generally interested in men's experience at birth but made no reference to death or my transpersonal interests. Informants were recruited by networking through acquaintances, friends, and chance meetings. Later, some fathers who heard I was studying 'fathers and birth' sought me out and volunteered themselves to the research. Also, a call for participants went out over a local radio station (Radio Bosom). I rang the station and we went briefly on air. I stated that I was looking for individuals to participate in a study I was conducting to understand any emotional or psychological changes individuals might have experienced during childbirth. Potential participants were invited to telephone me to discuss the research objectives and criteria. In order to participate in the study one must have participated in the site of birth with their partner and also needed to be willing to verbalize their experience. Ten participants engaged in the research as a result of this broadcast. The 30 others were recruited informally; including three men who sought me out.

In all, 40 men were interviewed between the ages of 20 and 73: ranging from unemployed to retired, student to professional. Thirty-nine fathers spoke of death. Around 10 fathers were baby-boomers now in their late 50's or early 60's and lived through the 1960's counter-cultural movement as students. They made strong reference to these influences. These men tended to use spiritual terms for describing their birth/death experience. Two younger men and one man in his 40's had near-death experiences (Lahood, 2006). The one man who did not speak of death spoke of 'rapture'. I have used 15 statements throughout this article to amplify certain typical categories of experience. Many of these experiences overlap with each other in complex ways, in particular the theme of death.

The questions guiding this research wheeled around the idea that if birth has ritual properties; then I might find, in the father's narratives, the kinds of psychological changes wrought by ritual—including transpersonal states of consciousness (e.g. Davis-Floyd, 1992; d'Aquili, 1985; Peters, 1994; Laughlin, 1994). As Grof has

pointed out in much of his writing, an encounter with death often heralds a breakthrough into transpersonal consciousness. However, from Grof's theoretical point of view, this can also suggest that the father's own perinatal unconscious may have been restimulated during the birth-giving ritual. If this were so I would expect to find in their narratives reference to the process of 'ego death' and a momentary collapse of dualism in the mind-worlds of the ritual participant. I was also interested in potential 'collapse' of rigid cultural patterns concerned with sexual divisions and gender polarities. These themes will be explored below.

SCOPE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

First time fathers (or those recounting their first birth attendance) frequently spoke of a psychological/emotional brush with death evoked over the duration of the pre and perinatal episode (i.e. around conception, gestation, labour and birth, and post-partum) and some described states that in any other context would be deemed 'religious' or transpersonal. This theme or pattern is the central data examined in the following pages. In this study I link these experiences to selective anthropological literature and show how male participation in birthing can trigger dynamic perinatal sequences which have also been shown to play a central role in transpersonal events, existential crises, spiritual emergencies and near death experiences NDEs (Grof & Halifax, 1977; Halifax, 1979; Grof, 1985; Ring, 1994; Bache, 1996).

Even though the realm of ancestors, death, male-birth (in the form of couvade rituals), and religion were early in the province of anthropological inquiry (Edward Tylor, 1878) this study represents the first study of Western procreative males' *transpersonal* experience in the wake of their late 1960's insurgence into contemporary birthing sites. Accordingly, this article can be seen as an *opening* consideration of the depth and range of male experience at the birth of children from a perinatal-transpersonal-anthropological perspective. As paradoxical as it might seem to some, transpersonal theory, especially Grof's perinatal-transpersonalism, can serve as a useful vehicle for the analysis of these anomalous and often 'secret' male narratives.

BIRTH AS A REALM OF THE 'UNSPEAKABLE'

For various reasons, obvious and subtle, ancient and modern, the experience of procreative fathering males tends to be marginalized and overlooked, and often remains muted, secret, taboo, repressed rather than expressed, inhibited rather than disinhibited. It was a common occurrence that the males I interviewed had not articulated certain 'unfathomed' aspects of their birthing experience to anyone before the conversation with me. This seems to suggest that a father's psychological experiences do not find a culturally sanctioned cognitive niche through persistent languaging and the resources necessary to "capture and encode them" and, like traumatic experiences, remain "linguistically and cognitively starved" which is to say they avoid integration into "conscious levels of self organisation" (Hollan, 2000, p. 541). Another possibility may be because their procreative fathering experience blends with prelinguistic memories of their own birth and therefore teeters at the edge of what Michael Polyani called the 'unspeakable' (1966), suggesting that the male experience tends to dwell in the tacit dimension rather than the explicit.

Feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has noted the difficulties in casting the nets of language over the cycle of human reproductive memory. According to Kristeva this ancient cycle has a “spasm of a memory belonging to the species” as it perpetuates “the eternal return of the life-death biological cycle” (1997, p. 303). Kristeva asks, “How can we verbalize this prelinguistic, unrepresentable memory?” Her answer is interesting because she appears to locate this collective memory in, (what I take to be, predominantly, male mystical or transpersonal experience): “Heraclitus’ flux, Epicurus’ atoms, the whirling dust of cabalic, Arab, and Indian mystics, and the stippled drawings of psychedelics” (1997, p. 303). This statement can also suggest that the male experience of reproductive reality and their lived experience in, and *as*, their portion of the eternal reproductive cycle is articulated and symbolically coded as mystical or ancient religious experience (another classically unspeakable, ineffable dominion). Religious mysteries, experiences, rituals, practices, and symbolic systems appear to have a direct relationship to birth, sex and death, and cultural constructions of cosmic causality, procreativity, and eschatology.¹

BIRTH AND THE ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH

Some might find the notion that death could intrude upon, or even pervade the experience of birth for males somewhat anomalous to the celebratory nature with which a birth is generally greeted in Western culture. Thus we might recoil from the notion that birth could have us knocking on heaven’s door. However, in many traditional or pre-industrial cultures birthing has a profound, even intimate, association with death. Birthing is often seen as an interface between the living and the ancestors, and where “supernatural forces are at work” (Newton & Newton, 1972, p. 15). Indeed the link between birth and death in anthropology is something of a given (Laughlin, 1990, p. 156; Eliade, 1958). As a young Ju’hoansi (Kalahari !Kung) woman told anthropologist Marjorie Shostak, “I say childbirth is about death” (Biesele, 1997, p. 488).

Various dynamics of the birthing process have already been significantly related to transpersonal consciousness in many ground-breaking works by Stanislav Grof (1975, 1985, 1994, 1998; Grof & Halifax, 1977; Grof & Grof, 1988, 1989). Grof and associates have comprehensively explored the overlapping interface of birth, sex, and death in the human unconscious from the perspectives offered through depth psychiatry, experiential psychotherapy, inner exploration mediated by religious practices, LSD psychotherapy, and holotropic research (1975, 1985, 1988, and 1998, 2000). From the Grofian perspective (sourced from a many voiced multi-gendered transpersonal inquiry over 40 years) the perinatal level of the psyche (itself a product of human sexuality) is closely interwoven with a dynamic existential/death constellation and is meaningfully related to women giving birth, the dynamics of psycho-spiritual death-rebirth, and with the near-death experience.

THE SECRET LIFE OF MEN: HED HUNTING

Of the men I spoke with almost all, in one way or another, attested to an encounter with death that, in one form or another, seemed to lie in wait at the birth experience. These moments represent a spectrum of HED (Human Encounters with Death) and

suggest a continuum of intensity. The frequency of death imagery and the timing (the moments when this imagery would emerge into our conversation) were quite uncanny. These statements would seem to emerge in feeling toned moments; the “I-thou” experience of Martin Buber (1958). As a researcher, after so many descriptions of these moments, I found myself anticipating a feeling in my body, a physical acknowledgment of the participants’ experience. Equally interesting were the variations in the kinds of ‘death’ to which they referred; certainly there was a suggestion of the end of the pregnancy; there is the death of the waiting; the death of the single man; the death of the pre-parent person. All these suggest psychological dying to old roles and images of themselves.

We can, observes Heggenhougen, find in the anthropological record the idea that, “the birth of a child is occasionally seen as the death of a father” which he says, “can be interpreted as the destruction of the parents’ previous identity” (1980, p. 24). The custom of teknonymy, the loss of the parents’ name and the calling of the parents by the name of the child, appears to be a practice that aids in the dissolution of the parents’ previous social condition. The symbolic destruction of previous identity is also central to rites of passage (Campbell, 1949; Peters, 1994). Furthermore, as one father, Richard, told me, “The way to weaken the ego is to have a child. It’s not just me anymore,” which seems to suggest some sort of egoic deconstruction. Richard’s statement suggests a movement away from self-centeredness and is similar to Jorge Ferrer’s assertion that it is the “overcoming of self-centeredness” that ushers one into “transconceptual disclosures of reality” and participation in ineffable intuitions (2002, pp. 144–145).

SOCIAL BINARIES

At one end of the spectrum were off-hand intimations of death seemingly not more than allusions, theatrical asides, or Freudian slips that I thought of as the ‘little death’. For example, I asked my father, Trevor, if he was present at the moment of my birth; he said “yes I was there.” I questioned him further – “I mean right there in the room,” and he replied, “Do you mean at the death?” (this is an old pig hunting term meaning to be present when an animal is killed). My father (indeed a one time pig hunter) went on to tell me that he waited outside the bedroom (even though I was born at home a little earlier than expected) because “you did not interfere in those days” – those days being 1960 before the flood of males into birthing sites (I will have more to say about this extraordinary cultural phenomenon). Such were the cultural restrictions of my father’s day that he felt obliged to remain outside of the birthing room while my grandmother assisted my mother (this is a further example of insider anthropology to be sure).

‘Death’ seems to be one pole of an unconscious binary system after Levi-Strauss (1963). For Levi-Strauss human thought operates on universal binary structures – to contemplate ‘birth’ or ‘life’ is to polarize ‘death’ – it is this structural system of “binary opposites” that constitutes the human mind. Several times fathers-as-informants referred to traditional masculine contexts of hunting, fishing, dangerous sporting activities, and warfare to describe the event of birth, which again, in many traditional cultures would have been the polar opposite yet binary equivalent to female birth-giving—possibly binding themes of gender stratification with death and

birth in a psycho-cultural structural complementarity. For example, William, while attempting to describe his partner's birth-pain told me of how he had badly sprained his ankle while wind-surfing a couple of miles off-shore. He then described swimming back to shore and the excruciating pain which almost turned to a kind of pleasure; he sought a parallel experience in his psychic repertoire, culled from traditional male domains (extreme sport), to explain his relationship to birth.

An important structural complementary can also be found among the male *Ju'hoan* of the Kalahari Desert who dare death in their hunting rites of passage and trance dancing as a parallel to women's daring death and altered-states in birth-giving (Biesele, 1997). Young male neophytes enter a trance state called "xiao" (meaning: little death) to track down and kill a large animal risking their lives in the attempt. He shoots arrows into the beast and his killing of it is paralleled symbolically with courtship and marriage. Another local man, Malcolm, when I asked about his birth story, told me that his close friend in his mid 20's deliberately went fishing when his wife went into labour and that he had drowned. With all caution and due respect for this tragic circumstance – it does seem to follow an uncanny structural logic i.e. female labour = male hunting/death dealing, and female birth = male death. After hearing this story I started to notice not only how men's stories often recapitulated these binary systems around birth but also the way my male informants sometimes seemed to organise these incidents of death to illustrate their meanings of birth.

Women daring the mortal peril of childbirth and men facing death in battle were also corresponding themes in early Greek civilisation and parallels are found in the funerary monuments and tomb stones of fallen warriors and women who died in childbearing (see Demand, 1994). A line from Euripides reads, "I would rather stand three times in front of battle than bear one child" (*Medea* 250–51: trans. Rex Warner cited in Demand, 1994, p. 121). A similar theme is found among Aztec materials, "And when the baby had arrived on earth, then the midwife shouted; she gave war cries, which meant that the little woman had fought a good battle, had become a brave warrior, had taken a captive, had captured a baby.—Sahagun; translated from the Aztec by Dibble and Anderson 1969" (McClain, 1989, p. 1).

Gerald, another of my informants, told me that while his partner laboured he was taking a break in a waiting room and was watching a television newsreel of the then Vietnam War. The man (now in his late 50's) saw himself as part of the counter-culture that mobilized around that conflict and he described an incident where he was watching images of a young male Vietnamese who had died in a battle and had on his person a photograph of his teenage girlfriend – at the same time my informant reminded me that his partner was in labour and giving birth in 1972. This experience seems to have been extremely meaningful and for him especially its poignant reminder of the life cycle and equally powerful reminder of the politics of the times. I was intrigued with the way he had so profoundly linked the binaries of war and birth-giving, life and death, degeneration and regeneration.

MALE BIRTH REVOLUTION AND SYMBOLIC GENDER-DEATH

We should note that it was during the Vietnam War that long-haired, pacifist, protesting males began participating in birthing in America as part of a wider

political statement (perhaps seeking female status, refuge and release from male-as-war-maker status or as a symbolic attack on structure). This performance seems to signify, at one level, a transgressive exploding and mockery of the structural boundaries that stratify gender into two binary, yet mutually exclusive realms—equivalent to male death-dealing and female life-giving. I see the war as an important part of the cultural context from which the male birth-revolution sprang and this epithet from a birthing manual *Childbirth is Ecstasy*, written by two males involved in San Francisco's commune movement in 1968, tells much of the counter-cultural motivation:

There would be no war if every man received his son onto this planet in this way and had known his wife in this act of ecstasy (Walzer & Cohen, 1971).²

Anthropologist Victor Turner noted in the late 1960s that the hippie culture was a liminal one, busy with *communitas*; boundary breaking activities leading to states of oneness (1969) including breaking into or breaking away from, hegemonically controlled birth sites and giving birth outside of the hospital's hegemony altogether, often in communes. A couple handcuffed themselves together so they would not be separated by routine hospital strictures during these times and the hospital in question changed its stance after this incident (personal communication from Ina-May Gaskin 2001 author of *Spiritual Midwifery* 1977 and a person who has had a profound impact on midwifery in America). As Larry Peters says "communitas . . . is an ecstatic feeling of oneness beyond all categories and hierarchies" (Peters, 1994, p. 7). Indeed, the medically heretical entrance of fathers into birthing sites occurred in tandem with a poetics based around the 'peak experience' (Tanzer, 1976; Maslow, 1964, 1971) suggesting that the father's presence might catalyze spiritual states in the mother and aid the process of 'natural' parturition.³ Such states may rightly be called transpersonal. In another excerpt from *Childbirth is Ecstasy* (1971) authors, Walzer and Cohen, offer advice to fathers by suggesting that they orient themselves to a Vedantic spiritual ultimate:

Remember the ocean of bliss, wisdom and existence [*Sacchidananda*] which we are and have always been and will always be and prepare for childbirth in that light with your loved ones (1971, p. 71).⁴

There is also the gender-hybridizing symbolism of this historical transgression to consider since such blurry sexual enactments threaten any society which is based on rigid binary divisions with a kind of death (Sawhney, 1997, p. 4). Several interesting cultural expressions exist of gender-death and its sexually disjunctive and paradoxical force: for example, Nanda's study of Hindu 'not man not woman', *Hijra's* of Northern India (1999), or Halifax's (1979) study of 'soft-men' the hypersexual shamans of Siberia. These transgressions into sexual hybridity also call to mind Turner's notion of *liminality*; a ritual state 'betwixt and between' one social or cosmic state and another. A man in the birthing site in the 1960s becomes a *liminal persona* and therefore, anti-structurally speaking, a man who has joined the ranks of the dead. "Thus liminality," writes Turner, "is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality . . . in a symbolic milieu that represents both the grave and the womb" (Turner, 1969, p. 96). Halifax has noted instances of gender androgyny, "bi-unity," and the creation of "soft-

men” found among Siberian peoples whose transformation into a shaman “terrified” the locals (1979, p. 24). Perhaps such terror resides in the shaman’s deconstructive agency, and because certain Siberian soft-men were so potent that they were even held to be able to give birth to human children and animals (1979). Halifax, in regard to shamanic episodes, says that various cultural and psychological divisions such as life-death, dark-light, male-female are collapsed in these experiences signalling “the dissolution of the contraries” (1979, p. 22). The late 1960s form of playful androgynous spiritual ‘terrorism’ has, therefore, deep heretical symbolic capital linked to protest and the counter-cultural contestation of structure, hyper-masculinity, war-making, and perhaps reality itself.⁵

A MOMENTARY LAPSE OF DUALISM

At the other end of the spectrum of death among procreative males in New Zealand are descriptions suggesting trans-conceptual and transpersonal states of consciousness laden with birth, death and rebirth imagery. In the following statements the polarities of past and future, life and death, are exploded in what appears to be a transcendental experience similar perhaps to Eastern religious expressions of non-dualism i.e. the *gharba*; the luminous oceanic cosmic womb of Hinduism (Porter, 2003, p. 110) or the *tathagatagarba*; the Buddha womb or Buddha embryo of Tibetan *Vajrayana* Buddhism (Gross 1993, p. 186). These ultimate religious conditions were originally held to be gender and caste neutralizing postulates (Gross, 1993, Morris, 1994, p. 81).

This man, Les, recounts a story of what he called a “hippie birth” and a “happening” at a festival in New Zealand in the mid 1980s. They had their child in a tipi drawn with Tibetan Buddhist symbols and attended by two midwives while attending a spiritual gathering of 300 persons mostly drawn from New Zealand’s commune movement.

I heard afterwards from people camped right throughout the valley that everyone thought it was just the most AMAZING thing seeing this softly glowing reddish maroon tipi and candles and all these people surrounding it and giving their love and prayers and protection to the birth. And yeah it was very ‘altered-state’ for me. It could not have been more perfect. You know you have perfect births and perfect deaths and it just worked into my idea of perfection . . . things unfolding as a matter of course. I look at it like a high celebratory state. Not sort of totally blissed-out where our whole energy is being . . . um (thinks) it was more subtle . . . an intense subtle feeling of well-being, grounded-ness, and oneness. And a very celebratory feeling basically we had all these people around us helping out; it was just before sunrise. We relaxed, slept, mellowed out with the baby, and next evening we are sitting around the fire playing, singing and drumming . . . you know that was quite trippy. What are the chances of being born and going straight into a party? Not otherworldly but it was definitely the non-ordinariness of the thing, you know, in Buddhism they say it’s so extra-ordinary that it becomes ordinary . . . this is very, very ordinary, this is the way it should be.

Ultimate religious states are often felt to be concomitant with the after-life state, “the Buddha, a human being, is dead, and has reached *nirvana*” (Tambiah, 1970, p. 44)

and see Ring (1990, pp. 208–9); Evans-Wentz (1957); Grof & Grof (1988, p. 18). According to neuro-theologist Eugene d’Aquili, polar opposites can be experienced as unified and distinct, simultaneously, in what he calls the “oceanic” experience found in ritual, “During intense meditation or ritual experiences . . . the experience of the union of opposites . . . is expanded to the experience of total union with self and other, or, as expressed in the Christian tradition, the union of the self with God” (1985, p. 26). The momentary collapse of polarities was a frequent theme among my informants.

Comparisons were also frequently made with the LSD experience – I heard often the earnest explanatory epithet “birth was just like tripping.” This language suggests, at the very least, something in the realm of the ineffable and strangely echoes Kristeva’s earlier statement regarding Arab mystics and psychedelics (1997, p. 303). According to some researchers the rigid polarity of subject/object which has shaped the Western mind-world is dissolved with LSD use (Watts, 1962; Grof, 1985; Tarnas, 1991). My informant, Ken, is in his mid fifties with children born in the ’80s. Again his experience seems to describe the collapse of polarities which he somehow relates to a death:

In the moment of birth, life and death became the same thing. What I experienced was a knife edge where they were actually the same thing - there wasn’t any time element involved at all . . . and even if I say the words, “in death there is life” you know, like when a tree decays and then a new life comes out of the tree, well, that doesn’t fit at all. There’s a kind of holy instant where they are totally the same thing. The instant that I think of is the concept of the past meeting the future in that moment where the two meet and then it opens to something else. Like there’s another dimension in there. The whole of the past stops and the whole of the future disappears. There’s that moment where you suddenly see . . . I don’t know how to describe . . . it was more than I have had on LSD . . . although some elements were the same . . . and the same as birth it had the same knife edge about it. I suppose that’s what people mean by being in the now.

BIRTH AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

In terms of an anthropological study of Western childbirth-as-ritual, Robbie Davis-Floyd’s *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (1992) is an instructive and overtly gyno-centric account. She reveals how contemporary hospital birthing can be constructed as a rite of passage (after the pattern outlined by van Gennep, 1908) geared to indoctrinate females to its biomedical mythology by enacting its ‘body as machine’ system of authoritative knowledge in a ritualized technological apotheosis: birth *as* operation (1992). While agreeing with much of Davis-Floyd’s useful account, she makes, in my opinion, two interesting and rather crucial omissions to her otherwise comprehensive study. First she omits any reference to a symbolic encounter with death, which according to many researchers is the central cog turning the psycho-spiritual developmental cycle in rites of passage (Turner, 1969; Grof & Halifax, 1977; Halifax, 1979; Eliade, 1958; and see Peters, 1994, 1996). Second, she does not explore the father as ritual participant, or the *symbolic* capital of his counter-cultural actions.

My study of contemporary males engaged in participatory birthing cycled around the following curiosities (which were not asked explicitly): Are procreative males at the birth of their children in contemporary Western culture in a ritual scenario similar to those engaged in rites of passage in different cultures and epochs? If so, would 'spiritual' (read: trans-personal) consciousness emerge in the process?

If Western birth-giving is a ritual process and rite of passage as Davis-Floyd and many others suggest then we might expect to find in the experience of the ritual participants both the encounter with death and transpersonal comprehensions. As Grof and Halifax wrote in their research with moribund cancer patients:

In all ages and in many different cultures, ritual events have existed in which individuals have experienced a powerful symbolic encounter with death. This confrontation is the core event in the rites of passage, of temple initiations, mystery religions, and secret societies, as well as in various ecstatic religions. According to descriptions in historical sources and anthropological literature, such profound experiences of symbolic death result not only in an overwhelming realisation of the impermanence of biological existence but also in an illuminating insight into the transcendent and eternal spiritual nature intrinsic to human consciousness. On the one hand they mediate a deep process of transformation in the initiate who then discovers a different way of experiencing the world (1977, p. 5).

Alex, a study participant, describes his version of a home-birth in 2002. I would maintain that his statement (and several others like it) suggests that he is describing a psycho-social deconstruction in which he is reoriented to primary perception (after Merleau-Ponty, 1964); and participates in the *lebenswelt* or ground of being associated with the feminine and the womb which lies unconsciously beneath the dominant cognitive structures historically associated with the masculine (see Laughlin 1990, p. 149). In this sense this death could also be seen as a 'return to the womb'—ultimately what he is intimating is a transpersonal comprehension provoked by the emotionally charged life-death act of birth-giving, a potentially 'sacred' state of mind that is not at home in the Cartesian dualistic operating system of Western medicine:

It's like . . . I suppose it's like a boat sinking and you're cast adrift on a raft and having to survive together. You bond . . . you have had this huge experience in your life and you have to come together to actually fulfil it. It's so close to death at that point it's incredible. And that medical model kind of took it away when it was introduced. And I didn't want to say anything about it because it might seem so far fetched.

I suggest that this breakthrough to primary perception is, after Grof, an "ego-death" (1975) and that his boat (cognized self/egoic structure) sinks, breaks down, in an experience that is "intense and dramatic" enough to bring his "cognized self into question and bring about a change in ego-structure" (Laughlin 1994, p. 2). This represents only one way in which death was spoken about during the course of this research. I believe when we take into account all of the narratives in this article that we could speculate that this diversity represents the surface novelty of deeper

universal structures of consciousness. I suggest that these structures reflect the universal perinatal stencil, the unfolding dialectical pattern of birthing as outlined by Grof (1975, 1985, 2000).

CONTEMPORARY BIRTH AS A MALE RITE OF PASSAGE

According to various researchers contemporary procreative males involved in the birthing site can be construed as participants in couvade-like rituals and developmental rites of passage (Richmond & Goldthorp, 1978, p. 167; Richmond, 1982, p. 92; Lewis, 1982, p. 45; Davis-Floyd, 1992, p. 33; Mander, 2004, p. 11; Reed, 2005). Researchers, however, have paid scant attention to ritual dynamics from a male's perspective, which, I would argue, can precipitate a 'cognitive transformation' and intense, perhaps even novel emotional responses, transpersonal disclosures, and participant comprehension (see Laughlin, 1988, 1994). If this is so, I would suggest that we can draw a parallel between procreative fathering males and those anthropologists who have participated experientially in 'native' rituals and trance. Neophyte fathers have also participated in a culturally-shaped ritual event and have therefore reconnoitered the ritual territory and its impact on male cognition and consciousness from an insider's standpoint and gathered important experiential data in the site.

Consider this conversation between two participants (a father and son) talking about birth; such narratives I believe, reflect potent psychological, symbolic, and ritual-like processes, i.e. the destruction or 'death' of identity, the reshaping of identity to include the 'other', the narrator's own underlying perinatal patterns catalysed by birth – are some interpretations:

David: I heard of a story about a Maori guy who suffered the birth pangs of all his seven children as they were being born.

Tom: He just locked into that, yeah. Really you know I can believe that can happen very much because at the point of the birth you and your partner are almost one. If you are there, right in there . . . locked in . . . you become one . . . you become so . . . in that intimate second the baby is born and you are virtually one person you know . . . and it's the closest you'll ever be to that person.

However, according to Lewis, the above would represent (following Trethowan & Conlon, 1965) "an introjected, almost schizophrenic identification with both the wife and child, as a result of a jealousy of the woman's ability to bear children." He then says that these ideas are "undoubtedly true" and "valid" (1982, p. 46). I would like to introduce a little post-modern doubt into this double-edged diagnostic and make a transpersonal anthropological reappropriation of the couvade and male-birthing rituals from Western psychoanalysts (e.g. Reik, 1914; Bettelheim, 1955) and feminists (e.g. Horney, 1932; Ruzek, 1979) and their construction and deployment of so-called womb envy:

Many contemporary feminists argue that secretly and unconsciously, obstetricians and gynecologists wish to usurp these childbearing functions that they, and presumably *all men*, envy [my emphasis] (Ruzek, 1979, p. 95).

However, Marla Powers, and others, have shown us that to study the rituals pertaining to reproduction (such as menstruation) in isolation rather than situated within a dynamic cultural whole is to risk Euro-centric interpretations of those rituals (1999). No research, to my knowledge, has been carried out specifically on the ritual aspects and transpersonal experiences of procreative fathering males in Western societies (or in any other society for that matter) nor the encounter with death that often presages or accompanies such transformation (Grof, 1975, 1977, 1985). Nor have Western birth sites been identified as places where ritual-like dynamics can trigger cognitive transformation, *communitas*, NDEs, OBEs (out-of-body-experience), and other transpersonal comprehensions – among procreative fathering males. Steve, a 27 year old father of a new-born, speaks of his participation at birth as akin to an ‘out of body experience’ – it is this kind of experience, this leaving the body at birth and the encounter with death which has been comprehensively understudied in Western culture:

But I would put it on a par with a spiritual experience . . . such a physical experience . . . that would just shift your body . . . where your mind stays out of your body just because it comes to point . . . like a death really I suppose . . . my body is about to give up and my mind has to take over and my brain also gave up so something else had to kick in . . . yeah, it’s like a spiritual experience but it was really induced by the presence of the physical-ness of Tanya birthing.

THE PERINATAL UNCONSCIOUS

As noted, various dynamics of the birthing process have already been significantly related to transpersonal events by Grof. He says for example, “delivering women and people participating in the delivery as assistants or observers can experience a powerful spiritual opening” (1998, p. 135).⁶ There is an obvious and simple connection to be made here: if procreative fathering males, by virtue of their participation in conception or birthing/labouring women and their perinatally engaged neo-nates, constellate their own unconscious perinatal psyche then they are also, by all accounts, in contact with the near-death, and transpersonal aspects of the psyche (Grof, 1975, 1977, 1985; Ring, 1994; Greyson & Bush, 1992; Bache, 1996, 2000, Lahood, 2006).⁷ Conversely if they experience a brush with death at birth they can also, according to COEX logic (see below), dynamise their unconscious perinatal matrices.⁸ As religious scholar Christopher Bache (2000), says,

In Grof’s paradigm, the perinatal process is said to culminate in ego-death. Ego death is presented as a definitive transition from personal to transpersonal identity. Just as birth represents a definitive transition from the womb to the world (p. 295).

As an anthropologist my analysis of these themes is tilted toward the cultural aspect of Grof’s COEX systems and what he calls the “biographical level of the psyche,” which includes both life-enhancing and ‘traumatic’ events in the social life-world (see Grof, 1975). Social actors engaged at the *site of birth* in the *ritual of birth* are participating in an event which can be traumatic and has everything to do with birth, sex, and death. Furthermore, as noted, procreative males (and females) are participating in the very biological, social, and cosmic event (in time and space) where perinatal patterning is laid down in the human psyche.

It seems to me that we procreative males (enter the anthropologist as father) while participating in the real-time drama of the birth from conception to the actual parturition of biological children are prime candidates for a symbolic and unconscious confrontation with our own archaic perinatal dimension (and everything that entails). At the same time, we are also being woven more deeply into kinship systems which inexorably connect us with the realm of kin and therefore ancestry, the long dead and the unborn, our entrance into river of time, our ageing, and eventual encounter with mortality (Aijmer, 1992). The perinatal skeletons in our unconscious closets are surely rattled at this site.

I will have more to say about perinatal dynamics and COEX systems below. Here is an account from Jake, a 30 year father describing his participation in birth, those familiar with ritual dynamics and Grof's observations of the perinatal matrices may perceive them ordering this narrative:

Last year we were living in Australia but we came home for birth because Karri had a strong feeling about being at home. While we were here (at home in NZ) things were a lot more natural . . . home environment . . . it's a beautiful place around here, there are the trees and there were people supporting us. I suppose my perception was more normal here (BPM 1).

As soon as we went to the birthing centre, even though it's a nice place, it's not a hospital, things changed. We went there at night and we were under the lights, I think they were flashing lights and it's a place I haven't been to before and all of a sudden I'm spending all my time there. And I think that's when it started to change my perception of things. That I was in a much more artificial environment, that I was under lights, it felt quite cramped because we were spending time in the same area. There was no longer a night or day because we went right through the night and the birth didn't happen (BPM 2). And then came next morning still hadn't happened so there a blurring of what was day or night or even whether it mattered . . . the lights, the different environment, the cumulative affect of what was happening . . . and then one of the things that triggered the emotion for me was . . . you see Karri had a very, very, long labour, she dilated to about seven centimetres and then it didn't go any further and we had this period of hours and hours when there was just nothing happening and then we thought she was in transition and then we weren't sure . . . so it's getting to that stage when you're really clinging to hope and you are not sure what's going on (BPM3).

She's a really good singer, very vocal, and she started doing this sort of deep moaning noise to try and help during the contractions. The ones I remember were in the bathroom which had the biggest echo and they were really resonating and for some reason she was making this real primal sound, like an animal, that went in and really touched me and went straight to some part of my emotional being and really affected me. Those sounds triggered something. That was the only time I went away . . . to a separate bathroom and cried . . . and that was the first time that I had cried in years and years . . . it definitely brought up a lot of emotion in me (BPM 3).

It's funny the sounds she was making . . . It almost sounded like . . . sort of songs I've heard . . . some songs . . . I don't know . . . I am thinking African or something,

a real wail, almost like a funeral song . . . a real wailing sound . . . it really triggered that image in me and that triggered off a feeling of sadness in me even though that was not the dominant thing I was going through (encounter with death). There was a feeling of sadness and I couldn't explain why that's what welled up.

The last two paragraphs are suggestive of powerful changes in this man's psyche and his emotional response. It may well be that the emergence of his child recapitulates his own (BPM4) in which an experience of decompression, lack of tension, relief, expansion etc. become figural.

COEX SYSTEMS

Procreative fathers engaged in participatory birthing, I would suggest, are also engaged in what Grof calls a *system of condensed experience* or, a COEX system – a dynamic governing system in the human psyche which is closely linked to the passage of birth (perinatal matrices).⁹ Grof writes:

A COEX system is a dynamic constellation of memories (and associated fantasy material) from different periods of the individual's life, with the common denominator of a strong emotional charge of the same quality, intense physical sensation of the same kind, or the fact that they share some other important elements . . . Most biographical COEX systems are dynamically connected with specific facets of the birth process. Perinatal themes and their elements, then, have specific associations with related experiential material (1985, p. 97)

If we utilize this COEX theory, we can see the fathers' emotional experience and social engagement in the existential drama of birthing can either add, or correspond, to his own COEX systems depending on the emotional atmosphere or 'flavour' of the birthing. Following COEX logic, if the birthing scenario matches the positive expectations of the procreative person it will tend to be organised as part of his positive COEX system rooted in (but not reduced to) positive perinatal matrices and their biographical and transpersonal dimensions. Accordingly, he might experience feelings of oneness with partner and child, peak experiences of joy, relief, love, awe, cosmic unity, the sense of cosmic procreativity, or a positive connection to generation. Conversely, if the birth scenario *is* life-threatening or *felt* to be frightening, unsuccessful, or traumatic it can become meshed into his 'negative' perinatal matrixes and COEX systems, at the base of which is a primitive existential encounter with death. Accordingly, he will feel trapped, alienated, victimized, abused, traumatized, and threatened unto death – at birth. Here my informant, Geoffrey, describes his birth participation at age 22, twenty years ago in a classic 'skull at the banquet' episode:

His arrival was forceful, it had impact. In that same moment of his issue into life came the realization that this child was mortal and would die. When, I did not know, hopefully after me. And suddenly I was impacted by my own mortality and his mortality . . . and I was tottering on freaking out about this. I remember thinking/feeling 'well it's ok if I die, but not him, this object of adoration, not this life. I could not bear it if he died.' I was overwhelmed with death as my son

emerged – birth is death. Or it comes with death trailing right behind. I freaked out. I knew then I could not protect him from death. It was like a shock.

Geoffrey's experience suggests a metanoia; the shock of a spiritual conversion or a fundamental shift in "province of meaning" (Schutz, 1973) as he experiences himself as powerless before life's fullness. Death has become undeniable – this is what William James meant with his image of a grinning skull at the celebration (Becker, 1973, p. 16); an acute and awful realization because to imagine birth in its totality is also to consider its eventual endpoint. The child has entered the river of time which, as we know, flows toward a mortal end and, what's more, we flow before her. The experience seems to waken in some men the connection with the cycle of generation, regeneration, and degeneration and can evoke statements like this one from Danny, a man in his late 40's with two teenage children: "Birth was a mortality check. I had to think about how I was next in line for death."

I want to use Grof's description of persons working therapeutically with these levels – here the reader could bear in mind how closely the procreative male's biographical birthing situation reflects these dynamics, he writes:

On the biographical level only those individuals who have actually had a serious brush with death must deal during their self exploration with vital threats, on this level [perinatal] of the unconscious the issue of death is universal and entirely dominates the picture . . . Experiential confrontation with death at this depth of self exploration tends to be intimately interwoven with a variety of phenomena related to the birth process . . . although the entire spectrum of experiences occurring on this level cannot be reduced to a reliving of biological birth, the birth trauma seems to represent an important core of the process (1985, p. 9).

Participation in birth-giving, as outlined in this manuscript, can easily be seen as a brush with death; there are a host of ways in which a birth can become registered and filtered by the human psyche as 'traumatic', which again, adds another coat of paint to the negative COEX systems. For example, my participant Joseph told me this, "My daughter's heart stopped and I just freaked. I was just pacing in the corner, you know, terrified." Another motif I heard several times was the description of birth as a bloody accident, a car crash; others included the slaughter of animals, and butchery, or description of the woman as like "a gutted pig" or "on a torture rack" or a "slab of meat." The following descriptions from Richard and Joseph might also suggest that some fathers can somatically empathize with the fetal struggle and suffocation:

Just as her head was starting to present at the end . . . yeah it was quite . . . quite horrific . . . at one stage when the baby was *actually trapped in the tunnel and the heartbeat went right down you see*. And I could see the midwife starting to panic a little bit . . . a couple of minutes and the heart just about stopped. I am thinking 'Oh my God! We could actually lose this child. Oh my God!' It's like going to a car crash and there's someone there dying in front of you and you've got to do something. The head presented itself . . . I could see the little head all blue . . . oh my god she's not breathing at all! You do get very close to death when the baby's born. It's not alive till you actually see it moving around. I couldn't take a breath. I was covered in sweat.

I was going to move down to where the baby was emerging but when I looked and saw the top of the head I had these really strong feelings of suffocation and I pulled back and put my feelings on hold and tried to support Julie (laughs).

Psychological impingements can also stem from hegemonic and psychologically insensitive or even abusive hospital routines and situations or authoritarian and autonomy-denying decision making practices (my brother Jeff expressed his distress when his partner Maria (my sister in-law) was told to “shut up” and if she did not stop screaming she would not receive any pain-killing medication). Another woman, Stephanie, who birthed without a male partner, had her mobile phone with her so she could phone her mother. This was confiscated by the nursing staff which triggered a frightening somatic crises – cut off from her electronic umbilicus she fell into a state of panic and began to vomit (this stopped when they handed back the phone). According to Joel Richman hospitals maintain their ascendancy and authoritative knowledge over fathers by creating “anomic” conditions for them and meshing them into the lowest level of status (1982, p. 102) where they feel “powerlessness, disorientation, and isolation” (Richman & Goldthorp, 1978, p. 168).¹⁰ We can also mention routine procedures that injure the bodily integrity and bodily knowing of procreative males; their partners and offspring. Neil, a television camera operator, related this story about his shock and dissociation during birthing – the way that death is seemingly plucked from the air is striking:

A Samoan doctor came in and he just got a pair of scissors and just went whack and cut her straight down. And I am sort of sitting there watching this, and I mean normally I would keel over and faint at the sight of blood. It was shocking, you ah . . . switch into ah . . . you know . . . you take yourself out of reality type mode . . . being a TV camera man I can face most things through a viewfinder . . . like that guy in Chile shooting himself getting shot . . . he’s pointing the viewfinder watching the guy shoot him.

The atmosphere of the hospital can easily tilt toward negative COEX inscription. The site is overtly related to illness, accidents, crises, emergencies, death and dying and what Mary Douglas called disordered and dangerous biology (1966) i.e. blood, feces, mucus, and urine. Obviously the birth itself can be laborious, ordeal like, and life threatening (to mother and child) at times requiring radical intervention¹¹ because of negative biological influences in utero (Piontelli, 1992) or the constricting passage of the birth canal (Grof, 1977, 1985); or the pelvis narrowed and brain size increased by the impersonal forces of natural selection toward bipedalism (Trevathan & McKenna, 2003).¹² Grof does not, in the following instance, mention birth-giving which is also seen as an operation in Western societies:

As a memory matrix, BPM11 [basic perinatal matrix two] represents the basis for the recording of all unpleasant life situations in which an overwhelming destructive force imposes itself on the passive and helpless subject. The most typical and frequent examples are situations endangering survival and bodily integrity. Thus, the recollection of sensations connected with various operations, such as appendectomy, tonsillectomy, setting of broken extremities and difficult tooth extractions or even the complex reliving of the circumstances of such

procedures, occurs quite regularly in this context. The same is true for injuries, excessive muscular exertion and exhaustion (1977, p. 162).

A further complication could arise if a procreative male's negative COEX system is projected into a relatively benign birth giving situation in a process similar to therapeutic transference. Listen to this claim by a father at birth in New Zealand: "I just had to get out. I left her there. I felt so powerless. I couldn't stand watching the woman I love dying in front of me. I thought she was dying" (Pudney & Cottrell, 1998, p. 101). Getting out of there, fleeing the scene of death may well suggest a complex transference scenario with perinatal roots. Indeed the sense of helplessness and powerlessness were named a number of times, although with varying shades of intensity. Several men felt the situation was constructed in a way that they would feel helpless and fought to overcome such feelings by engaging more fully with the process.

A related area where procreative males might psychologically encounter death is in the ego-deflating, 'loss of control' experience that men often speak of around the event of birth. Again this kind of experience can lead to an 'ego death' and it seems to represent a deep existential encounter with the impermanence of life and surrender as nature and biology overwhelm their grasp on psychological security and they are forced to relinquish control as they are confronted with a biological process that is intimately related to death (Grof, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1985). The following statement from Steve gives an insight into his emotional exhaustion, losing control, falling apart, and breaking down:

The midwife said 'ok this isn't happening, we are going to have to go to the hospital' ... and that was the point there. *'Oh my God this is being taken out of our control and now we are going down a tunnel.'* The ambulance turned up. Belinda was just like (puffing) ... I was gone just into complete like gone mode ... lost ... *'Oh my God I'm losing control ... I'm losing control ... I am out of control.'* The pain of watching the fact that we are going to hospital. Initially those dreams of how it's supposed to be in the tub, at home ... falling apart.

Then just watching this body of Belinda, become a body. And watching her almost lose herself. Then get lost. Here we are we can converse and you know what's going on and you have an awareness. And then seeing her just engulfed into this complete like [identifying and speaking from her position] "I'm going to give birth and I have no choice in it. My physical body is just taking over and my mind is just going to leave. My idea of decision is gonna leave. My idea of choice is going to be gone because I have no choice. My body is going to take me into that space," and so just being aware of Belinda and watching her slip into that space and watching her be bundled into an ambulance like a gutted pig. I am sitting in the ambulance with her. Everything is still and there is this van rushing along. I'm not really like ... I'm in a place of being completely stunned. Once we got to the hospital it was obvious that the nurses and doctors were in control. They just came in and gave her an epidural. The point when Belinda was rolled on her side and I was watching them put this needle in Belinda's back. And I was

looking into her face and seeing how exhausted she was, feeling my own exhaustion and that was the point when I really broke down and I started crying. I was going through it emotionally, supportively . . . not so much physically but I was just gone.

TRANSPERSONAL COMPREHENSION

Several informants' encounters with death seemed to evolve into transpersonal comprehensions. They made reference to an illuminating sense of being connected to ancestors, the world, the universe, all persons born, to partners, to divinity, and to a hard-to-define perception connecting them to cosmic procreativity. What I find intriguing in the two narratives that follow is that their transpersonal comprehensions occur at the moment that death becomes figural.

One of my interviewees, Gordon, recalls from his birthing experience in 1968 and touches on the theme of cosmic procreativity. The reader may notice that he has become aware of a connection to 'thousands of generations' of ancestors (therefore the long dead) and here is where he becomes transpersonally connected:

I haven't actually thought about this much but becoming a father is a universalising experience. We come from thousands of generations before us and suddenly I experienced this primal condition of fertilising an egg, of becoming a father of a new child, a child that's never been in the world before . . . suddenly you feel connected to the whole universe. You suddenly understand . . . and it changed me in a blinding . . . in an illuminating second forever because of this extraordinary feeling of connectivity. Now that I didn't anticipate, I never said to myself 'you're going to experience connectivity with the whole world'.

Another one of my informants, Dustin, of about 50 years of age, describes his child's birth. Dustin's son was born in 1998 and I interviewed him in 2002. Again we see similar themes of 'connection' that, when taken at face value, appear to transcend his identification with his body-ego and indeed, imply the transcendence of temporality. In my informant's words:

The strength of the child to fight through and to survive that crushing experience . . . and for the mother to survive . . . and yet the fragility . . . you are right on the edge of life and death, you are on the brink, on the edge. I was also experiencing that edge of life and death. If they had died a part of me would die. A part of me was connected to every birth of every human being at that time, just in that moment. It was something I felt, there was universality there, linking me to every human being born at that time but also every one in the past and the future. Like a commonality, a synchrony, that I knew every other human being on the planet has experienced this, exactly this. It brought me in from the cold.

I would draw the reader's attention to the fact that Dustin's visionary logic also fires at the time when he encounters death via an awareness of the potential death of his partner or child. The fact that he somehow experiences himself as participating with the foetal life of all humanity and human history (past and future) is a classic theme

in Grof's research into holotropic states of consciousness, their connection to uterine life, and what he calls the perinatal level of the psyche:

The feelings of cosmic unity [BPM1] . . . are identical with "peak experiences" . . . this phenomena functions as an important gateway to a variety of transpersonal experiences . . . the transcendence of time and space can assume a rather concretized form and be illustrated by a number of specific images. An individual may experience a sequence of visions that allows for interpretation in terms of regression in historical time. This involves a variety of embryonal sensations, ancestral memories, elements of the collective unconscious and evolutionary experiences (1975, p. 107).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Some procreative fathering males at birth have their own perinatal psyche constellated and transpersonal states of consciousness ensue including what could be called holotropic experiences.¹³ Western birthing specialists operating under Cartesian influences are not in my opinion aware of the depth of male psycho/spiritual participation at the birth of their children. Midwives, partners, friends are also largely unaware of the depth of the father's psychic process.

I have explored here the many ways in which procreative fathering males can experience encounters with death and ego-death over the perinatal episode which can include conception and post-partum. Some of the men's narratives suggest a complex participatory and projective relationship between the father's own birth and the birth of his child. Several men structured their narratives (especially around birth) in a dialectical fashion cognizant with perinatal patterning. From the interviews a number of associations to death, impermanence and mortality, and ancestry were made. Several reports of OBE, leaving the body, dissociation, trance, ordeal, and comparisons to LSD use were also made, as were comparisons with spiritual states of consciousness in which the Western dichotomy between life and death was collapsed. Still others appeared to participate in what is called a *spiritual emergency* (Grof & Grof, 1989; Peters, 1996) and showed self-initiation behaviours (after Bateson, 1972 and Peters, 1994) and three reported prototypical NDEs (see Lahood, 2006). Others suggested that cosmic forces were at work in which they were participants.

This study would suggest that more research is required on men and women's encounters with death and transpersonal comprehension at birth, in particular to find out if there is a healing function of such states. The impact on the family of a father with PTSD would be another essential area of study. Given that Westerners at birth-giving can be said to be in a ritual process, perhaps midwives could become more aware of this factor and recover that aspect of midwifery traditionally associated with her role as a 'ritual specialist'. Antenatal classes could also prepare both men and women for the emotional and transpersonal challenges of the ritual processes, and finally the Western birthing system itself should be scrutinized for its ability to help or hinder this process, perhaps leading to radical changes in the way we perceive and assist in birth-giving.

NOTES

¹ Westerners since the late 1960's have attempted to re-ritualize birthing and multiple cultural constructions can be found among people living in Western societies ranging from the secular to the traditionally religious, feminist to the New Age (e.g. Davis-Floyd, 1992; Klassen, 2001; Reed, 2005).

² This statement also alerts us to the vast political, social, and transpersonal agendas alive at the time fathers entered birthing sites in the Western world and points to some of the many meanings his presence can represent.

³ It is interesting to note that the Zen Boom among students in California has been related to the post-war demilitarized form of Zen Buddhism seeded by D. T. Suzuki. Suzuki's satori; the peak experience generalized by him to the heightened awareness found in other religions' ultimate states was tied to the notion that Japanese soldiers who gave up their lives on the battle field were enacting the ultimate act of self-negation and this was related to reaching nirvana (Cunningham, 2004).

⁴ This statement is important. It shows the invitation to fathers to locate themselves in the peak experience equated with the Hindu concept of enlightenment or moksha which is a condition tied to the posthumous state.

⁵ During my work as an antenatal educator, I spoke to a Nigerian man, whom I will call Ajayi, who told me that in his country that should a man be present at a birth it would be from an untimely accident. Eventually his participation would come to be seen as an indicator that he was slowly becoming a woman. When I asked him if it was okay to be present at birth in New Zealand he said "it is different here. It does not matter here."

⁶ Procreative fathering males may also be candidates for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as outlined by the DSM4: 309.81 "the development of symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's personal integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person" (1994, p. 424).

⁷ Three fathers experienced almost prototypical NDE-like patterns. Because of the complexity of these accounts I have reserved them for a separate article (Lahood, 2006).

⁸ This may also include midwives ancient and modern and again this might be another fruitful research area.

⁹ Feminist researchers and transpersonal theorists have shown that the Western medical system, operating on Cartesian principles, sees the body as an objectified machine (Merchant, 1990; Davis-Floyd, 1992, p. 48). Interestingly, it has also been persuasively argued that the dissociated and dualistic Cartesian mind-view strongly reflects the problematic perinatal situation around which negative COEX systems correspond. Richard Tarnas in *Passion of the Western Mind* (1991) argues that the trajectory of the Western scientific mind-world from Plato to the Post-Post Modern epoch can be interpreted as following an archetypal structure closely resembling that of birth and culminating in an era marked by a rebirth in participatory ways of knowing and being.

In his stunning epilogue, Tarnas, working from Grof's experiential research, has argued that Cartesian epistemology represents an outworking of the constricting and contracted aspects of unconscious perinatal dynamics at a collective and cultural level. Thus our cultural crisis finds an analogue with an obstructed foetal consciousness struggling for life in the birth canal (1991). A similar view was put forward by feminist Susan Bordo in *The Flight to Objectivity* (1987). She shows how the historic masculine flight to objectivity and its attempts at purification from the (so-called) defiling feminine 'irrational' is related to the structure of birth and claims that the Cartesian mind-world as a male 'drama of parturition': cultural birth out of the mother-world of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and creation of another world – the modern (1987, p. 5). While there are substantial differences in Tarnas' and Bordo's models to be reconciled, it is still of great interest that two researchers have located the Cartesian mind world to birth.

Modern technocratic birthing then can be seen as an expression of a psycho-cultural COEX system: a powerful clustering of emotionally constricting Eurocentric worldviews, cultural practices and institutions, rooted both in birth and in culture, extending perhaps from Neanderthal brain development and the narrowing of the female pelvis and the growth of the human brain (Trevathan & McKenna, 2003). The creation of oppressive feminine denying religious systems with strong pollution taboos and rituals of expulsion from 'defiling' women's bodies into secular mind-worlds which adumbrate narrowed masculine medical hegemonies hell bent on purging children from the uterine 'pump' (Ehrenreich & English, 1973; Martin, 1987). Embedded at the core of this system are the hegemonically constructed (birth) of the clinic, the objectifying medical gaze (Foucault, 1994) and its mechanical birthing rituals (Davis-Floyd, 1992): perinatal dynamics to the bone.

¹⁰ Sociologist Emile Durkheim, introduced the concept of anomie in *The Division of Labour in Society*, (1933). Anomie describes a condition of social deregulation: meaning that the rules of how people should to behave and what to expect with each other were breaking down leaving people with a problematic lack of 'norms'. Durkheim used the term again in *Suicide* (1952) referring to moral deregulation that could lead to anomic suicide.

¹¹ I worked for a time in a hospital as an orderly during this research and observed first hand women placed in emergency wards post partum.

¹² Wanda Trevathan argues that the forces of natural selection have narrowed the female pelvis during our species shift to bipedalism. To accommodate this pelvic narrowing human children develop for some time outside of the mother's body. This evolutionary pathway may have made the transition from the uterine through the narrow passage to the breast a hazardous and psychologically problematic journey.

¹³ I would assume that the successful birth of the child in some sense allows the male's own perinatal energies to be projected onto the sequential passage of the new born. Positive perinatal matrixes BPM1 and BPM4 will activate with successful birth and positive transpersonal experiences would tend to follow.

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