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Rebirth and the Growth Movement

"Everybody wants to be reborn".

This remark, made at a recent discussion on current group work, resonated in my awareness and has led me to think a great deal about our present interest in rebirth, how it reflects a centuries-old truth, and what is happening in the growth movement and in the world generally that is causing it just now.

The image: a person - in group - in a growth centre - in an urban setting - in a Western nation - is reliving birth at a primal level.

The growth movement is the 'Free Child' of our society: its role to explore and act out society's feelings about freedom. That the movement is now concerned with birth suggests that it is exploring rebirth for a dying society; also that its own relationship to society is at a crucial stage of birth. At present Britain is a mother who is holding tightly against the Free Child in herself; even though she nourished it in her womb, she cannot easily let it go, and be, and grow. The present economic depression with its inevitable 'holding in', restrictiveness and right-wing backlash is a threat to a growth movement which flourishes in an atmosphere of relative permissiveness and affluence. So the baby feels held down, oppressed - yet its urge to be born and accepted is the greater, for if Britain's old life is so unsatisfactory, haven't we new life to offer right now?

In this climate of indifference and hostility, the desire to 'get out from under' has led to regression into birth primals at one end, and flight to India and spaces beyond at the other. But I believe the important issue is how far, when we are born, mother and child can accept one another - and we may be shying away from that. The post-birth place is in our therapeutic experience the crucial place where we find our identity and meaning in relation to our new-found world: there, for better or worse, we begin to create anew. The growth movement, if it avoids confrontation with its mother environment, will simply repeat the pattern of mutual rejection with which too many people begin, and on which too much of modern life is based.

Humanistic psychology was born, in one sense, out of the womb of Freudian psychotherapy. That Freud so resolutely disowned the importance of birth trauma and saw it as a challenge to his own power and prestige is significant - almost as though he tried to abort the powerful female in his womb. We are conscious today of the need for liberating women: in our primal rebirth work we are exploring for Freud the powerful Mother who bore him and others so unsatisfactorily that generations of male analysts and obstetricians have striven to put her work right and prove they could do it better.

It seems to me no coincidence that the recent AHP conference had strong elements of women's liberation in it. We do well if we can free, within the growth movement, the energy of women and the energy men have devoted to holding women down. To do that in the rebirth context is possible because having really experienced the threatening power of Mother as it originates in the womb and immediately after birth, we can recognise how that pattern has led men to take over the role of keeping Her under control (which has made her more controlled and so more holding) and we can begin to let her go.

Mother, of course, is everywhere: Mother country, Mother Earth, Mother Nature; and for centuries we've known the difficulty of living with her. Whenever, in a certain time or place, she become threatening, civilisations go through the rebirth process in politics, the arts, religion, therapy, education, trying to make sense of the pain of their life and create new meanings. (I expand on this pattern elsewhere in this issue.) Where there is a healthy rhythmic energy-flow between her and her children - healthy bodies, a healthy childbirth pattern - then the rebirth process can be healthy too: an inevitable passage, an accepted transition. Where the flow is not healthy, or has almost stopped altogether - as in our urban societies today - the rebirth process is intensely painful and seems often to lead nowhere, or into some other chaos: a reflection of what happens in most 'civilised' births nowadays: experiences of torment which are followed by an agony of body isolation, non-being and despair.

We can take three literary examples to demonstrate what has been happening. Shakespeare's tragedies are, in form, rhythm and often content, rebirth experiences. They were rooted in popular theatre and language, so their energy and new life flowed back into the mother community; to this day they are meaningful energies.

Two centuries after Shakespeare, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* is in semi-exile. His message, his account of his rebirth experience is only half heard by the listeners in the poem - and is read on a printed page by contemporaries.

In our own time T. S. Eliot's profound experience in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* is in a language inaccessible to the majority; and the writing brings him no closer to the real contact with people he yearned for. The painful spirituality of his work is a reflection of our 'way out' of the womb into isolation.

These works are by men. Shakespeare's tragedy was at the more obvious level concerned with male power, potency and sexuality, women usually being the cause of their weakness or downfall. Increasingly over the centuries men have been trying to use phallic potency science, the machine, the weapon, to cure our ills, while women and feminine values are submerged and the image of the comforting or nourishing mother is replaced by the washed-out hag or the glamorous sex-symbol.

In male-dominated political life we can see clearly how revolutions reflect

the birth process, and there are as many variants as there are communities with common birth patterns which they are acting out. In the life of Western civilisation we are undoubtedly in that process again, and in danger of acting out the omnipotence fantasies of the last violent stage of birth so blindly that we could destroy ourselves and Mother Earth too. We have so split our male and female functions, so disconnected ourselves from body-life - natural rhythms and energyflow - that we can't feel what revolution, what birth is 'for'; we don't easily believe, trust that our human progress is towards creativity, new life, growth, nourishment, after reconciliation with Earth and Nature on whom we depend.

Our only saving is to recognise these patterns which we are acting out - and there we can begin to trust our human-ness: our understanding. Somewhere in the birth process when death seems inevitable the head and brain find an answer, an understanding which carries them through. Many people in birth primals have the sense that they will 'outwit' the restrictive mother - this is necessary life-aggression. Also, more pertinently, they often have the wit to hold back, to make the final exit less destructive; there is the sense of giving up the struggle and allowing oneself to be eased through when mother is ready. The conflict becomes collaboration. This partnership is heralded by the midwife's 'Stop Pushing'.

To give up that struggle at that point is to give up the omnipotence fantasies. The masculine aggressive gives way to the feminine passive at the crucial moment.

And with luck that is what is happening in our civilisation, and at the crucial moment where we face the possibility of a holocaust, we begin to use our heads, our wits and our wisdom, take a look at what is happening, and replace excessive aggression with forbearance and collaboration.

I want to stress again that it is what happens after the birth that is vital. Commonly the isolation and non-being send the baby back into regression in a search for meaning, a search for the lost womb, and we replay and act out our birth process for the rest of our days. The healing creative task is to endure the non-being, and then take up new life and establish contact with the world.

What we need to see, in the growth movement as it looks at its relationship to the wider world, and in our society as it looks at its relationship with the universe, is that it isn't enough just to relive that birth, repeat that pattern over and over as we have been doing in all our half-blind searches for meaning: art, therapy, tragedy, religious quest, political revolution. Now that our search has brought us back to birth, to 'the place we started from', we can move on from that knowledge and start to create new patterns; stop regressing into the womb and acting out its passion and start taking a hold on life outside the womb.

We are then faced with the dilemma of the newborn. For us in the growth

movement it is tempting to choose again the schizoid path and go off into transcendence or disassociation from the wider world and common social problems, or take the hysterical way, clinging to one another, looking to our groups and leaders for easy answers and brief satisfactions. But this is to avoid the creative use of our new awareness; for if we consciously work to break down the isolation between people, between 'us' and 'them', then we begin to counteract that isolation which so many of us suffered in the hours after birth, and we find, in mutual contact, the reassurance of our common human-ness together, our mutual responsibility, and - given that reassurance - the acceptance of our individual unique identities. In all this, the child may have to teach the mother how to be responsible. That too is a natural fact. And the teaching is done by expressing the need to be accepted.

There seems to be already a greater mingling of members of the growth movement in the outside community, a wider spreading and feeding back of what we have experienced and can offer, and more response-ability in the way we offer it. There is also a heartening reconciliation with the essential positive values of intellectual discipline, and with the essential positive values of Western religion. This is clear from the contributions we are happy to be able to include in this issue of *Self and Society*.

**A revolution is really the birth of a new baby, a new idea,
a new feeling, a new way of feeling, a new feeling-pattern.
It is the birth of a new man. . . You who want a revolution,
beget and conceive the new baby in your bodies. . . There
is no new baby in the womb of our society.**

D. H. Lawrence.

I've been born, and once is enough.
You don't remember, but I remember,
Once is enough.

T. S. Eliot: Sweeney Agonistes