

## DAVID'S BIRTH: MORE THAN A METAPHOR

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Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;  
in thy book were written, every one of them,  
the days that were formed for me,  
when as yet there was none of them.

--Psalm 138:16

Several days before Easter, 1979, an event of great wonder and power occurred in my life. Not to preach about it would have been as unthinkable as for shepherds to ignore a choir of angels. Our first child was born.

It never struck me, the irony of being handed such a marvelous Advent or Christmas theme at Eastertime. By the time of the actual delivery the power of the event had long since shoved seasonal considerations aside and made connections with the whole spectrum of Christian praise and pondering, but mainly, it seemed, with Easter. Why Easter? Because the drama of birth opened new doors in my consciousness of suffering and death, resurrection, and the life of the Spirit. These openings I wish to share with others who believe that personal events really do repositure our minds in our quest to grasp and interpret the mysteries of faith, and who are thankful when they do.

More than a month before Easter I had been teaching a seminar on death and dying to physicians in residence at Medical University Hospital. We began with a guided fantasy intended to loosen images and stir up symbols from the soul. Then in this context each participant was given a piece of paper and a box of crayons, with the simple instruction to draw Death.

My own drawing developed quite differently than in any previous seminar. A large, blue circle took shape, which I began to sense was like a pool of water, fed from a spring that flowed into it like a blue column from underneath. I drew a level of water in the round pool, but it was clear that I was not simply looking sideways at it like a tank: I was inside, aware of water all around me; so it all became light blue. Then I drew an outstretched, suppliant hand in the water, as the picture needed some human form to complete the gestalt. Finally, a bright yellow sun appeared outside the blue circle to the top left, and then my picture of Death felt finished.

When it was my time to show and tell, I described how the picture had taken shape but could offer no interpretation of it beyond "It just felt right." One of the residents said, "Lucille is pregnant, isn't she?" She was, very pregnant. "What it looks like to me is you've drawn an amniotic sac with an umbilical cord and a little human being inside."

I felt a moment of acute embarrassment, like one who has been caught with his unconscious showing. Of course it was an amniotic sac with a human being inside! But why should that form emerge when I was mindful of Death?

Then the connections started. The resident recalled an article he had read recently in The Atlantic (April, 1979), an essay by Carl Sagan entitled "The Amniotic Universe." In the article, Sagan presses his well-documented exploration of human consciousness into the universe of the fetus. The remarkable thing is that he does so prompted by the widely publicized epiphanies reported by people who had near-death experiences. In case you haven't heard, these people with surprising consistency report that they experienced first a startling awareness of their surroundings, including a perception of themselves as being perfectly whole, regardless of how wounded or disease-ridden they may actually have been. Then there is a voyage through darkness, sometimes tunnel-like, into a source of glorious light that is experienced as unconditional love.

How can we explain the fact that people of different ages, cultures, and religious beliefs have the same sort of near-death experiences? Sagan plays with a few implausible hypotheses about the symbol-structure of common religious beliefs being pre-wired into the architecture of the brain, then makes a proposal that is breath-taking in its simplicity:

The only alternative, so far as I can see, is that every human being, without exception, has already had an experience like that of those travelers who return from the land of death: the sensation of flight; the emergence from darkness into light; an experience in which, at least sometimes, a heroic figure can be dimly perceived, bathed in radiance and glory. There is only one common experience that matches this description. It is called birth.

What a pregnant idea! The idea is that the way we experience death is related organically with the way we experienced birth! But the way we experience death includes not only that graphic journey told by a few who came back. It also includes the religious and other ways we humans have of dealing with our mortality. By extension, then, the idea is that the imprinting of memory may begin prior to birth and furnish a matrix for the longings, the inklings, and the symbols of our deepest self as they develop throughout our life.

Say that this hypothesis is worth exploring. What kinds of pre-conscious experience might leave their imprint on "the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them?" To begin, consider that we were all once the center of a small, perfectly benevolent universe. "It does not seem impossible," Sagan says, "that we may occasionally and imperfectly remember this Edenic, golden age, when every need--food, oxygen, warmth, and waste disposal--was satisfied before it was sensed, provided automatically by a superbly designed life-support system, and that we may, in dim recollection years later, describe it as 'being one with the universe.'"

Some such existence as this comes to a violent end--such a definite ending to life as the young human being has known it that birth might be called a kind of death. First the universe constricts and convulses in a dreadful reversal of whatever awareness of reality the unborn child possesses. Then follows traumatic expulsion through a dark tunnel into sudden, brilliant light. What impact must the discovery of light make upon the consciousness of a creature who has lived only in sheltering darkness! And then there is the experience of being held, swaddled, nourished. And we are born.

Those are the data. Dr. Leboyer's poetic description of birth is well worth reading in his book Birth Without Violence--one can almost re-experience the event,

and without LSD. What interests me in this common reality of the birth experience is that it is full of evidences that point to the mystery of Resurrection life. Look at some of these intimations.

Both Jesus and Paul drew images from the whole process of birth to describe what it is like to live in the Spirit. The text that comes to mind at once is one that had obvious sacramental meaning to the author of the Gospel of John. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born anew or not see the Kingdom of God. When Nicodemus stumbled over the material impossibility of re-entering the womb, Jesus said to him: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." Do not ignore the water! When we stand before the water in the baptismal font, tank, or river, like an obstetrician helping a person to experience sacramentally death and delivery--the elements of rebirth--with Christ, are we aware that that font theologically is an amniotic universe? And could it be, as Freud suggested, that our common remembrance of the unity, peace, and wholeness of the amniotic state may be the dynamic font of religious consciousness, as well as a symbol of the Kingdom of God? Does the "oneness with the universe" that we experience in the first phase of our life serve to anchor the reality of the oneness expressed and sought for by spiritual teachers of East and West? "For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell," Paul wrote to the Colossians, "and through him to reconcile to himself all things--the Allness--whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. . . . If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God."

In Christian theology, the oneness of all things that we seek is a reconciliation, presupposing separation and strife. The second phase of the birth process, the time when uterine contractions begin, is a paradigm of separation and strife. Paul chose it as an emblem of the tortured, contradictory yet forward-moving condition of the present age:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. (Romans 8:18-25)

Paul's analogy is gripping because it evokes for us a time of utter insecurity. The stable uterine foundation upon which the amniotic cosmos is anchored turns against us, Sagan says; the fetus is horribly compressed and shocked for what must seem an interminable period. Could it be that the sudden, traitorous reversal of our first real security plants in our pre-consciousness the seed of the faith assumption that this earth is not our secure foundation? We groan inwardly because we know that the world as we know it can betray us. Faith in the Old Testament is often expressed in terms of God's faithfulness in "delivering" the person or people from such conditions as those described in Psalm 18:

Then the earth reeled and rocked;  
the foundations also of the mountains trembled  
and quaked, because he was angry.

For the Christian, it is impossible to think of the landscape of the spiritual life without confronting suffering and death there. These are the stuff of Good Friday when, Matthew reports, the earth was convulsed and thick darkness covered the scene. Easter itself is not an evasion of the tragedy and heartbreak of our lives, the dashing of hopes, and the final fact that we will die. The struggle to walk by faith and not by sight at such times as these is prefigured in the sense of betrayal and confusion first experienced in the unimaginably unkind jolts that begin the process of birth.

The third phase of birth is the passage through the birth canal, the primal journey from darkness into light. By every parameter of measurement except distance our first journey is an awesome one. It is the exodus from a land of security to a land of promise. It is the epic journey of Odysseus through many tests to Ithica. It is the mystical descent and ascent of Dante through the whole geography of medieval spirituality. It is the pilgrimage of John Bunyan through the wicket gates and sloughs of Puritan piety. Or if our journey of faith is more like a leap into the unknown or irrational with Abraham and Kierkegaard, we still have scarcely outjumped our own original leap of faith. The journey has been construed in many ways from Gilgamesh to our own day. The remarkable consensus that life is understood best under the paradigm of the journey may be related to the fact that we have all experienced, in a way that our conscious, mundane memories cannot recapture, a passage of mythological proportions.

"Let there be light!" One can almost hear Handel's triumphant chorus celebrating the passage from chaos to creation when one considers the end of the drama of birth. The crowning, the delivery, the first cry, the physical separation from the mother, the birth of Light--this fourth phase of birth is so momentous that it seems to sum up the whole process. The climax is in the last act.

Perhaps it does sum it all up, but in a paradoxical way. Delivery does not change substantially the character and function of the young human being. Yet the change in the reality in which he or she now lives is so vast, so previously unimaginable, so life-changing as to mark one's birthday forever as the moment one begins having personal identity. Birth: in a physical sense very little is different in the transition from helpless fetus to helpless infant; and yet everything is new! A Zen proverb says it: "Before enlightenment, chopping wood and carrying water. After enlightenment, chopping wood and carrying water."

Just so, the Christian who knows himself to have entered into the grace of the Risen Christ knows as well that Easter faith is not different in substance from the life of suffering and pilgrimage common to all humanity. Easter contains Good Friday and all the rest. And yet . . . "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come!"

The new stranger whom we greet has not returned to his amniotic Eden. The first burning rush of air into wet, tender lungs proved that. The Promised Land is always occupied by Caananites, it appears, when Israel crosses the Jordan, and Gilgal is more a beginning than an end. And the modern Odysseus of Nikos Kazantzakis, having gained his Ithica, comes to a moment of truth when he acknowledges to his deepest self, "My soul, thy voyages have been thy native land!" The infant pilgrim has not returned to Eden. And yet . . . he is received, and given nurture, and cuddled into membership in the human family.

Just so, Easter is not the promise of happy endings in life: Easter is the power for new beginning.

It is time to bring this playful theology, this metaphor that may be more than metaphor, to a close. The content of Easter is Christ and his victory over death. That is given. But the structure of our mindfulness of the Easter reality--may it not be formed in part by the imprint from our own primal experience of a kind of death and resurrection, that portentous time when we cannot have avoided learning something of what it means to be a human creature? God's revelation may find a most welcoming home in those persons who have built their home close to the springs of their own deepest--and most common--humanity.