

An Exploration into the Continuity of Consciousness

by
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Abstract

Can we explain the wisdom we perceive in the eyes of newborn babies? Is the simple answer that they *are* incredibly wise at that time? Is birth perhaps the death of an expanded consciousness, a state to which we are reborn with immense relief at the moment of physical death? Most Eastern philosophy has long held this belief, but the body of evidence to support this hypothesis is also now burgeoning in the West. This paper examines some of that evidence, looking at what informs us of the existence of consciousness before birth and after death. It also addresses the importance of this knowledge reaching healthcare professionals, particularly those who work closely with birth, death and dying, and the grieving process.

Birth: The Beginning?

When my sons, Benjaya and Asher, were born in 1986 and 1993 respectively, I not only perceived their innate wisdom, I bathed in it like an exquisite elixir for weeks. It was better than any meditation or spiritual encounter I've ever had – and I've had a few. Not an uncommon experience I know, and perhaps because of that it deserves greater scrutiny than it currently receives. What could explain the nature of such divine feelings in the presence of new life? Yes, the maternal instinct (in both men and women) is enhanced by the baby's tiny size, physical helplessness and other factors, but would we be aware of this sense of wisdom in the presence of an almost 'clean slate' of consciousness, imprinted only by the happenings in the womb and the birth itself?

Helen Wambach, an American psychologist, hypnotised 750 people back to the time before their birth to relive the experience of emerging into life. In her book *Life Before Life*¹ (1979), which is a collection of these accounts, startling similarities emerge that could, if we believe them, enlighten us about the state of consciousness of newborns and the appropriateness of our welcome. Here are a few excerpts from those hypnotised. They were asked to remember what occurred, come back to their present selves and accurately record their experience:

1. Immediately after the birth I felt that they were pulling me unnecessarily. I felt drained and angry. I felt raw from the light, the air, everything. They were so rough. The atmosphere was rude... it was all commotion and I longed to be back in space where everything was light.
2. After birth I was aware of other people's feelings and I had the understanding of an adult not a child. I just listened and observed.

3. It was like my mind was too big for this little body. I was aware that people in the delivery room worked with despatch and purpose.
4. I was aware that people around me were showing a mechanical attitude about the birth, but they touched me as tenderly as possible. Their standards were very gross compared to mine, but somehow I seemed to understand.
5. It seemed to me that the doctors were unresponsive to my consciousness and treated me as a non-entity, a mere thing or object.
6. As soon as I emerged it was very scary with lots of lights. People were handling me in a very unloving way, very cold emotionally. I was aware of their feelings. They were doing their job with good intentions, they were just not aware of their own insensibility and how much I could understand.

Experiences such as these are told not only by those in regression sessions the world over, but also by vast numbers in the Rebirthing Movementⁱⁱ who have relived the birth experience in order to clear life-long destructive patterns. If we accept these accounts, then the 'baby' is highly aware of what is going on without need to focus the physical eyes or to use the other four bodily senses. The consciousness may perhaps not even be totally in the body at this point, but coming in and out before entering more fully into its fleshy limitations.ⁱⁱⁱ Where are babies when they sleep so much? And how must it be for them when they emerge to be spoken to with 'goo, goo, ga, ga' language if they truly hold the wisdom we perceive?

Birth/Death: The Similarities

Doesn't the above ring a bell in relation to what we know of death? The dying look as if they are coming in and out of consciousness at the end, seeming not quite of this world anymore. But where is their consciousness? Just because they appear not to be lucid, does it mean that they are not lucid in another reality? As some hospice workers will testify, the dying, even without use of their physical vision, will often describe deceased loved ones there to greet them, and talk of a light that caregivers cannot see. Also, there are prolific accounts from those who have experienced near death describing in minute detail the happenings around their physical bodies after they have been declared dead. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross,^{iv} one of the world's foremost authorities on death and dying, and Dr. Raymond Moody^v – the 'grandfather' of near death research, have questioned several totally blind people who have had near death experiences. They were able to describe in minute detail the clothes of those present around their body, who came into the room first, and other information impossible for their physical eyes to detect. As with the accounts of birth experiences, many of those who leave their bodies in the near death situation also report being able to sense the feelings of those in the resuscitation team or others in the room.

Even the hush that often surrounds the deathbed is an echo of the birthing room where the presence of the newborn induces the response of awed whispers. And do

both the newborns and the dying experience the well documented ‘tunnel experience’ in their journeys in and out?

Changes are Coming

Over the many years I have been working in the fields of both holistic birth and death, I have encountered a climate of tremendous fear – fear of the unknown. And yet, although it may be true that the majority of those both witnessing and experiencing birth and death are presently ignorant to the possibilities of continuing consciousness, there is, in my perception, a growing opening toward these ideas. Paradigms do seem to be changing fast. University Professor Louis LaGrand, in *Messages and Miracles, Extraordinary Experiences of the Bereaved* (1999)^{vi} reports on various US polls, which vary widely: A Gallup poll suggests that one in six adults claim to have had contact with a deceased loved one, and the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Council found that as many as forty-two percent made a similar claim. Perhaps people are now feeling safer to admit their unusual experiences, as they are less likely to be ridiculed in this age of ‘coming out’. The media, although responsible for engendering immense fear about death by using it as a source of horror and morbidity in entertainment, are at last also beginning to air programmes with a more responsible attitude to the subject. Death is coming out of the closet and if we can believe the words of Djwal Khul quoted in esoterist Alice Bailey’s *Death: The Great Adventure*^{vii} (1985) ‘Within the coming years, the fact of eternity of existence will have advanced out of the realm of questioning into the realm of certainty.’

Soon we may need to alter the dictionary definition of both birth and death. I suspect that all Western dictionaries agree with *Collins English Dictionary*^{viii} that birth means ‘the origin’ and death means ‘the permanent end of all functions of life’. When related only to a physical, material and visible state of existence, all definitions will denote finality, darkness, and the extinction of all energetic activity. Inclusion of the metaphysical (beyond the physical) allows for the expansion of definitions with the common themes of transformation and transition into another dimension of existence. I often ask participants of my workshops on the subject of continuity of consciousness, many of whom have had personal experiences of life outside of the physical, to come up with their own definitions of death. Here is a selection: Transition from one state of being to another; Reunion of the body with the earth and soul with the spirit; The end of an individual personality in this life plane; Transformation from the density of matter to a finer frequency of existence; Another leg on the journey home.

Personal Experience

Mark Twain said, ‘I do not wish to hear about the moon from someone who hasn’t been there.’ Well, I have ‘been there’ – to the agonising place of looking death in the face as well as to the realm of continuous consciousness. In the sixth month of my first pregnancy, in the presence of a group who witnessed my utter astonishment, I had the extraordinary experience of hearing a voice claiming to be my son-to-be telling me that he was afraid of his coming birth because for him it

was like a death. “There is death in birth, just as there is birth in death” the voice said. Then I was overcome with emotion, that didn’t seem to be my own, as I heard him begging me to keep him conscious of his true identity when he came. I listened, was aware of his potential loss as he was born gently into water at home, and did my best to comply with keeping him conscious of his innate wisdom. Benjaya was the first baby to be born in water in the Midlands of England and because his unusual birth catalysed immense interest from the media and the public, his father and I joined other pioneers of waterbirth, working full time to bring the practice into the mainstream in Britain as a birthing method of choice.

It was five years later, when we were at last feeling as if we had achieved great success in this ‘mission’ that the unthinkable happened. When out playing, my waterbaby son, Benjaya, slipped down a river bank and drowned, leaving this life through water just as he had entered. That was in 1992, and he has spoken to me in many guises ever since, firing still further my passionate interest in the subject of the continuity of consciousness. It greatly comforted me then to remember the words of that voice telling me that there is birth in death.^{ix}

How are we informed about the continuity of consciousness?

Before we look at specific stories, let’s look in more detail at the different ways we are informed of the continuity of consciousness. The avenues available for exploration into the topic are many:

1. Near Death Experience (NDEs)
2. After Death Communication (ADCs) i.e. Sudden and unexpected communication using the senses, dreams, symbols, and physical phenomena
3. Contact with deceased loved ones through mediums
4. Regression Sessions (Hypnotherapy)
5. Rebirthing
6. Deathbed visions
7. Personal experiences of those witnessing birth and death
8. Spontaneous insights/ visions/ meditative experiences/ dreams
9. Reincarnation evidence

It has to be said that the vast body of evidence for the continuity of consciousness is mainly worthless in the eyes of scientists because it cannot be repeated under strict conditions. How can we expect metaphysical experience to be measured with tools of the physical world? This is right brain, experiential, anecdotal evidence, which by its sheer volume will, I believe, eventually make its voice heard in the scientific realms. Due to the nature of my work and the curiosity of others, it is often appropriate for me to tell my stories about my communication with those in other dimensions. This sharing opens the door for others to tell their personal tales, often kept hidden for decades, and I am left believing that almost everyone has had, or knows someone who has had, an evidential experience of life after death. I expect that such stories will soon flood out wider and lose the fearful responses, just as waterbirth was ridiculed and rejected before its value was finally seen and accepted by the mainstream.

Near-Death Experiences

We have already looked at some evidence for existence before birth from the avenue of hypnotherapy and my own spontaneous experience. Now let's look at the other end of earthly life. Here there is much more data to explore. I recently discovered an untitled Elisabeth Kubler-Ross tape in my collection, from the early nineties, on which she says that 25,000 NDE cases have been collected worldwide from people as young as two and as old as ninety-seven, from all cultures and spiritual persuasions.

In *Transformed by the Light* (1999), Dr. Melvin Morse and Paul Perry, who have studied near death experiences extensively and have built on the work of Moody and Kubler-Ross, speak of the nine essential traits of the NDE. All nine traits are rare,^x most NDEs having only two or three, but 'the research shows that virtually all those who have NDEs are transformed by the experience. For instance they have a greater zest for life and virtually no fear of death.'^{xi}

The nine traits are:

1. A sense of being dead.
2. Peace and painlessness
3. Out-of-body experience
4. Tunnel experience
5. People of light
6. A Being of light
7. Life review
8. Reluctance to return
9. Personality transformation.

The above-mentioned book is filled with near-death stories and also contains the results of a fascinating study on the subject. One story that connects birth and death tells of man from soviet Georgia who was hit by a car while waiting at a bus stop in his own country. It was told to one of the co-authors by the man himself, who is called Yuri in the book. By-standers thought he had been killed instantly and he was taken to the morgue by ambulance where he was confirmed dead and put in cold storage. Three days later it was finally discovered that he was alive. Yuri told of being aware in the ambulance that he was dead and he also later sensed being in the morgue with his body on a cold metal table.

At some point he saw a very intense speck of light to which he was drawn. He slipped through this 'pinhole' into the greater light, so bright that it initially hurt his eyes, and discovered when his eyes had adjusted that he could go visiting his family – his grieving wife and two small sons. Then he visited his next-door neighbours who had a new baby, born just two days before his 'death'. They were distressed about Yuri's demise but were also very upset about their baby who had not stopped crying since birth. The doctors were all stumped by the cause. While in this disembodied state the man discovered, 'I could talk to the baby. It was amazing. I could not talk to the parents but I could talk to their little boy who had just been born. I asked him what was wrong. No words were exchanged but I asked him maybe through telepathy what was wrong. He

told me that his arm hurt. And when he told me that, I was able to see that the bone was twisted and broken.’ So the baby and Yuri knew what was wrong and neither had a way of communicating the information!

When the doctor finally came to perform the needed autopsy, Yuri’s eyes flickered and responded to light when examined so he was taken to the emergency room and revived. No one believed his stories about being ‘dead’ until he talked in detail of his visits. Of course the sceptics were silenced when the baby’s parents had his arm x-rayed on his advice and his diagnosis was proved correct.

The Light

Descriptions of the light are common in much of the information about life beyond the physical. Here are some examples. The first is an NDE from a woman struck by lightning. ‘I was transported into a very peaceful situation, a place that looked like a very bright and white light. In our everyday experience you would have to squint because you couldn’t even look at it... To try and describe it in language almost makes me feel dumb... The feeling that went with it was one of utter and total peace.’^{xiii} The following is from a regression therapy session with Dolores Cannon, who describes it as a ‘typical and repeated example’.^{xiii} A woman was taken back to what appeared to be a previous death experience in old age. One moment her voice sounded weary and tired and then she exclaimed in a voice full of life, ‘I feel free, I’m light... I feel too *good* to be that shrivelled [referring to her body]. I’m in the light and oh, it feels so good... I feel intelligent... I feel peace... I feel calm. I don’t *need* anything.’ Lastly, here is an account of a young nine-year old, Russell, who died of cancer and reportedly returned through a medium to give a message to his mother.^{xiv} He told her of his experience of death, which was very similar to the story my son told me after his death. He spoke of a beautiful lady who took him on a journey as if they were walking on air. Together they walked through a tunnel out into a beautiful light. He said, ‘My eyes were dazzled at first but as they grew adjusted to this great light I could see things. I could see other children. I found myself, Mum, in this wonderful garden... It was so light, like a glorious summer’s day... It was so perfect and there was so much love in this place.’

Perusing my ever-growing library of books on this subject for different examples to share on workshops I found myself getting excited by the similarities in the stories from all the sources and was particularly moved by the powerful healing impact of these experiences. Very rarely is anyone scared by their NDE or communication with loved ones who have passed, and if so, that fear dissipates very quickly. Those who haven’t experienced such events seem more frightened by the idea – their minds perhaps imprinted with the aforementioned stereotypical media images of spooky ghosts, the dark occult, and the horror of things going bump in the night. The reality of after death communication is so very different. The following stories I am including to show the potential healing of ADCs.

After Death Communication

I interviewed Deborah Keammerer for my book *Mourning Has Broken*^{xv} after her twelve- year old daughter, Linnaea, had died. I will focus mainly on the ADCs although

it is an extraordinary story, told in detail in the book. In a nutshell, when Deborah was twelve herself, she read a book about a man who accidentally shot his best friend, and this tragic story touched her so deeply that she committed never to have guns in her house. She never did. But one day both her daughters were playing at the house of friends when a young boy started playing 'Clint Eastwood' with a gun his brother had left loaded by mistake. He aimed it at Linnaea, the gun went off and she was shot through the head. This, of course, was an horrific situation for all concerned, but some comfort was found by members of both families who had visitations from Linnaea after her death.

That first night, her sister, Holly, had a vivid healing dream of Linnaea who told her that she hadn't heard the gun go off and didn't feel anything at all. In the dream they were back at home and Linnaea was dressed all in white, looking angelic. She said that she was concerned about everyone, especially the boy who had fired the gun. She also said that she was fine and not to worry about her. The sisters played on the trampoline together and then went swimming. Afterward, Linnaea took Holly up to her bed, tucked her in and kissed her goodnight. Then she sat by the windowsill and her body dissolved into thousands of points of turquoise light.

Much later when Deborah finally felt able to re-open her contact with the family of the boy who shot Linnaea, his mother told her that within a couple weeks of her death they were visited by a spiritual presence three times. Three members of the family awoke on different occasions to see a bright orb of white light ringed with blue hovering in the family room where Linnaea died. Deborah told me, "His mother often hears her son speaking aloud to Linnaea before going to sleep. He discusses with her whatever is up in his life. I think there is great wisdom in this. He must feel she is alive and near him and sense her forgiveness. I think this horrible event was a unifying force in their family."

When he was four, my second son, Asher, who was born 18 months after his brother died, had a powerful dream similar to Holly's that helped to lighten his sadness about never having met his brother. He told me when I returned from a business trip to New York, "I was at home and there was a knock at the door. It was Benjaya but his body was blue and white [common colours] like mist. His face was Benjaya's and he had a big smile. He said 'Do you want to come and play?' I said, 'Yes, of course' and we went for a walk and then we went flying over the Atlantic Ocean to see you and Linda. You were in this tall building and we flew through the walls and saw you together working in the office. When we came back he said, 'Tell Mummy and Daddy I love them.'" I was working in an office just as he described, which he had never seen or heard about, and the time difference meant that I could have been working when he was sleeping. After this dream Asher felt as if he had met Benjaya and continues to use it as a comforting resource.

ADCs come in many forms and I believe it is imperative for those working with the bereaved to familiarise themselves with the most common ways that communication occurs so that these widespread experiences can be normalised. It is surely difficult to support mourners if we are uneducated about or afraid of what they are sharing with us. In *Messages and Miracles* (see references), author Louis LaGrand, who is also a grief

counsellor and founder member of a hospice in the U.S., answers a hundred frequently asked questions about ADCs, including a whole chapter called 'Helping the person who has an ADC'. He, like myself, looks forward to the time when ADCs are seen as what they are – ordinary, having been happening 'in every form imaginable since time immemorial'.^{xvi}

From the reported data, according to LaGrand, '... the sense of presence or intuitive ADC, symbolic ADCs, and the dream state ADC are probably the most common types of ADCs experienced.' I agree with him. A matter of hours ago I received an email from a friend, Carol, whose mother died last week, telling me, 'I dreamed of her every night for about five nights - when I woke in the morning I felt I had been with her.' Like the dreams recounted earlier, ADC dreams don't feel like ordinary dreams, can usually be interpreted literally, and are highly reassuring. I knew Carol's mother, Terri, and I think because I had been supporting both her daughters I also had a visitation from her. This could be described as an intuitive ADC. It was late evening and I had just finished writing a loving email to her daughters when I just knew there was a presence with me. It felt as if my whole body chemistry was changing in a kind of wafting way from my toes to the top of my head. It was like I sensed an electric current nearby and my body was responding to it. Then I felt a wave of tremendous gratitude that seemed to be entering into me rather than emanating from me. I sensed it was Terri and I was delighted that she had managed to make her presence felt. I also felt a familiar tickling on my face that I often felt after Benjaya died, as if someone is touching my cheeks so gently that it tickles.

The symbolic ADC is one that is exceedingly familiar to me. These make use of natural phenomena such butterflies, rainbows, flowers, animals and even people and objects. Let me give a couple of examples. Firstly, butterflies – a perfect symbol for transformation into another form. At my son's cremation, held in early March 1992, a butterfly swooped down and circled the coffin before flying out toward the light. Since then, butterflies have come seemingly out nowhere and often out of season in split second timing when I have been thinking of Benjaya. For instance, when leading a winter workshop called 'Shedding Light on Death' and talking of him, a butterfly, noticed by all the participants, would not leave me alone. It wanted no one else. Also, when I was struck by a writer's block and asking for help a butterfly appeared and sat right on my page for a long time until my blockage was cleared. Now a lights and rainbow story. When Deborah, mother of Linnaea, left her girls at the house of friends she went and had dinner at a restaurant. At eight minutes to seven the lights went off momentarily, leaving it pitch dark. She then went back out to the car and saw an incredibly intense rainbow making her wish the girls were with her to share this. Yes, the gun went off at the same time as the lights went out.

Incidentally, to add to LaGrand's list I would say that electrical disturbances are also common. Janet, the other daughter of Terri, reported an exploding light bulb just after her death (the second I'd heard of in a week connected to death) and also lights dimming. Our television repeatedly came on automatically for the first year after Benjaya's death. Also music systems can suddenly have a life of their own – as can telephones, which are known to ring at symbolic moments, occasionally with the voice of the deceased clearly to be heard.

Reincarnation

There is much that can be written about each of the ways that inform us of life before birth and after death and I have not the space to cover them all. I do, however, want to mention reincarnation because if reincarnation is a reality then it follows that there must be continuity of consciousness. Belief in reincarnation is expanding rapidly in the West and already is the basic system for almost all the Eastern religions and spiritual groups. Approximately 779 million Hindus, 324 million Buddhists, 6 million Jains, large numbers of Native Americans, the Hare Krishnas, the Theosophists, the New Agers, The Unity School of Christianity, the Rosicrucians, the Spiritualists... the list goes on, all base their quest for higher consciousness on the premise of reincarnation.^{xvii}

Ways in which we are given evidence that we have lived before are: spontaneous intuitions and flashbacks (especially common in children), regression sessions, dreams, and the possibly less trustworthy avenue of channelled information through mediums. Dr. Ian Stevenson, a scientific researcher and professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, USA has been researching reincarnation since the sixties and has an extraordinary file of thousands of cases. Of particular interest are the many cases where children had birthmarks and defects that corresponded to fatal wounds they say had caused their death in a previous life. In several cases he visited villages where children claimed to have died and found records to corroborate their stories. In the case of Sujith, from Sri Lanka, who had been talking about his past life since he was two, he was able to corroborate fifty-nine of his statements!^{xviii}

Countless books have been written about reincarnation making investigation easy. Proof, however, is again elusive, despite overwhelming evidence in favour of our having lived before.

Conclusion

Birth and death are probably the greatest initiations we will face in this life. Understandably, the unknown frightens us, but there is a vast body of information to educate us if we choose to seek it out. As human beings, and especially as professionals supporting others through these powerful transitions, we have a responsibility to face our fears and explore any available data on the continuity of consciousness. The choice is simple: we either transform our fears or transmit them. It is my hope that due to the uprising of evidence to support the soul's continuity, insensitivity at birth will rapidly decline and incoming beings will be given the respectful welcome they deserve. Fear of death will hopefully dissipate leaving us much more energy to live our physical life to the full, and mourners, having heard so many stories of after death communications will perhaps grieve without complication, finding comfort in the probability of the ongoing existence of loved ones. Also, potential suicides may think twice and look to the source of their troubles when faced with evidence that suggests they cannot escape the consequences of their actions.

The Jury may be still out on the subject of the continuity of consciousness, but does the jury not consist of those who have never been subject to a metaphysical experience?

Those of us of sound mind who have been transformed by such experiences are akin to those who stand in the dock. We know that whatever the jury decide, nothing can dissuade us of the reality of our present truth. One thing is for sure - ultimately, we will all enter the great mystery of death... and possibly rebirth.

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ⁱ Wambach, H. (1979) *Life Before Life*. Bantam Books. (Now out of print).

ⁱⁱ British Rebirth Society, 59 Panmure Close, London N5 1AG Tel: +44 (0)20 7704 8803

ⁱⁱⁱ Further information: Cannon, D. (2003) *Between Death and Life*, Gill and Macmillan.

^{iv} Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is author of many books, the classic being *On Death and Dying* (1969) New York: Macmillan.

^v Dr. Raymond Moody's most well known book is *Life After Life* (1975) Bantam Books.

^{vi} LaGrand, L. (1999) *Messages and Miracles, Extraordinary Experiences of the Bereaved*, Llewellyn Publications, p. 13.

^{vii} Bailey, A. (1985) *Death: The Great Adventure* Lucis Press Ltd, P.5.

^{viii} *Collins English Dictionary* (1999) HarperCollins.

^{ix} The full story of Benjaya's birth, life and death is told in *Benjaya's Gifts* (1996) M'haletta and Carmella B'Hahn, Hazelwood Press.

^x Dannion Brinkley had all nine traits. See his book with Paul Perry, (1994) *Saved by the Light*, Piatkus, London.

^{xi} Morse, M & Perry, P. (1999) *Transformed by the Light*, Piatkus, London. See Preface.

^{xii} *Extraordinary Experiences of the Bereaved*, Llewellyn Publications, St. Paul, MN. U.S.A. p. 32.

^{xiii} Cannon, D. (2003) *Between Death and Life*, Gill and Macmillan, p.5.

^{xiv} Williamson, L. (1997) *Children and the Spirit World*, Piatkus, London, p.75.

^{xv} B'Hahn, C. (2002) *Mourning Has Broken, Learning from the Wisdom of Adversity*, Crucible Publishers, Bath, p. 36 – 42.

^{xvi} LaGrand, L. (1999) *Messages and Miracles* (as above), p. 97.

^{xvii} From: www.religion-cults.com

^{xviii} *Psychic Voyages* (1987) Mysteries of the Unknown Series, Time-Life Books, p. 96.