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R.D. Laing says:

Conception is root of woes

By AGNES KRUCHIO

Convocation Hall at the University of Toronto was filled almost to the rafters.

For weeks, R. D. Laing's first public lecture in a year had been sold out,

with tickets selling for \$3 and up.

For the first time in 12 months, after a sojourn in India, the author of *The Divided Self*, *Politics of Experience*, *Knots*, and other books that were guiding lights for many during the counter-cultural revolution of the late 60s, was going to give a gift of the fruits of his mind.

But what emerged was perhaps something of a disappointment for those who had expected a messiah in the psychiatrist. Laing, tall and lanky with a peppery Scottish accent, gave what he casually termed "something of a progress report on my explorations of my and other peoples' psyche."

Among many meandering incoherence, Laing outlined an idea which he said he had originated at the start of his 20 year career: that our psychic life, in spite of all our cultural beliefs, begins not at the moment of birth, but at the moment of conception. Our psychic life and our biology are two-sides of the same coin "until we die".

"We are all originally one cell, and all that we are unfolds from that one cell," he said.

WRIGGLES

Laing cited an occasion when, during a lecture to a congress of obstetricians and gynecologists, his statement that a baby was a "sentient (sense-perceptive) being" was received with a "ripple of giggles and wriggles".

"In our total unawareness of the reality of all that goes on in the development of the biological and psychic life of the embryo," he commented, "we set up for ourselves a set of conditions whereby we turn the process of birth into a biological and psychological disaster area of the first magnitude."

He traced the voyage of the embryo from conception through implantation and growth in a series of slides. Between fertilization and implantation (first contact with the mother) of the embryo, seven to eight days pass, he said, and those first impressions are timeless.

"We are either received with love and joy, or it's a beachhead landing. Our first impression of that first contact—is it a matter of love or a matter of hate? Is it a matter of welcome or a matter of fighting all the way—leave permanent marks on an individual's psyche.

ESCAPE

"This womb can be regarded by some people as a horror which they spend the rest of their lives trying to escape."

He described his first experience as a psychiatrist during World War II, with soldiers who repeatedly re-enacted their horrifying experiences, whether as a consequence of the horror of battle or the guilt of having survived the holocaust while their friends perished. These soldiers looked very much like babies he had seen a few months after their birth. The infants looked as though they had gone through an "incomparably major catastrophic experience", which he located as the birth experience itself.

"People come to me," he said, "psychotics; and without any promptings from me, they say they know they have been born physically. But much like you can go through a marriage ceremony, they have come out of something and into something else.

METAMORPHOSIS

"A profound psychological metamorphosis (as between the caterpillar and the butterfly) has somehow not happened, and they have never come to terms with this world of sight, sound, taste, touch, and the fabric of time and space."

He cited cases of patients who felt they had never been born, and had begun to revert to "what they think is an embryonic state of mind."

"What they tell me they are looking for is a place they can crash, where they can be and the process of incubation is allowed to occur; in the course of which, there is the possibility that the scattered and fragmented and dislocated state of mind that one may be in may have a chance to heal itself."

His treatment consists of "non-interference with the process of healing." As their "advocate in sane language", Laing said psychotics want a chance to go back to whenever the "fracture of their biological and psychological life cycle occurred", and from there to go forward in a "parabolic movement", which is now not allowed to happen "except in nooks and crannies".

NO PROMPTING

When he tells patients he recognizes to "just go into it", without any prompting from him, they often re-enact in a dramatic manner what he judges to be their birth experience.

"There is no need that his (birth) be such a heavy number in our society," he said. "We will be known 1,000 years hence as the people who strangle our babies within seconds of birth, because the umbilical cord is cut off before they have taken a breath.

"The baby is cut off, tied off and taken away. All that 'normal stuff' takes a lot of getting over," he said.

"A hospital is the last place I would like to be born myself. In China, children are born in 'birthplaces' Surely, the natural place to have a baby is in a birthplace."

He said that partially due to fragmentation of care, depersonalization and humiliation that a mother is subject to, childbirth in the west is the furthest thing away from a "natural childbirth".

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