

Antics of the Embryo

Understanding the Emotional Cycles of our Lives

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We all have emotional ups and downs. At times in our lives, we are open, active, and ready to embrace all that the world has to offer. At other times, we fold inward and close up like a flower at dusk, until we are ready to open up again. If you think about it, chances are that you can't remember a time when you weren't going through this cycle. In fact, it began before you were born.

Flowering of the embryo

We all started with two sides. A big egg sits in our mother's womb, waiting for those wonderful little genetic material carriers called sperm. When she accepts one of them, she envelops that little guy, and then there is a 48-hour period of absolute stillness. When are we ever still in the rest of our lives for two whole days? This is the only time. But this stillness remains very much a part of us.

In the embryo, a slow tide emerges out of that stillness, and cell division begins. Cells proliferate until they form a flat plate. Then there is a spark. In a whoosh of energy, the flat plate bends and folds until it forms a tube. As this process continues, a bubble forms at the top, and a spot of stillness called the precortical plate develops in the middle. The tube is full of nutrients that will form the spinal cord, and the bubble will become the heart.

After all this development, the embryo needs to rest again. It curls up; the tube folds over, and the heart rests on the chest wall while it fuses in place. But in its innate wisdom, the embryo knows it cannot grow like that. As it begins to open up again, organs form, the spine forms, and through several cycles of stillness and growth, the brain folds back. The little still space migrates from the bubble to the front of the brain, about an inch behind the eyes, and forms the front wall of the third ventricle. The pituitary, thalamus, and hypothalamus are there, too, and they become the central nervous system.

The embryo's heart is huge—imagine a new rosebud atop a 6-inch stem. Later on, the beat of this heart will drive the baby's development. The clamshell-shaped tissues that become the hands first form behind the heart. They come out of the shell of the body, move forward, and reach around the heart. Next, in order for this little being to know how to relate to the world it hasn't seen yet, it will resonate and entrain with the mother's nervous system. The baby will develop a balanced nervous system in terms of how things are going for mom.

Lessons the embryo teaches us

The rhythms that begin in the embryo are repeated throughout our lives. We can thank that tiny being for creating the stillness that allows us to grow and develop. It is important for us to realize that, to function in this world, we must come back to the place where the stillness began and open our hearts. The skill of entrainment is another gift from the embryo and is an integral part of the therapeutic relationship. The client becomes child, and the therapist becomes mother. It is absolutely critical for the therapist/practitioner to be completely Present and remain in a place of stillness. We can't be thinking about what we're going to have for lunch, or the bills we have to pay. Again, the way to find calm and resiliency is to come back to the stillness of the heart.

The embryo teaches us that it is so natural to go through these periods of stillness and development, folding inward and opening up again. We see them in our lives on a daily basis. Every time we're doubled over, hitting the pillow, and crying, those periods are necessary prerequisites to great growth. As we get close to the transition we call death, the limbs fold inward, and the fingers draw closer to the body until they reach the chest. We return to the place where we began.

Acknowledging this ancient cycle helps us accept and forgive ourselves, and brings more understanding to our lives. We've all been through this before. Can we accept our embryo?

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