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EMOTIONAL FIRST AID: Healing a Birth-Trauma

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Case study: Pietro, son of Valeria, treated with the Eva Reich method: The "Gentle Bioenergetic Newborn Massage" as FIRST AID after birth.

In this article we will examine the possibility of healing a traumatic birth situation, of preventing future physical and psychological problems through compassionate and on-time first-aid for the mother and her newborn, of bridging a physical and emotional gap in order to reestablish the innate communication between the mother and her newborn.

We will observe a baby with an apparently serious physical impediment and his distraught and anxious mother, and see how both of them were eager to adapt to a healthy situation in a surprisingly short time when encouraged through the gentle touch of the bioenergetic newborn-massage.

Besides the description of this small "miracle" my intent in this article is to investigate what happens on a bioenergetic level in the newborn, in the mother, and in that primary relationship that is of such vital importance for a baby's future psycho-somatic growth and the development of his/her Self.

My approach in this case is the result of my studies of the nearly unknown observations and late methods of Wilhelm Reich, and those of his daughter Eva Reich, both pioneers in the field of preventive care and cure of the mother-newborn duo, observations which have been scientifically confirmed and reconfirmed by modern neonatal researchers.

Perhaps a "miracle", which has always been considered an act of faith, can occur and can be allowed to reoccur systematically when the rational mind of science can allow itself to "take seriously" the importance of the simple messages and signals, the instinctual needs and calls for help and care, sent out by the mother and by the newborn before during and following birth, that unique period that is the beginning of all growth.

WHAT IS A HEALTHY NEWBORN?

When Wilhelm Reich founded the Orgone Infant Research Center in 1949, Eva Reich was a young medical doctor assisting her father. The aim

of the foundation was to discover what is a healthy child. W. Reich wanted to understand how babies and very young children begin to block themselves, and how to prevent the early formation of "muscular and emotional armor"¹ that would destine them to future pathology. In fact, for Reich, there was no doubting that chronic depression, schizophrenic split, the traits of a schizoid personality, violent and antisocial behavior all had their seeds in traumatic experiences, at the beginning of life, when the baby, in order to protect itself from pain, contracted its vital plasma pulsation. It was thus at the very beginning of life that it would be necessary to work on the prevention of what he called "biopathy".

BIOENERGETIC CONTACT-ENERGY-PULSATION AND -FLOW

Wilhelm Reich, observing under the microscope unicellular life forms (ameba, what he called "bions") discovered what he considered to be laws governing the vital processes, pulsating inside these unicellular beings and also pulsating between them. Reich called these unicellular forms "bio-systems". A "bio system" is made up of a membrane that contains the plasma. Energy pulsates inside this membrane and a field of energy extends itself around the membrane. If the environment is favorable, the ameba extends itself in a flowing movement, that is, the energy flows to the outer limits and the energy field expands. On the other hand, if the environment is hostile, the ameba will contract or withdraw from this environment. In other words, its energy will flow from the peripheral area towards the center, and the energy field will contract. If the stimulus of the environment continues to be negative the pulsation will stop and the ameba will die.

For W. Reich, metaphorically, it was as though in the case of a favorable environment the ameba would be saying "yes" with its expanding movement outwards and with the contracting movement away from the environment it would be saying "no". (The "expressive language of the living") The ameba, with an undulating movement, attracts or is attracted by another ameba and makes "contact" through a "bridge of energy". The process of "contact" occurs when two energy fields of two pulsating bio-systems attract one another, touch one another, superimpose and compenetrate, emitting light and vibrating together.

W. Reich deduces that the bioenergetic movement of the plasma in the ameba is functionally identical to the movement of plasma in all living forms (more complex bio-systems) and the emotion (expansion = "yes", contraction = "no") is actually an energetic expressive movement in the plasma. He calls this movement the "expressive language of life forms" and

observes that this process is functionally identical in the mother/newborn relationship. For W. Reich, pleasure becomes the specifically productive process of the biological system.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE LIVING - "GLOW AND FLOW"

For the development of its vital functions, the newborn baby needs to ground itself in the mother's energy field - the very life of the baby depends on this. When the newborn is grounded in "contact" with the mother, the result is a truly healthy baby: this can be observed in the soft warmth that its body radiates, in the rosy color of its skin, in the shine in its eyes, while its tender expressive movements attract the mother's caring. Eva Reich refers to this process as "glow and flow" - the visible expression of the state of health and well-being of the newborn in "contact" with the mother, when energy glows and grows; it is the visible expression of the autoexpressive plasmatic-energetic, free pulsation through which mother and baby have their dialogue, united in a single bio-system that "knows" how to develop itself, if the mother is able to cooperate.

The future development of the baby depends upon the pleasure of functioning in this inter-relationship during "bio-energetic contact". Eva Reich clarifies "bonding" as a function of "contact" which can be worked on bioenergetically. She teaches how this can be done with the methods of "Gentle Bioenergetics"; above all, she teaches how to PREVENT, right from the beginning, the crisis in the mother/newborn relationship that can be so detrimental for the child's future development.

W. Reich observed that if between two organisms there existed a sufficiently profound "contact", there would occur an energetic and thus plasmatic resonance. This resonance would allow one to experience in one's own body the expression of the person with whom one is in "contact", process which he called vegetative identification. The baby communicates through self-expressive movements, which are actual "biophysical" energetic-plasmatic processes, thus stimulating the mother to enter into "contact": in this state of "bio-energetic contact", the flow of biophysical pulsatory expressions are perceived by the bio-system (body) of the mother. Deeply "moved" she can feel the baby's needs, understand and satisfy them as if they were her own needs. The mother's capacity to be in "contact" with the baby through her own plasmatic pulsation, perceived as emotions in her own body, depends on her capacity to tolerate, without fear, the strong waves of excitement with which the baby expresses itself during birth and afterwards. For this reason it is so important to protect the mother.

The function of the mother is to be a (sufficiently) pleasurable environment for the newborn, so that the baby can enter into "contact" with her in order to develop his innate potential for growth. According to W. Reich, the healthy baby comes out of a pulsating womb with a high potential of pulsating bioenergy with which it expresses itself: waves of aroused energy emanate from its body and expand to enter into contact with its mother's or caretakers body. Each of the two bio-systems expresses itself with its own "language" (autoexpressive vibrations) and in this "contact", the two of them form a single, larger bio-system., that has to be protected by the environment to prevent trauma.

THE BIOSOCIAL PROCESS

W. Reich calls this process "bio-social", "bio" because it is an emotional communication on a level of plasmatic energetic pulsation, and "social" because it takes place between two human beings. For him bio-social communication is the basis of all forms of communication. "Each mother creates the steps in this unique and personal dance, to be danced and carried on with her own baby. The particular movements and the improvised sequences of the reciprocal adaptament are part of a universal process, that all women have in common," observes Daniel Stern.²

W. Reich experiments and discoveries of the early 1950's have been confirmed today, in the recent researches done on newborns and their mothers.³ In video-tapes analyzed at slow-motion, it is possible to observe micro-interactions that are not visible to the naked eye. The newborn is revealed to us in a totally new light: far from being passive, the baby, of its own initiative, stimulates the mother to respond, signals its own needs, and receives and understands the mother's messages. If the mother cooperates in this dialogue, the baby will be motivated to explore, to play, and to seek pleasure. Today the recent research on newborns studied with slow-motion video registration, give us the chance to observe this profoundly moving phenomenon of "contact" between mother and newborn, a sort of dialogue/dance which is the primal language of our species.

THE LOSS OF CONTACT - THE LOSS OF HEALTH

What happens if there is an interruption in the natural dialogue between the mother and her newborn? If the reciprocity does not function, the new-born contracts, cannot trust its inner biological rhythms and, therefore, has to guess the mother's mood. To get her attention it begins to cry, to shout, it stops eating, sleeping and it gets "ill". Aggressiveness is used to

signal needs, if the messages are not understood repeatedly and the baby cannot reach the mother anymore, the life-asserting energy flow is blocked. The first trauma during and after birth is the loss of contact and the loss of contact leads to armoring.

The process of "armoring in a newborn infant" is described by W.Reich as a vicious circle: A lack of bioenergetic, emotional "contact" between mother and the newborn creates a sympathetic reaction (paleness, lowering of the bioenergetic peripheral charge and of body-temperature). This reaction affects the chest (or other organs) and results in an irritation in the bronchi with increased mucus secretion. At this point there is more loss of "contact" between mother and newborn and an increase of muscular contraction which causes nervousness because of more difficulty in expiration. The anxiety of the mother creates more loss of contact with the baby and lack of sleep and more irrational behavior in the mother. At the source of a local symptom, a cold, W.Reich found a lack of bioemotional "contact". "This vicious circle constitutes the core around which biopathic noxae later gather, like layers, that we have to peel off in adult biopathies."

HOW TO PREVENT OR TO HEAL THE FIRST TRAUMAS

Eva Reich developed the work of prevention of energy-blocks from birth onwards. She said: "if we know the importance of "contact" at the beginning of life, we can prevent the vicious circle or heal it immediately".

When there is absence of "contact" with the mother, the new-born baby feels abandoned: "nobody cares for me." The baby holds the breath in, hardens its stomach pulling it in, immobilizing the diaphragm, it goes away with its eyes it immobilizes its lively pulsatory movements and in doing so it abandons the reality of its self (the body-sensations). It cannot trust its own feelings. We know that this can be the origin of autistic and schizoid behavior, but if the mother is helped to come in contact with her own feelings and with her baby, this development can be prevented.

PREVENTION OR HEALING OF TRAUMA DURING THE SENSITIVE PERIOD

The sensitive period is a unique period in which a strong reciprocal, "privileged" bond is formed between the baby and its parents. In her workshops, Eva Reich insists on emphasizing that after birth, the mother for no reason should be separated from her baby, and goes so far as to call separation a "crime" against the life of a child. She warns of the grave consequences of insensitive treatment of the mother and baby before and after

birth, and in the first hours and days to follow.

According to Eva Reich, the mother and the newborn are united during and after birth by a bio-energetic law. This bond develops the mother's instinctive knowledge and the energy that the baby needs for its growth. This "contact" is strengthened by massage: "a baby caressed, like a well-tended plant, has a greater possibility of developing growing", and will feel more capable in its ability to overcome the inevitable hardships in life. In this far too underestimated sensitive period, profound and refined bio-emotional processes, somewhere between innate and learned, are activated between the mother and her baby. A baby that has been tenderly embraced from birth on will learn from the beginning that it is desired, and as a result will be a tender embracer as an adult. For this reason it is important that obstetricians teach baby-massage in the first days of the baby's life, and that baby-massage groups begin as soon as possible following birth.

MOTHERING THE MOTHER

The strong and conflicting emotions of tenderness and fear which flood the mother's body during and after birth can be so powerful that they become almost overwhelming, and therefore may be the cause of resistance or opposition. Empathic understanding from those close to her can be expressed through touch and can help the mother to overcome the trauma and accept the baby and the disrupting sensations it brings with it. In this way the biological potential with which the mother and the newborn self-regulate their relationship can develop in all of its plasticity and productivity. The mother herself receives the gentle bioenergetic massage in order to re-establish her energy-flow together with a sense of well-being.

The mothers should be re-assured that it is not always possible to have a good contact with their babies, but that it is important that they recognize when they have lost this contact, in order to be able to ask for help.

In the cities where Eva Reich has taught her method, "Emotional First-Aid Centers" have been established, where mothers (parents or care takers) and babies can receive the necessary help through the methods of Gentle Bioenergetics, and especially the bio-energetic baby massage. In this way, we attempt to prevent or halt the "vicious circle" process with its often deeply negative effects on the child's development.

The mother is in an extremely open state during the sensitive period and it seems that something special occurs when she receive the soft rhythmic, energetic contact of the bio-energetic massage. The sense of warmth and pleasure of this contact stimulates the self-expressive, self-regulating

bio-energetic free pulsation of the mother in all of her cells. It seems that the affective-motor schemes, blocked at some moment in the past, (perhaps in early childhood or at the moment of birth?) can now be stimulated to unwind and to develop, in the relationship with her own baby. It is as though, in this special moment, nature were to have made available to the mother/newborn duo all of its potential for self-healing: these are the moments when healing is truly sacred. During the bio-energetic neo-natal massage, when the interrupted energy-flow between the mother and the baby begins to pulsate and flow again and the two of them, in the very core of their being can experience this "glow and flow", it is a state of grace.⁴

It is a perfectly credible clinical principle that the most important affect-motor schemes, when they are not completely developed, 'want' to manifest themselves and to grow...These 'frozen' schemes are characterized by their remaining intact, conserving an essential integrity even if they have had an incomplete development and an extremely strong defense mechanism against them. In addition they have a considerably strong tendency towards self-realization. In the exceptional condition of corporal regression, it seems to be even easier to come into contact with this tendency, with the property of 'wanting to grow'. In some way which we do not fully comprehend, the state of corporal regression appears to permit a major possibility of access to the affect-motor schemes blocked early in their development".⁵

THE EFFECT OF BABY-MASSAGE

The very gentle skin stimulation of Eva Reich's bioenergetic newborn massage, that moves from the head to the toes, allows the energy to flow through the muscular blocks.

The energetic plasmatic pulsation through which mother and baby communicate, is increased and harmonized. This self-healing effect manifests itself in such a way that many women, even those with severe emotional problems, can avoid the classic post-partum depression if they can receive sufficient massage and contact before, during, and after the birth of the child. The pleasure of functioning restored through the massage, harmonizes the function of the sympathetic-parasympathetic neurovegetative system. The pleasure of functioning self-regulates all body functions and promotes health.

The massage is particularly important
- for every newborn because it stimulates the immune system

- for premature babies and hospitalized babies. The effect of baby massage on the development of pre-mature newborns is truly amazing.⁶
- for adopted babies and their new parents for promoting the bonding process.
- for cesarean-cut babies, and for all babies after traumatic birth.
- for babies who cannot be breast-fed. Through the massage they can receive energetic nourishment
- for babies of working mothers. The ritual meeting, the intense flow of pleasure during the massage, give relaxation, energetic nourishment and a feeling of closeness to both mother and baby.

THE CASE STUDY OF PIETRO AND HIS MOTHER.

1. Encounter

The first encounter with Pietro took place in the postpartum group. Valeria, his mother came with Pietro (age 2 months). Pietro remained in a fixed position with his spine arched backwards, in an attempt, it seemed, to push himself away from his mother and out of her arms and his mother, in that position, was unable to look in her son's eyes and it was difficult to hold him. The mother, who defined herself an ex-anorexic, was desperate.

The baby was in a podalic position at the time of birth. The mother wanted to have a vaginal birth and not a caesarian cut, but during labor, there was an impediment and so it was decided to do a caesarian section. The baby was born asphyctic, blue, and contracted into a position with the spine arched constantly backwards. (opisthotone) I proposed to do 3 sessions of Eva Reich's "gentle bioenergetic newborn-massage" for the baby and the mother.

First session:

"I can do something for him!"

The first session took place in the following manner: we were on mattresses on the floor. Valeria was tense and exhausted and so she was the first to receive the massage. After having experienced for herself the relaxing but energizing and unifying effect of the massage she said: "I feel good! I feel an unifying flow in my body!" and she wanted, with my assistance, to give the massage to her child.

I played a little bit with her and her baby's body and showed her the effects of the gentle touch: I lightly touched the shoulders of the baby with two fingers and the baby seemed amazed, dreamy, as though he were listening to a profound message and then the baby relaxed the muscles under my

fingers. Then I touched Valeria's shoulders and she could feel the relaxation Pietro felt before. The mother was amazed. I invited her to express her emotion with a long sound: "ahhhh!". Her sigh relaxed not only herself but it also produced a visibly relaxing effect on her son. In that same moment she announced: "Now I'll give my baby a massage". Under my guidance she slowly began the easy and light movements of the massage and felt the baby slowly relaxing. This produced a sense of self-assurance in her: "I can do something for you, Pietro!"

After the massage the baby began to cry. Maybe he wanted the massage to continue? Maybe he was overstimulated? I asked his mother to take him in her arms, to hold him close to her, to try to look him in the eyes without her glasses, and to speak to him of their labor and his birth.

She could look at him because the child was now less arched backwards. The mother, walking up and down in the room, began to speak to the crying child about his birth. She told him how much she had suffered and had made him suffer and that this made her very sorry and gave her a feeling of guilt. She told him how bad the experience was, but that he had survived it and she too - he was alive and she was happy that he was there with her, now, after all., embracing him. During this talk the baby stopped crying and both his mother and I had the precise sensation that he was listening. It seemed to me that what the child understood was that now his mother was happy that he was there and that they were finally together after their long suffering and separation of incubators and nightmares. And so the mother continued talking. She had never before spoken about the painful experience of this birth, and at the end of her "story" the baby was sound asleep.⁷

2. session (1 hour)

He is looking at me!

A week later I went to Pietro's home. The effect of the treatment is much more effective when done at home. There was Valeria and also Pietro's father and his brother, 4 years old. We all sit on the carpet in the children's room. Pietro is less arched backwards but it is still difficult to capture his gaze. I give the mother a soft bioenergetic massage. While my hands are in contact with her body I let my words flow, and I tell to her about her body, about what my hands are feeling, about her fear, and her hope and about the body's self-regulating capacities. I speak to her of "energy flow".

Her husband is present and is listening and "gives me a hand": while I do movements on her one arm, he does the other arm, in unison with me.

He is learning the movements of the massage. He's a musician. "Touching is like playing an instrument." He says and he says that he never does it. "You can become a 'virtuoso'!" I said. We exchange words, carried along by the waves of empathy (vegetative identification).. I don't intervene with suggestions but simply let the healing words and the sensations flow.

The baby is awake and has been listening silently almost attentively. Now his mother massages him. She is sitting on the floor, leaning against her husband's body - he is her armchair. The baby gladly accepts the massage, lends himself to it, the mother enjoys his response to her hands, Pietro feels her joy and enjoys it. His mother's tranquil voice touches and envelops him.

I teach the mother to do the movements in a way that is also pleasurable to her body and to accompany these movements with long sonoric expirations which can become a rhythm and a song. The entire body system of the child "knows" how to harmonize with this flow of soft sensations of movement, of touch, of sounds.

Now the child's eyes also search for his mother's eyes. "He's looking at me!" exclaims the mother, in what is to me an unforgettable tone of voice. There had been a "meeting" between the two of them in a deep "eye-contact". For a moment they are attached to one another through the eyes, as lovers do. The mother wants to continue looking her son in his eyes. I tell her that it is sufficient to have had that short spontaneous and real contact and that her son would search for that contact again after having known it. She had to leave him time to dare again, to rediscover, to repeat.

3. session (1 hour)

We have a "talk" together!

The third session again took place at home with Valeria, her husband and Pietro. This time the child no longer arched his back. Valeria says that he still arches his back when she nurses him because she was anorexic and so he probably has some problems, she thinks, concerning his eating. Pietro watched his mother during the massage, smiled, made little sounds, sweet movements and had a dialogue with her.

Valeria asked to have a fourth session at my office, before going for a medical control, an event she feared. But by the fourth session the child was in such a good condition that she didn't even bring him along.

She even forgot to telephone me after the medical control visit. Later she told me that the doctors could not believe their eyes as she arrived with Pietro. They exclaimed: "it's a miracle!". For her it was a "triumph", because

the doctors had made her believe that she was not a good enough mother.

My reflections: There is a period following birth in which mother and child are very sensitive. Their bioenergetic system of communication can be easily disturbed, but it is also easy to reestablish the energy flow in the bonding system between mother and child when disturbed and before it becomes a "vicious circle" that disturbs the development of the relationship and of the baby's health..

In this period, the mother Valeria, ex-anorexic, could discover her feelings, with the aid of "Eva Reich's Gentle Bioenergetics", as being a good, nurturing mother, and could probably in that moment, overcome old blocks in her own equilibrium. In this period of sensitivity, the mother is extremely open. It is as if the very nature of the systems of self-regulation of well-being between the mother and new-born, could cure the baby in the relationship, with a slight amount of help. The help for mother and newborn comes not from somebody who analyzes and gives prescriptions, but rather from somebody who has an intuition of the nature of the dynamics of energy-contact and knows "how to be with" them, "how to be there" for them. This capacity of intuition and this need to protect are qualities not only inherent in human nature. Elephants and dolphins have it when they "stay with" the females and newborns until the systems of auto-regulation of health for survival are consolidated. When humans have forgotten the expressive language of the living creatures they can learn it again because it is waiting there, inside themselves, to be awoken, to grow and to be "spoken" with their baby's and with their lovers.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Muscular and emotional armor": according to W. Reich, the body defends itself from too great stress by contracting the muscles. Moreover, too intense emotions (e.g: fear, anger, hatred) are anchored in the body's muscular armor. In this way the armor protects one from feeling too much pain, but the individual now has a distorted connection to its' vital sensations.

2. Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, N.Y., Basic Books, 1985.

3. *Grounding and Grace*, title of the Congress of the International Institute of Bioenergetic Analysis 1991 in Portugal. Article by Robert Hilton, *Grounding and Grace* in "The Clinical Journal of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis", vol. 4 Nr, 2 1991.

4. George Downing, *The Body and the Word*. Italian text: *Il corpo e la parola*, Roma, Astrolabio, 1995.
5. Ruth Rice, *Neurophysiological Development in Premature Infants Following Stimulation*, in "Developmental Psychology", 1977, vol. 13, nr. 1, pp. 69-76.
6. W. Condon and L. Sander, "Neonate movement is synchronized with adult speech", *Science* 183, 1974.

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