



Primal Scream: A Persistent New Age Therapy

Alternative medicines and curious treatments for physical ills are flourishing as never before around the world. The same is true of alternative mental therapies. Every year it seems as if new and outlandish forms of psychiatry appear in books and articles, along with thousands of satisfied patients who provide glowing testimonials about how completely they have been "cured" by the new techniques.

In this column I focus on one of the once-popular New Age therapies, the so-called "primal scream" technique discovered and promoted by Dr. Arthur Janov, a California psychologist. Born in Los Angeles in 1924, Janov obtained his doctorate in psychology in 1967 from Claremont College, in Claremont, California. During the second world war he was a Navy signalman. In 1976 he divorced his first wife, Vivien France, who had helped pioneer his work. He later remarried.

Janov and Vivien founded the Primal

Martin Gardner has two new books of essays: Did Adam and Eve Have Navels? Discourses on Reflexology, Numerology, Urine Therapy, and Other Dubious Subjects (W.W. Norton, 2000), based on his SKEPTICAL INQUIRER Notes of a Fringe-Watcher columns; and From the Wandering Jew to William F. Buckley Jr.: On Science, Literature, and Religion (Prometheus Books, 2000), a collection of his other essays and reviews.

Institute in Los Angeles in 1970, where some two dozen staffers then practiced primal therapy. Three years later he began publishing *The Journal of Primal Therapy* and the monthly *Primal Institute Newsletter*.

The public first became aware of the new therapy in 1970 when Janov published his first book, *The Primal Scream*. It became an instant best seller, and the therapy became something of a fad around the world, especially in California. A handsome Janov appeared on the Dick Cavett show. He was interviewed by *Vogue*. John Lennon, Yoko Ono, actor James Earl Jones, and other Hollywood bigwigs praised primal therapy. Sweden aired a long documentary about it.

The basis of primal therapy, which came to Janov like a revelation from on high, is easily capsuled. All neuroses, psychoses, and psychosomatic ills derive from repressed memories of childhood traumas, particularly the violent trauma of being born. This central role of the birth trauma goes back to Otto Rank, a psychotic Vienna psychoanalyst who broke with Freud. Rank traced all neuroses back to a painful birth. He even wrote a book titled *The Trauma of Birth* (English translation 1929), which he dedicated to Freud.

By a series of interrogations—the details of which Janov has kept secret for fear of their being used by untrained therapists—a patient is slowly regressed to childhood. Unconscious memories of

incidents which he or she suffered as a very young child start to emerge along with memories of actual birth. When these memories are recovered the ills begin to disappear, though it may take many sessions and much time and money. Moreover, Janov claimed, one's aging process slows down—he once likened his therapy to the Fountain of Youth. Resistance to all diseases increases. In brief, the patient starts to lead a normal, healthy, happy life. Once healed, Janov asserts, a patient will never need therapy again.

The Primal Scream was followed by a spate of popular books with such titles as *The Primal Revolution*; *The Anatomy of Mental Illness*; *Primal Man*; *The New Consciousness* (written with Michael Holden, M.D., then Janov's medical director); *The Feeling Child*; *The New Primal Scream*; *Prisoners of Pain*; and *Imprints: The Lifelong Effects of Birth Experiences*. All these books are now out of print.

In 1972, when Simon and Schuster published *The Primal Revolution*, it was an alternative selection of several book clubs. A full page ad in *The New York Times Book Review* (November 19, 1972) included a list of ailments primal therapy—and only primal therapy—can cure or alleviate: alcoholism, homosexuality, drug addiction, psychoses, paranoia, depression, and manic-depression. In a similar ad for *The New Primal Scream*, in the same periodical (May,

1991), the following ills, all helped or cured by the therapy, are added to the previous list: tension, stress, anxiety, sleep disorders, high blood pressure, cancer, sex difficulties, obsessions, phobias, ulcers, colitis, migraine, asthma, and arthritis.

Not only was Janov convinced that no other form of mental therapy works,

turned. Judges and attorneys have become aware of how easily such memories can be fabricated, with the happy result that many therapists and quack psychiatrists have lost costly lawsuits, and dozens of innocent adults had their convictions overturned after spending years in prison.

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and Richard Corriere. Its techniques included ordering patients to strip and to endure beatings. The center closed in 1980 after losing many lawsuits. Later it was roundly pummeled in such books as *Therapy Gone Mad* by Carol Lynn Mithers (1994) and *Insane Therapy* (1998) by sociologist Marybeth Ayella.

An even uglier spinoff was the rise of "rebirthing therapy," a crazy New Age technique started in the 1970s by one Leonard Orr. The therapy consists of wrapping a patient in blankets to simulate the mother's womb, then pushing pillows onto the patient's face to arouse feelings of labor contractions.

An elderly born-again Christian, Orr lives in his birthplace, Walton, New York, where he runs a rebirthing training center and edits its newsletter. He has written some twenty books. They include *Rebirthing in the New Age* (1977) and *The Healing Power of Birth and Rebirth* (1994). His therapy is closely related to breathing exercises and what he calls the "power of fire." In a trip to India he met a number of yogis who claim to have lived more than 2,000 years. One of them, Yogi Babaji, Orr believes to be over 9,000 years old. You can read all about him in Orr's 1992 book *Babaji, The Angel of the Lord*. Somehow Orr manages to combine his Biblical Christianity with India's belief in reincarnation and karma.

In April 2000, in Evergreen, Colorado, a social worker named Connell Watkins and her three associates—none with any training in psychiatry—charged a Durham, North Carolina, pediatric nurse \$7,000 for two weeks of therapy on her adopted daughter Candace Newmaker. The girl, 10, was said to be suffering from "attachment disorder," characterized by her inability to form loving relationships. At the culmination of "attachment therapy" the child was wrapped in a flannel blanket and large pillows shoved against her face.

Candace cried out repeatedly that she couldn't breathe and was about to vomit, but the therapists kept pushing the pillows and urging her to fight her way out of the "womb" through a twisted part of the blanket. Candace soon stopped crying. A half-hour later

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but primal therapy must be administered only by workers trained at his institute. Later he speculated that perhaps someday families would learn the technique. This could result in a world with less injustice and no wars. "It would be," Janov is quoted in *Contemporary Authors* (Volume 116), "the only hope if mankind is to survive."

All mental ills, Janov is convinced, result from what he calls "primal pain," a suffering arising from repressed memories of childhood traumas. Illness is a "silent scream." When patients recover their lost memories of early traumas, especially the trauma of birth, they often writhe on the floor, sobbing, and screaming with rage at whatever was done to them or at the violence of their birth.

Such sessions are called "primals." The recovery process is called "primalizing." Primals take place in soundproof rooms with padded floors and walls to prevent patients from injuring themselves while writhing and screaming. The entire process is, of course, faster and cheaper than psychoanalysis, which can go on for years.

Janov was a pioneer practitioner of what later came to be called the "false memory syndrome." During the 1980s and 1990s hundreds of innocent parents and teachers were falsely accused of sexual molestation, frequently of school children. These fake memories were implanted in the patient's mind by well-meaning but self-deceived therapists. Thanks to the valiant efforts of Pamela Freyd, who started the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in 1992, the tide has slowly

turned. Judges and attorneys have become aware of how easily such memories can be fabricated, with the happy result that many therapists and quack psychiatrists have lost costly lawsuits, and dozens of innocent adults had their convictions overturned after spending years in prison.

For details about this great psychiatric scandal you can consult the two chapters on it in my *Weird Water and Fuzzy Logic* (1996), or such excellent books as Mark Pendergrast's *Victims of Memory: Sex Abuse Accusations and Shattered Lives* (1995). The False Memory Foundation is at 1955 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5766. Janov is not particularly concerned with memories of sexual abuse since any old kind of early childhood trauma will do. Prior to primalizing, patients spend a week in a hotel room without radio, television, or anything to read. They are not allowed to sleep the night before their first session. In his section on primal therapy Pendergrast quotes Janov as saying, "The isolation and sleeplessness are important techniques which often bring patients close to a Primal. Lack of sleep helps crumble defenses."

Of course there is not the slightest reliable evidence that any adult brain harbors repressed memories of birth. Nor, for that matter, any memories of the first one or two years of life, or of pre-birth memories of life inside the womb as Janov also believes—a belief he shares with L. Ron Hubbard, Stanislav Grof, and others.¹

In a letter to the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER (Fall 1988) Janov canceled his subscription and asked for a refund. He was furious because in the magazine's Winter 1987–88 issue Barry Beyerstein, writing on "The Brain and Consciousness," had called primal scream therapy "suspect."

There have been several tragic spin-offs from primal therapy. In 1971 a Center for Feeling Therapy made its appearance in Los Angeles, founded by two defectors from Janov, Joseph Hart

the therapists unwrapped the blanket. Candace was lying in vomit, not breathing. She died of asphyxiation the next day at a Denver hospital. Watkins and her colleague Julie Ponder were arrested and charged with child abuse resulting in death; their trial began in early April. (For more on this case see "New Age 'Rebirthing' Treatment Kills Girl," SI 24[5] September/October 2000.)

If you care to learn more about primal therapy you can read Janov's books, and *A Scream Away from Happiness*, by Daniel Casriel (1972). For attacks on the therapy and its spinoffs see the chapters in Margaret Thaler Singer's *Crazy Therapies* (1996), R.D. Rosen's *Psychobabble* (1977), and Michael Rossman's *New Age Blues* (1979). Rossman's chapter is titled "The I-Scream Man Cometh."

I close on a depressing note. In the spring of 2000 Prometheus Books published Janov's latest work, *The Biology of Love*. In an ad for the book on Janov's Web site, Janov calls it "the most important book of the century." It concerns such questions as, "What makes us humans, the hormones of love, shaping personality in the womb, the nature of feeling, the power of love, the origin of anxiety and depression, the source of

addiction and obsessions, sleep and eating disorders, the causes of sexual act out, and many more."

On January 2, 2001, E. Patrick Curry, an articulate consumer health advocate in Pittsburgh, sent Paul Kurtz, founder and head of Prometheus, a strong letter protesting the book's publication. Long an admirer of Prometheus for its willingness to publish books attacking pseudoscience—books other publishers are reluctant to take—Curry urged Kurtz to withdraw the book and issue a mea culpa for the failure of Prometheus editors to recognize Janov's book as bogus psychiatry.²

Curry cited an incredible passage on page 319 of *The Biology of Love* that should have been a tipoff to Prometheus editors. Janov reports that a photograph of a primal, in which a patient is experiencing rebirth, shows the fingerprints of the obstetrician miraculously appearing on the patient's legs! "The first time I saw this," Janov writes, "I was as skeptical as I am sure many readers are now. But it happens and is not a chance occurrence."

If you can believe that, you can believe anything Janov says. To keep up with the doings of what he now calls his Primal Center, in Venice, California,

you can check the center's Web site at www.primaltherapy.com. Janov's earlier Primal Institute is now run by his ex-wife Vivien.

Notes

1. Grof is a Czechoslovakian-born psychiatrist, 1960s LSD researcher, and paranormalist now living in the United States. SUNY Press has published several of his controversial books. One of Carl Sagan's rare lapses is his unfortunate chapter on Grof in *Broca's Brain*.

In his 1993 book *The Holotropic Mind*, Grof credits LSD with changing him from an atheist into a mystic. He writes (page 18): "... we can reach far back in time and witness sequences from the lives of our human and animal ancestors, as well as events that involved people from other historical periods and cultures with whom we have no genetic connection whatsoever. Through our consciousnesses, we can transcend time and space, cross boundaries separating us from various animal species, experience processes in the botanical kingdom and in the inorganic world, and even explore mythological and other realities that we previously did not know existed."

2. Paul Kurtz responded to Curry, with a copy to me, on February 7. He noted that despite Prometheus's review process, "We may sometimes err. We are not infallible." But he noted that Prometheus has a long tradition of publishing unpopular books, and criticisms come from virtually every viewpoint. Kurtz said he appreciated Curry's distress with Janov and said he himself was also dubious of "primal scream." He said Prometheus is still committed to a rationalist-scientific agenda but contended that Curry's suggested remedies could be considered suppression. I would consider them damage-control. □

GOBBLEDYGOOK AND CHARM from page 15

But not everyone there was a firm believer. A woman who works for AAAS shared my views. She told me a story about her father, a well-known physician who had passed away recently. In going through his belongings after his death from cancer, she was horrified by one discovery. No, it wasn't pornography or any other typical secret stash found after the death of a loved one, but bottles and bottles of every kind of herbal remedy now on the market, thanks to passage of The Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994. I could tell that she was still terribly upset by this discovery, and although they were probably worth hundreds of dollars, she felt that the right thing to do was to throw them away, which she did.

The last person I had an opportunity to chat with at the reception was Dr. Jonas himself. During this conversation, it suddenly dawned on me why he made such an effective spokesperson for alternative medicine. He is the quintessential politician.

One of the long-standing problems with communicating science to the public is that the scientific community has a paucity of politicians, leaders who are so polished and charming and charismatic that people are naturally drawn to whatever it is they have to say. Their words don't need to be convincing, because it's their style and personality that do the heavy lifting. Dr. Jonas fits this model of the ideal spokesperson.

I managed to ask Dr. Jonas several questions, and I couldn't help noticing how skillfully he managed to dodge each one. Talk about a good politician!

For example, I mentioned that I was reading Robert Park's recent book *Voodoo Science*, and that it contained several unfavorable references to Dr. Jonas.

Would he care to comment on what Professor Park had said about him? But rather than answer the question, he responded by saying how impressed he was that Park has now become a "good skeptic." According to Dr. Jonas, Park has gone from being a not-so-good skeptic to being a really good one. I got similar non-answers to my other questions.

All in all, the afternoon I spent at the seminar proved to be quite insightful, although I realize that my observation that people are easily deceived by a lot of fancy words and a winning personality is really nothing new. Alternative medicine certainly isn't the first kind of pseudoscience to be sold in that way, and it won't be the last. □