

THE MYSTIQUE OF MULTIPLES

Since ancient times, society has been fascinated by the concept of multiples. Superstitions and myths developed around multiples in primitive societies as people attempted to explain the phenomenon of their existence. The birth of two or more infants to one mother often led to the belief that there was more than one father responsible for their conception. This implied that the mother had committed adultery and had intercourse during pregnancy which was considered taboo in many societies. Some ancient tribes even believed that the first father was human whereas the second father was a god or devil.

Multiples were often attributed with mystical powers in early civilizations. Certain African and Indian tribes believed that multiples controlled natural forces such as rain, wind, and thunder. North American Mohave Indians poured water over the graves of twins during periods of drought in an attempt to make it rain. Multiples were revered by those tribes that thought they possessed beneficial powers. The mother of multiples was also highly respected and given gifts for her children. However, other societies viewed multiples as a threat and often sacrificed them to the gods.

Superstitions about multiples still exist and some people believe that they have special powers with respect to each other such as ESP. One often hears interesting anecdotes where multiples have felt each other's illnesses and accidents or sense when their sibling is having a bad day. Many sets of multiples seem to be on the same wavelength and have a closeness that outsiders may view as uncanny. However, no scientific evidence has established the existence of ESP among multiples. Some researchers attribute the occurrence of "ESP-like" events in the lives of multiples to shared experiences and constant awareness of one another since birth. Other scientists believe that genetic factors are responsible for multiples reacting to situations in a similar way especially if they are identical. Since they share the same genes, identical multiples may be more likely to make similar choices in life and have analogous experiences. There have been accounts in the media of identical twins separated at birth by adoption whose lives ran on a parallel track i.e. they chose the same profession and lifestyle.

The mystique surrounding multiples has aroused a great deal of curiosity in both ancient and modern times. People are intrigued by their similarities and differences, often envying their special bond. Advertisers have capitalized on this preoccupation with multiples, using them to promote products. Commercials for Wrigley's Double Mint Gum show clips of identical twins dressed alike to accentuate their similarities. Other manufacturers have used higher order multiples to advertise their baby products. The film industry has also realized the appeal of multiples to audiences and produced many movies featuring twins. The Parent Trap, a popular film in the 1960's and 1990's (re-make), focused on the entertaining theme of twins switching identities. The movie, "Twins", starring Danny Devito and Arnold Schwarzenegger was another box office hit that focused on the differences between fraternal twins. Famous child actresses such as the Olsen twins have also become very popular in recent years.

In addition to entertaining us, multiples have made a valuable contribution to society by participating in research studies on health and psychology. Research on diabetes in identical twins has led to a better understanding of the genetic factors involved in getting the disease. Multiples have also allowed us to examine genetic and environmental influences on behavior. A study on happiness, conducted by the University of Minnesota, examined the well-being of 1000 pairs of identical and fraternal twins reared together and more than 100 pairs of identical and fraternal twins reared apart. They concluded that about 50% of the variation seen in happiness is influenced by genetic factors and the remainder by environmental factors. Therefore, parents of identical multiples can expect a great deal of similarity in their children's happiness level.

The existence of multiples has enriched our lives in many ways since the beginning of history. They continue to mystify and charm us while we try to understand their special bond. As parents of multiples, we have witnessed the fascination others seem to have with our children. Strangers

often feel compelled to make observations about them without having any understanding of their relationship. Outsiders may still believe some of the myths about multiples and view them as an oddity rather than siblings born at the same time with individual personalities and needs. We are lucky to have been given the opportunity to witness their funny antics and interactions on a daily basis. Even though our multiples may try our patience at times, we need to remind ourselves that we have been truly blessed. Life would certainly be very dull without them!

Sources:

1. Noble, Elizabeth. Having Twins. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991.
2. Novotny, Pamela Patrick. The Joy of Twins. New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1993.
3. Segal, Nancy, Ph.D. "Nature vs. Nurture: Who is Happy?" Twins Magazine, pages 50-51, March/April, 1997.
4. The Twin Sourcebook, Copyright Twins Magazine, Revised, 1997.

First published June 2000 in "The Duet", Bucks-Mont Mothers of Multiples. All rights reserved to the publication and the author.