

# THE CONTINUUM CONCEPT IN PRACTICE

by

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Three months before my book was published in 1975, a friend asked me to lend my proof copy to a couple who were expecting their first baby. They both read it promptly. I met Millicent when she came to lunch with Seth, who was by then three months old. She told me that she and her husband Mark, a doctor, were convinced that my ideas made sense, because they corresponded to their own feelings. She was very keen that other parents read the book, but worried that some might be discouraged by the idea that they had to carry the baby about constantly for months.

"I could see the point", she said, "but I was sure I was not going to lug the equivalent of a ten- or fifteen-pound sack of potatoes around all day and night. I'm afraid you might put people off altogether. Why don't you just stick to 'put the shopping in the baby carriage and carry the baby', as I heard you say on the radio? Most of them will probably be willing to do that, and when they get home they'll want to go on carrying it. I never did put Seth down because I didn't feel like it".

"That was the idea", I said. "It's only when the baby is there and your feelings for it are not negated that it

works; not because someone said you should. Nor would you be likely to want to be stuck in the service of just 'a baby' to that extent, before you had met and fallen in love with it".

"I solved the problem of my bath by taking Seth in with me and bathing him at the same time", she went on. "If Mark gets home in time, he can't resist jumping in, too. He loves sleeping with Seth as much as I do".

"Luckily, I have a printing business with a friend, so I didn't have to quit my job. I work standing up, and by now I'm used to having him in a sling on my back or hip. I can swing him around to the front if he wants to feed. He doesn't have to cry, he just grunts and reaches. At night, too, he only has to nuzzle about and I know he's hungry. I just plug in a bosom and don't even really have to wake up.

"I've found ways to do all my housework and gardening without putting Seth down. I put him down only when I'm making a bed, and bounce him around among the sheets and blankets, but he loves that. And I do wait until Mark can help me to bring the coal up from the basement. The only time Seth and I are

separated is when I'm riding my horse. A friend holds him then. But I'm always eager to take him back at the end of the ride. It feels right to have him with me".

Seth was relaxed and quiet through lunch and, like the Yequana babies I describe in the book, no trouble to hold.

It is understandable that Western babies are not welcome in offices, shops, workrooms, or even dinner parties. They usually shriek and kick, wave their arms and stiffen their bodies, so that one needs two hands, and a lot of attention, to keep them under control. It seems that they are keyed up with undischarged energy from spending so much time out of contact with an active person's naturally discharging energy field. When they are picked up they are still rigid with tension, and try to rid themselves of the discomfort by flexing their limbs or signaling the person holding them to bounce them on a knee or toss them in the air. Millicent was surprised at the difference between Seth's body tone and that of other babies. His was soft, she said. The others all felt like pokers.

We need to recognize that, by treating babies the way we did for hundreds of thousands of years, we can be assured of calm, soft, undemanding little creatures. Only then can working mothers, unwilling to be bored and isolated all day with no adult companionship, rid themselves of their cruel conflict. Babies taken to work are where they need to be - with their mothers; and the mothers are where they need to be - with their peers, not doing baby

care but something worthy of intelligent adults. However, employers are not likely to be receptive to the idea until the reputation of babies improves.

**Ms Magazine** made a heroic effort to bring babies into the office; but it need not have been so heroic had the babies been in physical contact with someone instead of isolated in carriers on nearby desks.

Not everyone has been able to put continuum principles into practice as early, and as happily, as did Millicent and Mark, who now have more children brought up like Seth. One mother, Anthea, wrote me that, as soon as she read the book, she realized she should have listened to her own instincts instead of to the baby-care "experts". Now she had a four-year-old, Trevor, to whom she had done "all the wrong things". Another baby was on its way. It would be a "continuum baby" from the start, but what to do about Trevor?

It is difficult to carry a four-year-old about, in order to make up for his lost "in-arms" stage. Also, it is important that he play and explore and learn, as befits his chronological age. So I suggested to Anthea and her husband Brian that they take Trevor to sleep with them at night and, during the day, leave things pretty much as they were, except for encouraging the boy to sit on their laps and being physically available to him whenever possible. I also asked them to keep a daily record of what happened. It was soon after the book had come out, and I thought their experience might be useful to others.

Anthea kept the record faithfully. For the first few nights none of them had much sleep. Trevor would wriggle and whine. There were toes up noses; elbow in ears. Glasses of water were called for at ungodly hours. Once Trevor jockeyed himself into a perpendicular position, forcing Anthea and Brian to cling to the edges of the mattress. Many mornings Brian stomped off to his office red-eyed and irritable. But they persevered, unlike others who, after three or four trial nights, would say to me, "It doesn't work; we couldn't sleep", and give up.

After three months Anthea reported that there were no more disturbances; all three slept blissfully through the night. Not only did their relationship to Trevor improve markedly, but so did their relationship to each other. "And", she said at the end of her report, mentioning it for the first time, "Trevor stopped being aggressive at school!"

Some months later Trevor moved back to his own bed of his own accord. He had had his fill of what would have been infant sleeping experience. His new sister was in the parents' bed too, and even after he had moved out, he knew he was welcome back whenever he felt the need.

**Why not to feel guilty about not having been the only one in western civilization to treat your child correctly**

Another mother, Rachel, whose family of four was half grown, wrote, "I think your book was one of the cruelest things I've ever read. I

am not suggesting that you should not have written it. I am not even saying that I wish I had not read it. It's simply that it impressed me profoundly, hurt me deeply, intrigued me greatly. I do not want to face the possible truth of your theory and am trying my best to avoid facing it . . . (God forgive you for that sequence about what babies go through, by the way, because, in the deathless words of Noel Coward, I never shall!) . . . It's a wonder to me, as a matter of fact, that you were not tarred and feathered at some stage . . . Every mother who reads it must do everything she can to avoid its implications . . . Do you know, I honestly believe that it was only while I thought that all the aggravation we go through was normal and unavoidable - 'natural', to use a word one often hears by way of comfort from other mothers, child psychologists, and books - that it was endurable at all. Now that you have intruded into my mind the idea that it could be otherwise, well, I don't mind telling you that for twenty-four hours after reading your book, not to mention during, I was so depressed I felt like shooting myself".

Happily she did not, and we have since become close friends, she a great advocate of the continuum concept and I a great admirer of her honesty and her way with words. But the sentiments she expressed - the depression, the guilt, the regret - have occurred all too often among readers with grown children.

Yes, of course it is dreadful to think about what we have done, with the best of intentions, to the people we love most. But let us think too about

what our loving parents - equally ignorant and innocent - did to us and what was undoubtedly done to them. Most of the literate world joins us in victimizing each new, trusting babe: it has become the custom (for reasons I shall not speculate on here). Does any one of us, therefore, have the right to take the guilt, or even the awful sense of having been cheated, upon herself, or himself, as though one alone could have known better? If, on the other hand, fearing that unreasonable sense of personal guilt, we refuse to acknowledge what we all do to each other, then how can we hope to change?

For example, consider Nancy, a beautiful, white-haired woman who attended a lecture of mine in London. She told me that, since she and her daughter - who was thirty-five - had both read my book, their understanding of their relationship had brought them closer together than they had ever been before. Another mother, Rosalind, told me how she had sunk into a weeping depression for several days after reading the book. Her husband was understanding and patiently took care of their two little girls, while Rosalind languished, unable to continue her life in the new light. "At a certain point", she told me, "I realized that my only way ahead was to read the book again . . . this time for strength".

### **On our strange inability to see**

An acquaintance telephoned me one day in a great state of excitement over an experience he had had on a bus. He found himself sitting behind a best Indian lady and a small child

who were enjoying an easy, respectful relationship of a sort seldom seen in British society. "It was beautiful", he said. "I had just finished reading your book, and there they were, living illustrations. I've been among lots of people like them before without ever seeing what now seems so obvious. I certainly never appreciated the lesson they could be to us if we could understand how they get that way . . . and why we never do".

So blind are we that there is actually an organization in England called The National Association for Parents of Sleepless Children. Apparently it functions on the model of Alcoholics Anonymous, fortifying the victims of screaming babies with sympathy from fellow sufferers and consolations like, "They do outgrow it eventually". "Take turns with your spouse so that each of you can sleep sometimes while the other gets up". "It won't hurt a baby to be left to cry if you know there is nothing wrong with it". The best they have to say is "If everything else fails, it won't really do the baby any harm to let it sleep in your bed". There is never a suggestion that they might call off the war and believe the babies, who - unanimously, and perfectly clearly - let everyone know where a baby's place is.

### **On being "Child-centered" or Permissive**

A parent whose day centers on child care is not only likely to be bored, and boring to others, but also likely to be giving an unwholesome kind of care. A baby's expectation is to be in the midst of an active person's life, in constant physical contact, witnessing the kinds of experiences

he will have later in life. His role while in arms is passive, with all his senses observant. He enjoys occasional direct attention, kisses, tickles, being thrown in the air, and so on. But his main business is to absorb the actions, interactions and surroundings of his caretaker, adult or child. This information prepares him to take his place among his people by helping him to understand what they do. To thwart this powerful urge - by looking inquiringly, so to speak, at a baby who is looking inquiringly at you - creates profound frustration; it manacles his mind. The baby's expectation of a strong, busy, central figure, to whom he can be peripheral, is undermined by an emotionally needy, servile person who is seeking his acceptance or approval. The baby will increasingly signal, but it will not be for more attention. It is actually a demand for the appropriate kind of experience. Much of his frustration is due to his inability to make his signals (that things are wrong) bring about anything right.

Some of the most exasperated and "contrary" children are those whose antisocial behavior is really a plea to be shown how to behave cooperatively. Permissiveness constantly deprives children of examples of adult-centered life, where they can find the place they seek in a natural hierarchy of greater and lesser experience; where their desirable **actions** are accepted and their undesirable **actions** rejected, while they **themselves** are always accepted.

Children need to see that they are assumed to be well-intentioned,

naturally social people who are trying to do the right thing and who want reliable reactions from their elders to guide them. A child seeks **information** about what is done and not done; so, if he breaks a plate, he needs to see some anger or sadness at its destruction, but not a withdrawal of esteem from him - as though he were not also angry or sad at having let it slip and had not resolved on his own initiative to be more careful.

If permissive parents do not distinguish between desirable and undesirable acts, the child often behaves more interruptively and disruptively in order to force his parents to play their correct part. Then, when they cannot bear any more imposition upon their patience, the parents may explode with all their pent-up anger at the child himself, perhaps telling him they have "had enough" and sending him out of sight. The message he gets is that all his previous behavior, which they were tolerating, was in fact bad; that they were misrepresenting their true feelings at the time; and that the irremediable badness of the child finally brought their pretense of acceptance of him to an end. The game is defined this way in many households, whose children come to see that they are expected to try to "get away with" as much undesirable behavior as possible before the axe falls, when they will be revealed in their true colors as unacceptable.

In some extreme cases when parents - often having had their first child late in life - dote so disastrously on their little darlings that they never show **any** sign of distinguishing

between what is to be done and what is not to be done, the children are nearly mad with frustration. They rebel at each new plea: "Would you like to have this?" "Would you like to do that?" "What would you like to eat? . . . to do? . . . to wear?" "What do you want Mummy to do?" And so on.

I knew a most beautiful two-and-a-half-year-old girl who was treated like that. Already, she never smiled. Her parents' every fawning suggestion of something that might please her she greeted with scowls of discontent and obstinate repetitions of "No!" Her rejection made them even more abject, and so the desperate game went on. The little girl was never able to get her parents to set an example from which she could learn, because they were always looking to her for guidance. They would have given her anything she wanted, but could not understand her real need for them to be engaged in living their own lives as adults, with her in their midst.

The enormous amount of energy expended by children in trying to get attention is not because they need attention itself. They are signaling that their experience is unacceptable, and are only trying to get a caretaker's attention in order to correct it. A lifelong impulse to seek attention is simply a continuation of the frustrated child's failure to get it in the first place, until the search for notice becomes a goal in itself, a sort of compulsive contest of wills. So a form of parental attention that only brings more signals from the child is clearly an inappropriate one.

Natural logic forbids belief in the evolution of a species with the characteristic of driving its parents to distraction by the millions. A look at other millions of parents in Third World countries - who have not had the "privilege" of being taught to stop understanding and trusting their children, reveals families living in peace, and with an eager and useful addition to the family labor force in every child over the age of four.

### **New Thoughts on Psychotherapy**

My approach to healing the effects of the deprivations of childhood has evolved from an attempt to reproduce the missed experiences themselves to converting the harmful messages, conscious and unconscious, that remain in the psyche as a result of those missed experiences. I have found in my own practice as a psychotherapist that one can commute one's low or negative expectations of oneself and the world by thoroughly understanding what the expectations are, how they got there, and why they are false. The most ingrained feeling of inadequacy is, at its very origin, an innate knowledge of one's true worthiness. This knowledge is betrayed and eroded by experiences that impose erroneous beliefs, beliefs that in infancy and childhood one is unable to question. Fears - nameless, shapeless threats of consequences too dire to contemplate - cut off any freedom of action, or even of thought, that may lie in their direction. These fears are sometimes so restricting that one is at liberty only to live one's life in the self-imposed equivalent of a prison yard.

Tracking down these terrors to their beginnings reveals them to be experiences that, when finally envisaged by the adult, are recognized as frightening only to a child. The ceaseless, draining effort to keep oneself from coming face to face with that dread is finally abandoned, and the part of one's life that was held in thrall by it comes at last into its own. One can then allow oneself to do or be whatever had been forbidden; to be successful, or to fail; to be a "nice guy", or to stop being such a nice guy; to love, or to accept being loved; to take risks, or to stop taking risks, without an inappropriate compulsion that prevents the best use of one's judgement, instinctive and intellectual.

In the late 1970s, during the last of his thirty years of pioneering research in abreaction therapy, I was able to join Dr. Frank Lake in some of the work at his center in Nottingham, England. He had read this book and was keen to show me that the offences to people's sensibilities, about which I am so concerned, do not begin at birth but in the equally formative time in **utero**. The dramatic reliving of these experiences by his many subjects, and subsequently by some of mine, convinced me that he was right, especially since he produced the abreactions in me before I had seen anyone else curled up in fetal helplessness, moving limbs in that special way, making sounds and expressing emotions that I came to recognize as characteristic of that stage.

I still make use of this technique when clients arrive at a point where

they need to know about their birth, early infant, or intra-uterine experience. It has been my impression that abreacting, dramatic though it is, is not often therapeutic in itself. The value of the experience lies in its contribution to the subject's information, which is then integrated into his new understanding of how things really are in his life (as opposed to how he has always believed them to be). Occasionally an abreaction turns up the last piece of a puzzle, making possible the leap from understanding to realization, when one's spontaneous behavior finally comes to reflect the discovered truth. But it is the truth itself that brings about the transformation, and apparently **only** the truth, no matter how it is acquired: by determined detective work employing induction and sometimes deduction; by reevaluation of beliefs unexamined since they were formed in childhood (usually concerned with "goodness" and "badness"); as well as through abreaction or data gleaned from others who had no investment in forgetting some event that in its time seemed cataclysmic to the subject. The liberating results of this process usually begin to appear quite quickly, and major transformations take months rather than years.

In light of the continuum concept, a person seeking help is an inherently "right" creature whose species-specific needs have not been met and whose precisely evolved expectations may have been greeted and treated with self-righteous denial or condemnation by those whose role should have been to

respect and fulfill them. Unresponsive parents unfortunately make the child feel that he is not lovable or deserving, or somehow "good" enough. He cannot, by his nature, conceive them to be wrong: it must be himself. So when he can thoroughly realize that his crying, sulking, self-doubt, apathy or rebellion were correct human responses to his incorrect treatment, his whole feeling about himself - as the wrong one - changes appropriately. A review of a person's history in that light, I find, has in itself a salutary effect; it creates a healing atmosphere for someone accustomed to being made to feel unworthy, unwelcome, or guilty. I have been glad to hear that many other psychotherapists have

found the continuum concept useful, too, for themselves, their students, and the people they are treating.

Indeed, in the decade since this book first appeared, a far more hospitable climate for its ideas has developed in many quarters - obstetrics, child care, social institutions, psychology and in the general public - in a widening search for trustworthy principles by which to live. I was particularly encouraged to see the description of a film character in a recent *Time* magazine review, which read, "Her sense of social responsibility is informed by unimpeachable instinct, not by suspect ideology".

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### The Colibri

Why child of human  
Did they put me in this cage?  
    Because you're pink  
    And green and orange  
    And hum so peculiarly  
    Because you hold in your wings  
    The secret of freedom  
Do you know child of human  
What freedom is?  
    Not quite, dear colibri, not quite.  
Freedom child of human  
Is a question, not an answer  
You and I, you see, are both prisoners  
Me in this cage, you in your cozy lounge  
The question you ought to ask yourself child of human  
Is not how I can get out  
But rather where I should go.

Albert Russo

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