

COMBINING REBIRTHING WITH ANALYTICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

by Bronwen Astor

"It is my belief that in all psychotherapeutic work with patients, psychotherapists and analysts have to provide two distinct types of relating from their side. One side of relating is covered by interpretative work, which helps the patient to gain insight into his internal conflicts and resolve them. The other side of relating, which is harder to define, is more in the manner of providing coverage for the patient's self-experience in the clinical situation. The knack of any psychotherapeutic work is to strike the right balance within these two types of functions in the therapist."

from Masud Khan The Privacy of Self

The excellent four-year training at AGIP (Association for Group and Individual Psychotherapy) combined with three years' therapy with a male Jungian followed by three years with a female Freudian, had enabled me to set up a satisfactory practice as an analytical psychotherapist. After a few years, however, I decided to train in Rebirthing.

Freudian theory had rejected the primary importance of the birth trauma since it undermined the Oedipus Complex and the superior influence of the Father rather than that of the Mother. Melanie Klein was more cautious, so was C.G. Jung. Nevertheless the fundamental significance of birth and what to do about it was not within the scope of analytical psychotherapy.

In my own analysis I often experienced an unexplainable, wordless, overwhelming sadness, and occasionally one of my patients would regress to a pre-verbal state and, overcome with tears, be choking and sobbing inconsolably. I felt inadequate. Surely there must be a better way to deal with this infantile state, but what was it?

My daughter had become interested in different body therapies. She had read Janov's *Primal Scream* and encouraged by her I went on a course with the Holistic Rebirthing Institute and trained in Leonard Orr's methods under Toni and Lee Preisler.

Defence against Change

Through consciousness breathing and the rebirthing process I learnt how to unlock my thoughts and feelings in the womb, during my birth and in the subsequent separation from my Mother. All this is stored in the unconscious and linked in the computer-programmed memory to our very first breath. Breathing becomes the healing agent.

I discovered how all our experiences in the first hours, days and weeks after birth still predominate in our memory and decisively influence our attitude to life. Where they are negative they work constantly against us undermining our health and fulfilment and confidence in our divine purpose. Probably all traumas can be traced to our initial reaction to life outside the womb.

Anxiety and depression, for instance, are defences against the fear of irreversible change which starts with birth, because "once I go out of the womb I shall never be able to get back in". Sometimes the distress of the Mother and the baby during the birth makes life not worth opting for and so a person can spend her entire life unconsciously preferring not to have been born at all. Rebirthing changes all this.

Choice of Parents, Choice of Birth

As I was a premature Caesarean I began to realise that I often felt violated by other people's intrusion on my privacy, that I was not prepared for situations to change; I was constantly shocked or distressed and had a strong determination to do things my own way. Also I had no inbuilt mechanism for process: for getting from position A to position B, both mentally and physically, since my birthing had consisted of a sudden transition from womb to world in which neither I nor my Mother had a positive part to play. Consequently all journeys, unless familiar, were an anxiety for me. There were however many advantages, not least being the conviction that struggle in anything is unnecessary, for life holds instant solutions that come out of the blue. So I find it easy to proceed from one A'Ha moment to another.

The reliving of my birth and of experiencing a conscious decision to be born in my own time resulted in a lowering of the unconscious stress level and a subsequent immediate improvement in my health and relationships.

A true sense of self (body, mind and spirit) begins with the conscious realisation that I have chosen my parents and my manner of birth. To say "I did not choose to be born" is only true in so far as I have not yet made that choice conscious. In the same way as the sacrament of Confirmation in the Christian Church enables me to make promises made on my behalf at my Baptism my own responsibility from that moment on, so Rebirthing gives me the opportunity to choose this life NOW, and, in concert with God, my particular life and circumstances. I become no longer a victim but an active participant from conception.

Many of us are born into unhappy situations: perhaps handicapped or orphaned or rejected in some way. To perceive how these circumstances have enabled us to develop in ways that fulfil our potential and ultimately God's purposes is to grow in self awareness and wholeness.

Combining this training with my psychotherapy practice proved easier than I anticipated. At appropriate moments in therapy I told my patients that I had now trained in Rebirthing and discussed it with them. For any new patient I explained that rebirthing would be included as and when appropriate, but not before some initial weeks of psychotherapy. I found that the patients who suffer from panic attacks were the most apprehensive, whereas those in depression and anxiety were usually eager to try something that might get them well quicker. I like my patients to lie on a couch. For psychotherapy sessions I sit to one side of their head but almost out of sight with a table and a lamp between us. This has the advantage of their not watching my face and thus consciously and unconsciously reacting to my expressions, but they are in their own world where they can "free associate".

From my position I can see their breathing and can comment when they hold their breath, or make gestures with their hands and so on. But when we have a Rebirthing session I dim the room and sit in a chair at their feet facing them. It is a much more intimate relating, more eye contact, touch and conscious attention.

While they are breathing I pray with my Rosary which helps me to tune in to the Holy Spirit. There is always tea and biscuits at the end of these sessions.

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This flexibility in approach and attitude on my part highlights the transference and counter-transference. My training in psychotherapy helps me to have sufficient stability in these processes.

Rebirthers or others in alternative therapies, not trained in the detachment needed to handle these transference processes can sometimes get too involved emotionally and physically (sometimes they do whether they get trained or not!), which does not leave the patient sufficient time and space to come to their own insights in their own unique way.

Body and Spirit Together

Psychotherapy alone can take many years. It can prove frustrating for both patient and therapist when insufficient change takes place. The ego can remain infantile, locked in that part that has never been born. Money can run out and the patient may feel trapped in a financial drain. Equally the therapist may feel immoral in raising fees and similarly trapped in a situation that feels unjustifiable. Unwittingly the patient often does not bring essential pre-verbal material into therapy, or if she does the only method is talking. But it is precisely the talking that throws the patient back into the child-versus-non-understanding-parent situation that has brought them into therapy in the first place. To be able to work with the body and what the breathing does to the body circumvents the necessity for words. Body and Spirit work together to discover their link with the Source.

The fundamental perception of psychoanalysis is that the unconscious content of the mind consists of desires that need immediate satisfaction and derive their energy from primary physical instincts: the instinct for life, union, oneness. This is the heart of mysticism and true religion. It is also the experience of Rebirthing. Therefore, practised together, psychotherapy and rebirthing make a powerful combination. Not only is the conscious ego strengthened through orthodox analytical procedure and interpretation, but the patient in the rebirthing process feels safe and secure enough to get in touch with and express her deepest infantile withdrawn part and in receiving affirmations and encouragement discovers the richness and energy within herself. This she does at the height of the distress stimulated by the breathing, when, completing the energy cycle by continuing to breathe, she succeeds in going through what Leonard Orr calls the urgency barrier and moves into deep relaxation and a feeling of mastery and insight over the death urge.

Rebirthing brings up much repressed material very fast, especially in dreams so that, in my opinion, it works best for the patient if it is combined with ongoing sessions of psychotherapy. I also use Voice Dialogue as taught by Hal Stone and Sidra Winckelman in elucidating meaning from dreams and getting the patient to feel the different energies in the dream. Voice Dialogue helps dramatically in the process of individuation, in reintegrating the shadow or rejected selves. Many therapies could combine in this way to produce results.