

The Birth Metaphor in Primal Integration

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Birth - then and now

Biological gestation and birth provide rather a good metaphor for an intentional process of 'becoming' embarked upon later in adult life, such as in Primal Integration. You become aware of being 'pregnant' – a sense of something going on inside. Gradually you become more and more aware of its nature. It gets bigger and moves towards some sort of coming out into the world. This can be an uncomfortable process, a painful process. It may be dramatic. It may be ecstatic. It may be gradual and quiet. Whichever way, this is a forward and outward process.

If a practitioner is involved, their role is akin to that of a natural birth oriented midwife – to encourage the participant to follow the instinctive processes that will produce the natural emergence. In giving birth to aspects of oneself, even the memory of traumatic experiences – such as having been stuck during one's biological birth – will emerge naturally. These experiences do not need to be extracted with the forceps of elaborate practitioner technique. Recovery of traumatic memories does not require the psychological equivalent of the obstetrical intervention that was perhaps necessary for one's physical survival 'back then'. Practitioners remain midwives – midwives of consciousness – rather than obstetricians.

The natural 'delivery', including that of traumatic memories and 'difficult' feelings, is enabled by the configuration of a contained, 'free space'. In Primal Integration, we have a high degree of structure 'around the periphery' which allows the space within to be very free. This configuration encourages the 'structures' within people to become apparent, to be experienced as in their formation, and for unexpressed feelings bound up in them to be released and completed.

It seems that often the intensity of the experience necessary to melt such inauthentic 'structures' within people will be comparable to the intensity of the original experience from which they split-off. Seldom is intellectual understanding of the relevance of these experiences enough to effect change. Indeed split-off intellectual understanding may often be a hindrance by allowing an enlarged 'head' to intrude too much into the process and be busy categorising before it's done – 'That's to do with...'. It seems that the understanding has to run as deep as the event is significant in that person's development. The events are in a sense re-lived at depth and in context. Important to note here and crucial to the 'wholing' process, are the differences between the original context and the present one. This time around there are resources available that were not there the first time, a good enough here and now reality, support for the endeavour, and crucially, sufficient access to one's own 'adult' self.

To our minds, the SAFAA criterion (Sufficiently Available Functioning Adult Autonomy) (Mowbray, 1995) is an important requirement for participation in deep personal growth activities and is part of what distinguishes those activities from medical model

psychotherapy. A past experience is being engaged with rather than a present reality, albeit a past experience that is being felt now. An awareness of this distinction is fundamental to the endeavour, as is an acceptance that it is being undertaken voluntarily under one's own direction, control and responsibility.

The period after the 'birth' is one that requires attention worthy of this 'new beginning'. This is integration – welcoming and creating space for the newly recovered 'self' in one's life by giving it appropriate recognition, energy and time. Integration takes place in two stages – the integration into awareness of the formerly excluded aspects of oneself and then the practical application of these new discoveries in everyday life. Whilst the former can happen spontaneously, the latter often requires some form of active work.

The welcoming may involve changes in outside life, where choices made in the absence of these now recovered aspects of oneself may have established social roles and patterns of living which have gathered considerable inertia. Changing these, when possible, usually involves 'donkey work'. However, it is not always feasible, or wise to completely change them, so there is much challenging work to be done in finding a way for the 'new self' to manifest which is meaningful and fulfilling, whilst respecting and not abandoning that of one's life which has been a worthwhile investment, whatever its origins.

Hazards

There are pitfalls to be aware of in this process, most of which stem in some way from a state of imbalance between the process of emergence and the integrative process. The inner Self is capable of regulating this if allowed to do so by an alliance with the adult (self), and there are natural points of 'closure' that prevent consciousness being overwhelmed. Being able to allow this is in part a learned art that develops as one's adult here and now self learns to trust the guidance of one's Self, to differentiate it from impostors and to trust, sufficiently, those with whom one is working, if they are worthy of it.

However, if some other part of the personality, motivated by other goals, has been allowed to take control of the endeavour, an imbalance results in which the participant may for example feel swamped with primal feelings that are felt to be too much to 'digest', or loses contact with present reality in some other way. Conversely the participant may experience little happening at all. This 'inner usurper' may be an inner child, a punitive parent or some other sub-personality. In the extreme this may become, to use Michael Balint's terms (Balint, 1968), a 'malignant regression' rather than a 'new beginning'. These other goals that may be pursued often involve the projection and acting out of some sort of fantasy expectations derived from the primal level. So long as these are recognised for what they are and worked with – regarded as 'grist for the mill' – then all's well. It is only when they become the driving force – the past driving the present – and are acted upon that they pose problems. Some examples of these may be helpful by way of illustration.

One fantasy expectation that may occur is that what is on offer is a chance to rewrite one's history. The Primal Integration setting can appeal to a desire in some people to go 'back in time' to where things went wrong, and to do it right this time. 'This time my needs will be

met.’ The fantasy is that positive experiences in the here and now can somehow be transported back in time to when something good was needed but was not available, the fantasised effect being that the positive experience would retrospectively cancel out the negative one and makes things ‘all right now’. In such a case, there is an attempt to use the resources offered in Primal Integration to hide the person’s true experience, much in the way that a drug would be used to treat pain. This method can have a palliative effect and appeal for a while, but eventually breaks down when the truth of that person’s original experience breaks through these attempts to suppress it. There will be a rude awakening, and the full force of the feelings about the original situation are likely to burst forth, now directed towards whoever has now ‘failed’ them. The person has a choice at this point: to draw on the resources available to help them complete their experience of their past, to integrate it and be able to move on, or to seek another ‘drug’.

Sometimes there is a situation in the deep feelings, where ‘going forward’ poses the underlying threat. For example when the umbilical cord has been entwined around the neck during the birth process – so that the more one progresses the less oxygen one receives (‘to grow is to die’). When in contact with this sort of memory, safety may be sought in regression. Some people may unwittingly attempt a repeat of how they did survive a situation experienced as a threat to their existence by using this as the model for the recovery of those parts of their psyche that were split off at that time. Thus an attempt may be made to act out a fantasy of being ‘rescued’ by the practitioner – seen as obstetrician. In other cases expectations deriving from primal associations with medical (‘cure’) or religious (‘salvation’) models may be the driving fantasy.

Many births

There are many ‘births’ in Primal Integration. The emergence of an early split-off emergency* such as during one’s biological birth is one sort, but so is enacting the birth one wished one had, or expressing that which has not yet been expressed, or the emergence of more authentic behaviours, new insights, unexplored capabilities, creative works and joy – releasing one’s human potential in all its colour.

The process of emergence and integration is not a ‘one off’ project. When Self-regulated, it can form a continuous cycle of change which seems to provide for its own furtherance, the fruits of one cycle providing resources for the next, continually bringing a deeper way of living into being, and a deeper way of being into living.

References

Balint, M., (1968) *The Basic Fault* London: Tavistock.

Mowbray R., (1995) *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration* London: Trans Marginal Press.

(*Emerge and emergency have the same Latin root, *emergentia*.)

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