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# Inner Nature, Outer Nature.

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## The Roots of Ecological Crisis in Pre and Perinatal Experience.

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### The Formative Disconnection from Nature

The therapeutic work with babies (Integrative Baby Therapy) has many levels of meaning to it. The resolution of present moment difficulties is just one of these. At another level we can think of this work as ecological. When we think of nature, we usually think of nature as out there. We go out into nature. The experience of walking through woodlands, swimming in rivers and lakes or standing on mountain tops may renew us in ways that are not so easily found in the city. Nevertheless, we are part of nature and we can also go into nature by dropping our awareness beneath the level of the personality and into the interior world of embodied experience. The inward movement to connect with nature is as renewing as the outward movement. Both have their own terrains and interface with each other in a continuum that we may miss when we only operate at the level of personality. Without connecting with our own deep roots in nature we miss the 'I-Thou' relationship with nature, experiencing only an 'I-it' relationship.

Our disconnect with our own nature begins in early life. This formative disconnect is at the root of all future disconnections. When our deep embodied subjectivity tells us that all of nature is alive, we do not need to rely on abstract beliefs to inform us. We *know* it. When we feel how the Earth suffers from our lack of regard and incessant exploitation, we do not need scientists to produce statistics as to changes in the atmosphere or in weather patterns. This embodied interconnectivity exists at a non-cognitive level. Over time we may develop the synaptic pathways that enable us to connect our embodied experience with our cognitive awareness and bring it more into conscious awareness. Nevertheless there is always an elusive quality to the flowing interconnectivity that exists at the embodied felt level, even when we are not fully conscious of it. It defies literalism, whilst

informing us deeply. As soon as we conceptualise we have disconnected from that flow. This does not make conceptualisation 'wrong', it simply recognises the limitations of our cognitive maps.

There are three essential ways in which our embodied embedding in nature is disturbed and diminished during the early formative stages of life. These relate to our prenatal life, our birth experience and how our embodied 'stories' are heard following birth.

### **The Womb: Our Original Environment**

The first of these is the lack of awareness in our culture of our spiritual nature during prenatal life. The prevailing understanding in post-industrial cultures is very different from that of indigenous cultures. For example, shortly after conception the Dagara tribe of West Africa 'celebrate the arrival of the soul through ritual and celebration. A ritual space is created with shrines and all kinds of decorations. Food is cooked while the village sings. Elders take the mother-to-be into the shower room and give her a shower; then all the women come in to wash her. They they dress her up and introduce her and the incoming soul to the community, at which time all members of the community, one at a time, give their welcome to her and to the soul.' Similar traditions exist within the Native American Tradition. The process of embodiment from Source (Spirit) is seen as a rite of passage that needs acknowledgement and support to enable the incoming soul to fully commit to being here. Throughout the pregnancy various women with specific roles look out for signs in nature that indicate the specific gifts and qualities that the unborn child has to bring to the community. In traditional Tibetan culture 'During the time before conception, or preconception, couples prepare themselves in many ways. It is an important time to prepare body, emotions, mind and spirit so that all is in readiness to invite a child into the womb.'

In regression sessions with adults in workshops and one-to-one sessions the sense of not being welcomed and a sense of isolation in the womb often emerges as a core wound to the psyche. It may leave us with poor self-esteem and an existential sense of disconnection from life. Prenates and babies experience anxiety when they do not feel welcomed or consciously held in unconditional positive regard. If this goes on for long

periods the anxiety, which is an internal embodied state, becomes overwhelming. The only way prenatals and babies have to manage this is to diminish the sensations by contracting against the aliveness of the body or to disconnect by disassociating. In this way the internal tonal qualities of our own bodies become a source of anxiety that we reflexively move away from. Babies whose prenatal experience was one of ongoing distress carry with them this sense of aloneness and disconnect. They may cry incessantly for 'no obvious reason', their bodies are tense, they find it hard to settle, they often avoid eye contact and they seem lost in their experience. In a culture that expects women to continue working throughout most of the pregnancy and does not recognise the prenatal as a whole person who needs to be welcomed and empathically engaged with it is little wonder that so many people carry these core wounds. As our embodied experience is also our root into the wider natural continuum, it is little wonder that our need to disconnect from or diminish the life of the body is reflected later as a disconnect from and diminished relationship with nature as a whole.

### **The Struggle to be Born and the Places we Become Stuck**

The second way that our relationship with our inner nature is disturbed is at birth. Birth involves struggle and pain for babies as well as for mothers. Just as mothers who have experienced the sense of meeting the challenges of birth and of having overcome them feel a sense of achievement and that they have passed through a rite of passage, so it is for babies. Likewise many mothers who have not felt able to do this without the process being taken over by medical intervention are left with feelings of grief and failure. This is also true for babies.

In the IBT sessions mothers (and fathers) are given space to express and work through these difficult emotions, whilst at the same time being supported to know that they did what they were able to within the conditions that were present during the birth. Babies express the difficult feelings that they are left with through their body language and crying. Giving space for the babies to 'tell their stories' and supporting the parents to hear this, without falling into guilt, is at the core of IBT. Empathic mirroring techniques support the baby to feel heard and understood. Through this emotional attunement babies do not feel

alone in their experience and are able to release tension and reconnect with their embodied experience.

Traumatisation may be understood as a process that has not been able to complete. We may experience trauma without being traumatised when we feel empowered to do what we need to do to move through the experience. For example, a couple of years ago I fell whilst mountain walking on my own, and injured myself quite badly. It took me a long time to get down, during which time I became very cold and exhausted. Later when I had got myself back to safety and rested awhile I began to shake and cry. When I phoned my partner and felt her empathic concern as I told my story, another layer of emotions came to the surface. As human beings we have a deep need to be heard and for our experience to be empathically received. Later still I was able to look back on the experience with a sense of achievement, recognising my resourcefulness and capacity to endure. Without allowing the emotions and shaking to emerge and move through me I would not have been able to fully experience the sense of achievement, as part of me would have still been stuck in the experience. Having my story empathically heard was an important part of this process of moving from traumatisation to achievement. So it is with babies. It is not so much the trauma of birth that is the problem, but the lack of opportunity for them to have their experience empathically heard and mirrored. Without this support to complete the process, even though they have been physically born, part of their psyche is still stuck in the birth process at the point at which it became overwhelming. As such they are traumatised. Completing the process in an IBT session shifts the experience from traumatisation to achievement, from learned helplessness to empowerment.

### **Experience in Search of a Mirror**

The third way in which we disconnect from the inner world of the body and hence our root in nature, is due to the lack of emotional attunement that most babies encounter in relation to their birth trauma. The type of crying connected with prenatal distress and birth trauma is known in IBT as 'memory crying'. This is an expression of the place of overwhelm that the baby is still stuck in. It is not a memory in the sense that we may remember what we did yesterday, but, is a 'body memory', arising out of embodied experience. It is usually accompanied by certain movements, known as 'baby body

language', which indicate to the trained therapist which stage of the birth or prenatal life the baby is still feeling stuck in. Baby body language is universal, just as birth is a universal experience. At the same time every baby's birth is individual and experienced by baby in the context of his or her prenatal life and the specific conditions present at the time of birth. When memory crying is empathically heard and mirrored it reaches a peak known as a 'release apex', after which the baby begins to relax. Parents often report that their babies seem heavier and more present after a session as they are able to inhabit their bodies more fully. As unresolved trauma is not usually recognised as a source of crying in babies, memory crying is often mistaken for a 'present moment needs cry.' This is the type of crying which most parents are familiar with. This is associated with a present moment need such as being hungry, tired, or uncomfortable due to temperature, wet diapers, under-stimulation or over-stimulation. When a memory cry is mistaken for a present moment cry there is a lack of emotional attunement or accurate mirroring. Whilst babies can tolerate this for short periods, if it is prolonged the mismatch between inner experience and outer response becomes a source of tension in itself. Parents also experience this tension when they are trying everything they can to soothe a baby and nothing works. From the baby's perspective it is the same; except that babies have much less capacity to regulate their own stress levels than we do as adults. This leads to unbearable inner tension and the loss of trust in inner instinctual experience. An example of this is, 'I feel stress and the world tells me I am hungry, therefore I must be hungry.' This is the source of many an eating disorder, as well as the distrust in our environment as a source of pleasure or satisfaction.

### **Institutionalised Trauma and Colonial Abuses**

These early disconnects from our embodied roots in the living continuum of the natural world is certainly a factor in our current ecological crisis. It leads to a mindset in which nature is experienced as flawed, untrustworthy, dead or hostile. These are themes that show up in regressive work with adults and can be traced back to these formative experiences. At a cultural level this shows up as the will to dominate and exploit nature. The relationship between our experiences during the stages of prenatal life and infancy and nature is also reflected in the horror of indigenous cultures who describe our exploitation of the Earth as an abuse of our mother. This is more than a metaphor. It

places our maternal relationship in the wider context of our relationship with a larger mother; that of living nature. In so far as we have denuded the material world of 'spirit' we are out of relationship with our environment. The words 'material' and 'maternal' have the same etymological root. Our first environment in the material world is the womb. The experience of this environment colours our relationship with the wider environment later in life. This includes whether we experience nature as spiritually alive or not.

It is where nature impinges most explicitly into our cultural world that we see the will to dominate and control at its strongest. These include birth, sexuality and the erotic life of the body, illness and the symptomatic expressivity of the body, the instinctual wisdom of the body with its inner world of sensations and images and death. These areas of human life are all subject to suspicion and repression. Indigenous cultures that are connected to the land and to the inner landscapes of their own embodied nature are likewise dismissed as primitive and deprived of their basic human rights over and over again. This colonial attitude is as institutionalised in our medical, psychological, economic, educational and social systems as it is in our attitudes towards indigenous cultures. Like any form of abusive behaviour it has its roots in the trauma that we have encountered in our own lives. We see it in the way that pregnancy and birth are treated as a medical condition to be managed, rather than a natural process to be listened to and worked with. We see it the way that body symptoms are suppressed by drugs and driven deeper into the body, so that they express themselves in more chronic and severe conditions. We see it in the distrust of the nature of the child and education systems that try to mould the child along narrow academic pathways, with barely any support to nurture the inherent gift that each child embodies. We see it in the way that death has become such a taboo and is hidden away like a dirty secret from the rest of life. Like any colonial imposition these approaches do bring certain benefits. But these are far outweighed by the abuses that they perpetuate. The common denominator that underlies all of these seemingly separate issues is our desire to dominate nature.

The word 'indigenous' comes from the Latin *indigena* meaning "sprung from the land, a native" This derives from *indu*, which means 'in' or 'within' and *gignere* "beget". This comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *gene*, which includes 'to produce' and 'give birth' in its meaning. We can thereby interpret indigenous as meaning 'to be born from or

begotten within'. We are all begotten within and born from the womb. We are all indigenous to this biological landscape and have all sprung from it in one way or another. It is here that our own indigenous human rights to be welcomed as wholly human are undermined. This is the original wounding that has become institutionalised within our post-industrial culture and which we impose upon the rest of the natural world. Welcoming babies with all of their experience, including the stresses, pain and trauma they have encountered on their journey to be with us must be at the heart of any new ecological awareness. Only then can we *know* with the deep knowing of our own indigenous sensibilities that when we abuse the natural world we abuse ourselves. Our interconnectivity with the wider web of life is not just a concept, but an embodied experience. When we witness people standing up for the sacredness of life, of the the land, the water and the air, as we have seen at Standing Rock, in South Dakota, in the confrontation between the Sioux Nation and the oil companies, we know that this is not just a local event, it is just a local manifestation of *the* event we are all participating in during this second decade of the twenty first century.

Mitakuye Oyasin ('We are all related').

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