

26 February 2021

Have we Been in a Collective Womb like State since March 2020?

So it's now 11 months since we were asked to stay at home for 2 weeks to flatten the curve of a graph that seems to be a distant memory.

March 2020 was the conception of this current lockdown. It is now January 2021 and I have noticed a changing mood in the air from how the world felt 10 months ago.

As a psychoanalytical psychotherapist I use my training and knowledge of the earliest interactions we all encounter to inform my observations of the human condition. This of course includes, (yet is sometimes overlooked), what happened to us in the womb. Then when we separate physically from our mothers at birth we are also influenced by other beings and situations, although we still remain very much psychically attached to our mothers. These early months of life after our birth are also vitally important in terms how we adapt to the world around us and whether we are primarily surrounded by love and thus develop a confidence in our innate self worth or whether we learn that fear drives those who are looking after us. John Bowlby saw fear being felt more strongly than love as one of the major factors in mental ill health as we get older.

The title psychoanalytic is awarded to those of us who have done an infant observation in our trainings. This is an observation of a child and the caregivers around the child from birth, (and preferable before, while baby is still in utero), for at least 18 months , and at least once a week. The reason for this is that eminent psychotherapists and psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein , John Bowlby and Alice Miller and others all realised how the early years and months and days of our lives shape our somas and psyches, (our bodies and souls).

The observations are truly amazing, one learns to appreciate the rapid and magical way that a tiny baby transforms into a walking , talking little person. To witness, observe and viscerally feel the intense emotions that the baby encounters during the many hours of his or her day. I was always struck how the little baby that I observed could change from a blood curdling scream and crying as though they were on the verge of imminent catastrophe to laughing and gurgling as though they had just heard the funniest joke on the planet, then to sleep so soundly that they looked like an angel. This could be all in the space of a minute! I wish everyone had the opportunity to witness this stage of development so carefully and unobtrusively for the baby as it really brings to light how trying to suppress our emotions in our adult lives is such a strange activity that we have learnt from society pressures.

This poem by William Blake speaks to me of the wonderful world of emotions, that can be painful, but can lead to great ecstasy and when our emotions are accepted we feel safe.

“Man was made for joy and woe
Then when this we rightly know
Through the world we safely go.
Joy and woe are woven fine
A clothing for the soul to bind.”

— **William Blake**

The 9 months leading up to our births and the amazing visceral experience of meeting the world outside of the mother's body is, of course, preceded by the 9 months inside of the mother's body.

I have been fortunate to have my own experience of pregnancy to my own child to shed some light on this stage of human development too. And my pregnancy came after I had completed my psychotherapy training, so I had extensive knowledge of John Bowlby's understanding of Attachment, as well as the infant observations and ten years of clinical practice as well as my own personal therapy to help me understand my own early attachment bonds in the view to becoming an autonomous adult with healthy and secure adult attachment bonds and to then be a good enough mother.

So back to March 2020 and the idea that something was conceived in the world at this time and we have had the 9 months being told/advised what to do by powers that seem out of our control. A bit like a little being that is in their mother's body and has to go along with whatever the mother chooses to do. If the mother decides to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes or partake in other drug habits, we know this has an effect on the baby. There is enough evidence of this that there isn't really much to debate. Also if the mother takes prescription drugs there will be an impact, which was horrifically seen when many pregnant women were prescribed Thalidomide in the early 1960s resulting in many babies who lost their limbs. My older 2 siblings were born around this time and they are eternally grateful to my father, who was a GP for not prescribing this untested drug to his patient, and to my mother for not taking it for her morning sickness.

And there is also evidence (Why Love Matters by Sue Gerhardt), that the stress levels of the pregnant woman affect the baby living inside. So it would be wise of us to hope that the powers that be, the powers that have been deciding to keep the world in an almost womb like state for the last 9 months would be healthy in body and soul themselves, with no excess stress or drug taking.

It is now 10 months since March 2020, and if I continue with this analogy, then the world is being born, being set free of our 'caregivers', some of us have been happy in lockdown, some have been very unhappy, just like some babies are surely happy in their mother's bodies and some less so. The world seems rather agitated right now and there are certainly more people out and about than last April. I know, as my dad very sadly died in April 2020 because he was unable to attend the local hospital due to them saving spaces for Covid patients. My father was a man of 91 who had served the NHS for over 40 years of his life, and was not allowed to go to hospital when he was ill, even though he was very happy to risk getting Covid and be admitted. He wasn't afforded that choice. So I was travelling around a little during April and May 2020 due to seeing him for the last time and attending his funeral, and the country felt like it was all asleep, or in utero. Not like now where there is a definite bustling energy and the feeling that people are wanting to get on and make their own informed choices for their lives and health.

So what happens to us when we experience a terrible mother, (see Dragon Mother by Michael Tsarion) or by Toxic Parents, (see book of this name by Dr Susan Forward) or are not witnessed by an enlightened witness (see The Drama of the Gifted Child by Alice Miller).

Well we know we can't physically reverse the time and go back to babyhood and choose different parents or educate our parents, but we can remember that we are adults and educate ourselves to help that part of us that feels like a baby or young child to feel safe and secure. We can learn to parent ourselves to some extent and to reach out for support to help us be the best parent to ourselves. Support from professionals or from trusted friends and colleagues. Humans need interactions and these last months have been tough for many who have felt isolated.

I would be interested if when reflecting on the last 11 months anyone feels a connection to when they were in their mother's womb. For me it has been a mixture of feelings, and despite frustration at a lack of freedom to travel and anger and worry that my son will miss important social interactions I have loved being in my own home and the private, quiet time that has been precious for me and also the joy of connecting with people on a one to one basis where I feel true intimacy stems from.

When I was born my home already had 2 parents and my 3 older siblings interacting with each other, so I can see that the quiet time I had in the womb , being constantly close to my mother, felt rather precious and peaceful compared to the noisy house I entered where I had competition for my mothers and fathers attention. Although a busy house also meant that I had lots of distractions and others to play with and learn about myself. As Winnicott famously said "there is no such thing as a baby, only a baby- parent bond", ie we learn to be ourselves through the interactions we have with others. So I had lots of interactions to help learn about myself, for which I am very grateful. The many more interactions that we will all hopefully have in 2021, as compared to 2020 will help us learn about ourselves. What will you learn?