

Appreciation for the ‘Human Being, Human Baby’ pre and peri-natal psychology conference

8 & 9 June 2019, M Shed, Bristol, UK



This landmark conference which took place in Bristol in June 2019 was the idea of [Conscious Embodiment](#) - founded by Matthew Appleton and Jenni Meyer - and [e-health learning](#), founded and run by John Wilks. The international speakers included Thomas Verny, Anna Verwaal, and Cherionna Menzam-Sills, and there were additional workshops with some of the speakers before and after the conference. For me an added luxury was having such a significant and interesting conference in my hometown, with no jarringly early Saturday morning train commute!

I was glad to reconnect with colleagues at this event. I crossed paths with many of the people with whom I shared the ‘The Birth Journey’ a two-year training with Matthew Appleton, Jenni Meyer, supported by Kate Rosati and Julie McBride from Conscious Embodiment six years ago. I appreciated crossing paths with craniosacral colleagues from Bristol, as well as finding it useful sharing notes and catching up with fellow psychotherapist friends.

The conference opened with [Anna Verwaal](#) presenting ‘from womb to world – the journey that shaped our lives.’ Anna explored this theme beautifully and experientially, sharing photos and images which drew on her wisdom from many years of doing this work; starting out as a nurse and, over time, becoming a birth photographer, birth consultant, midwife and doula instructor, primal period educator, and certified lactation educator. Anna’s heartfelt engagement with supporting babies and their families before, during, and after their arrival

was palpable. She was also the first speaker of the conference to bring in the link between ecology, quoting Thomas Verny's 'womb ecology = world ecology' a theme close to my heart.

[Ludwig Janus](#) offered a warm, scholarly exploration of 'the collective psychological dimension of pre- and perinatal psychology.' He took a fascinating look at the different characteristics of the stages of life from pre-nate to adulthood, beginning with meeting our mother, in Ludwig's words: 'our mother is a goddess at birth, and we can only survive if the goddess functions and doesn't hurt us.' He pointed out how, as adults, we have the impulse to rebuild the world so it resembled our womb experience. For example, he drew parallels between visiting the supermarket and nourishment; being carried and our use of cars, trains, and boats; and unlimited communication in the shape of prayers, telephones, and social media. He ended with images of the trauma of the pre and perinatal stages by Blake, Munch, Dali.

After Ludwig's presentation I enjoyed the brief and spontaneous 15 minutes with Dr Aruna Narvekar from the [Manashakti centre](#) in Mumbai. Aruna, who is an obstetrician, gynaecologist, and author of the book [A New Way to Prenatal Education](#), explained her work at the centre, in particular, providing workshops themed around conscious conception, preconception, prenatal and child development.

After lunch [Cherionna Menzam-Sills](#) explored 'the shadow and the potential' of the prenatal and birth experience. What struck me most about this presentation was Cherionna's underlining of our potentiality, for example, our 'exquisite sensitivity' and natural resilience at birth. Whilst this sensitivity and resilience can be overwhelmed, leading to hyper vigilance and stress, I appreciated this reminder of our potentiality. She went on to explore the different dynamics around implantation and umbilical connection and the effects when the experience of these stages are challenging.

I also welcomed how Cherionna offered moments to stop and to make sure we were still breathing and still present during the course of her presentation. She ended by reminding us about wholeness; the baby is part of a planetary system and the importance of our communities: family, birth helpers, pets, and wider society.

Obstetrician [Binu Singh](#) introduced the work she is doing at the University of Leuven in Belgium as founder of an innovative outpatient and day care programme for babies and their parents in her talk 'perspectives on mental health care for babies.' She spoke and showed images of baby, mum, and dad as three patients in a connected system and explained how interventions at the centre are offered in ways in which parents can practice at home, too, for example, through dance, relaxation, baby massage, play, eating together, building the benefits of the work into everyday life.

After tea [Jenni Meyer](#), craniosacral therapist, former midwife, and co-founder and assistant director of Conscious Embodiment reminded us of the significance of the cosmic dimension in her talk 'when does prenatal experience begin?' I welcomed this as the penultimate talk in an inspiring and very content-rich first day. Jenni posed the question in a beautifully spacious way, offering definitions of consciousness to which she added her own thoughts,

including the ability to learn and the ability to remember. Jenni drew on Rupert Sheldrake's work and examples from [The Hidden Life of Trees](#) by Peter Wohlleben. At the end of her talk she played a recording of wren birdsong slowed down, underlining the importance of us slowing down for our clients – babies and adults, and encouraging us to 'think of the possibilities!'

The first day ended with an energetic and dynamic presentation from [Thomas Harms](#) presenting on 'self-attachment and inner security' in which he explored the birth experience bringing in attachment theory, neo-Reichian work, and his notion of 'self-attachment.' The thing I learnt about most in his presentation was how to support parents to help their baby regulate between/after therapy sessions through teaching them to ground, to breathe and to learn self-attachment.

Thomas demonstrated vividly – with the help of his model doll – what goes wrong when baby and parent become more and more tense as the parents focus upon and get 'sucked in' to the baby's distress. The video clips of him working with parents showed the profundity of this work and how quickly, at times, distress can melt into contact, connection and co-regulation, with the necessary support and skills in empathising with the baby's inner world. Thomas says he no longer uses the word 'trauma,' instead preferring to emphasise 'health' and looking for healthy process happening, whilst still paying attention to the wounds. He ended up emphasising the importance of healthy birth processes for individuals and for the planet, how we all need to make a 'social effort' given the challenges we are currently facing, ecologically and other inter-related challenges.

The second day of the conference began with [Kate Rosati](#) exploring 'relational feeding – the journey from womb to breast.' Kate explained how she became interested in breast-feeding after the birth of her first daughter 19 years ago, when she found it difficult to feed for several months. When she is at work as a lactation consultant Kate reported how she receives at least four phone calls a day about new-born babies being unable to feed. She shared her depth of knowledge in how she approached supporting mums and babies with lactation wearing her different hats as: a lactation consultant, a craniosacral therapist, a midwife, and an integrated baby therapist.

I found the way Kate shared with us the questions she runs through in her own mind so helpful, as she is working with the mum and baby, particularly as she presented in her characteristically humane, unpretentious, knowledgeable way. The common threads Kate concluded with were the importance of her listening, watching, talking to the mum about what she sees the baby doing, reassuring the mum, and supporting her in building a relationship with baby, through encouraging her to trust her instincts, thereby supporting the relational field.

[Matthew Appleton](#) gave the second talk of the day, dispelling myths about the 'good baby' in his talk entitled 'good baby syndrome – a legacy for life.' He started out contextualising how notions of 'good' and 'bad' babies are associated with how we talk about positive and negative emotions and wider cultural imprints of what is acceptable and unacceptable. He gave examples of the messages given to parents – some subtle, some overt – including happy smiling mums on the covers of several popular parenting publications. He was quick

to point out that there's obviously nothing wrong with happy smiling mums but that this adds enormously to the pressure on parents, especially mums. Highlights of his talk for me, being very keen on non-pathologising language, is how Matthew pointed out how we de-humanise babies when we call them 'fussy' or 'bad' and how there are taboos around babies crying in our culture. He drew distinctions between the different types of crying.

Another of Matthew's points that leapt out at me is how he doesn't think of this work as trauma oriented. He acknowledged that there is trauma in the field in working with distressed babies and parents, and if it's able to be heard, the baby's story and the whole experience from conception to birth can be integrated, bringing vitality to the baby. He showed examples of this work with babies and young children as they started to experience their vitality and aliveness as they worked together.

After coffee on day two [Thomas Verny](#) talked on 'genetics, epigenetics and the trans-generational transmission of trauma.' I was looking forward to hearing Thomas speak having read his book [The Secret Life of the Unborn Child: How You Can Prepare Your Baby for a Happy, Healthy Life](#) and other papers he has written. Thomas began by introducing classic genetics before moving into an incredibly detailed and meticulously researched exploration of epigenetics. He gave us the example of how a caterpillar and butterfly are the same animal but look different because of epigenetics, pointing out how our epigenetics also change throughout life – if in a slightly less visibly striking way.

He went onto explore in much scientific detail how trauma and stress are passed down from parent to child, as well as through multiple generations, through epigenetics. I find this a fascinating area of work, tracing it in my own family lines socially and psychologically, and have wanted to understand epigenetics more. Whilst I can understand that Thomas wanted to establish and convey the background to epigenetics in a scientific way, I found it hard at times to keep track with the theoretical and very detailed content delivered instructively. I was also hoping for some more human examples relating to the trans-generational transmission of trauma, to support my work and given that it's a subject I'm writing about at the moment. I am very grateful that Thomas is making his extensive presentation available to us post conference, giving me time to absorb his paper.

[Kate White](#) and [Judy Terwilliger](#) offered a passionately presented early afternoon presentation on 'demystifying the practitioner experience of working with babies'. Kate introduced her long-standing work with babies - how she became a baby worker 20 years ago, drawing on many teachers in the UK and US. She shared her experience of working with a couple of babies, ending with the open question 'can you fix a baby?' Judy then presented for the second half of the session, introducing us to her approach which is called the 'Functional Bowen method'. This draws on Bowen's work, and Judy synthesises it with her own discoveries, research, and knowledge, for example, as a nurse. Video clips demonstrated her work and she generously sent us away with a comprehensive coloured handout about her work with children. In both Judy and Kate's presentations I would have liked to have heard in more detail in *how* they work, for example, the challenges they experience, and so on, and I realise they had limited time.

The final presentation of the day 'creating a human being' was given by Swiss psychologist and psychotherapist [Klaus Käppeli-Valaulta](#) who works predominantly with adults, families, children, and babies in integrating very early experiences. In this talk Klaus empathically and skilfully explored his work with babies 'created' by assisted reproductive technologies (ART), for example, using In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) and Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI) methods. Klaus explored the richness of the themes which commonly emerge for 'created' babies, for example: a very strong will to live, the need to impose rules on others, a deep fear of abandonment, a need to check they are welcomed, among other experiences. He emphasised a point he learned from his teacher, Ray Castellano, how the impulse to come into life comes from health, clearly demonstrated in his case study material and moving films demonstrating the potency of his work with babies and their families.

The conference drew to an end with a whole panel question and answer session chaired by John Wilks. In terms of learning this was one of the richest conferences I have been to for years. In digesting I am relieved I subscribed to '[Whole Being Films](#)' record of the [whole conference](#) so I can re-watch and reflect on many of the presentations, as well as a couple of the workshop before and after the two-day event which I wasn't able to attend in person.

I have very few criticisms about the event. Occasionally I found some of the discussion around gender roles, sexual orientation, and assumed norms around what constitutes a family slightly jarring, as there seemed at times to be a strong baseline assumption of binary gender identity, heterosexuality and, to a lesser extent, nuclear families. Perhaps we can encourage an awareness of more diverse identities and greater inclusivity in our work with one another - work in progress for many of us in our different communities - to ensure the work is as widely accessible and as relevant as possible.

I would also have liked a greater range of different cultural examples. When I did the 'Birth Journey' training with Matthew and Jenni at Conscious Embodiment I enjoyed the video evenings we had. These showed Matthew's work with babies as well as different birthing practices in different countries and cultures which I found fascinating and informative.

Having said how rich *and* enriching I found the conference, at times the programme tipped into too full! By the end of the two days I felt saturated and I wonder whether less might have been slightly more, or whether there could have been breathing spaces between presentations, particularly given the potential and sometimes actual emotional charge of this work. Having said that, I would not have wanted to omit any of them from the programme, given the breadth and depth of subjects. Having co-organised a few conferences I acknowledge that trying to fit everything in is a perennial challenge and for me personally having a third day would have made the conference too long and increased costs, making it less accessible to potential participants.

In digesting this conference a few things stay with me in particular. The first is the presence of many of the presenters; their embodiment of kindness, wisdom and care, and, in response, the engagement of fellow practitioners in the room from quite varying backgrounds: craniosacral therapists, nurses, obstetricians, midwives, doulas, psychotherapists, among others.

Secondly was the reminder which emerged a few times about encouraging health. With the current emphasis on trauma and 'trauma-informed' approaches being very much in vogue – an important development in counselling and psychotherapy – it was refreshing and important to hear several of the speakers speaking about paying attention to health as well as the wounding and trauma. Likewise, given the (important) focus upon the negative effects of the over medicalisation of the birth process, I find reflecting on these themes can sometimes become problem focused. I found the talk of health important and timely, as well as being reminded of our potentiality as babies and our potentiality in this very moment.

Thomas Verny's phrase 'womb ecology = world ecology' quoted by both Anna at the beginning and Thomas himself at the end of the Q & A session stays with me, given my work as an ecopsychologist and practise of Wild therapy. Participating in the conference catalysed my decision to enrol on Conscious Embodiment's 'Integrated Baby Training' starting in October this year. I felt drawn to it when I completed the 'Birth Journey' training, continuing my own pre and peri-natal training – which I've loved, to date - and extending my body psychotherapy work.

This conference felt like the beginning of something in the UK and beyond; perhaps practitioners of different disciplines coming together more regularly to share learning about pre and peri-natal work; pregnancy and birth from the baby's perspective. I look forward very much to what unfolds next. Meanwhile, I am grateful to everyone who made this conference possible – may our work deepen and bring awareness, learning and healing.

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