

From Birth to Death*

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I am overjoyed to be here and to see you all. Just before I came, I reread the chapter I wrote with some trepidation, but was quite pleasantly surprised.... it does seem to be what I really think. So I thought that for the birthday party for this baby-book, I would not rehearse what I have already said, but would muse aloud - a sort of meta-narrative- about birth, development, living, and death.. Our life in external-world time does progress inexorably in a linear fashion, but progress and development are not identical. Our development takes place largely in internal time, in psychic reality.

By this I mean the way we anticipate the future while remembering the past, we progress and regress:, the way our thoughts circulate and how we need our lives to circle round an inner core of ourselves and around our Objects. We live in loops or spirals. We teach children to tell the time on a clock face and show how the hours come round and round, the days, weeks, seasons and years all come round and round. And we talk of the life-cycle.

This talk is, of course, dedicated to the Father of the book which was conceived by you, out of love and admiration for him,.. for us both,(but mostly for him..) The labour pains and birth pangs were all yours, my trusty little band of pioneers, and the two midwives, Perla and Silvia, had a long and arduous task bringing this book-baby to the light of day.

The year before he died, Dr Meltzer asked to be taken to Monterchi, near Arezzo, to see for the last time *La Madonna del Parto* by Piero della Francesca. In this beautiful and mysterious picture painted in 1453, the serious angels, in a dramatic gesture, are

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throwing the curtains open wide to show the young, expectant mother centre stage. We gaze at her but she is not looking back at us. She seems to be looking inside herself, contemplating, but not quite ready yet, for the imminent event of the birth of Christ. The extreme shallowness of the setting focuses our attention on her. Her posture is exactly that of a pregnant woman, hand on hip, weight thrown back. She indicates the tiny parting in her robe suggesting the personal, intimate nature of his human birth, and we are drawn into thinking about her internal world with her. The grand sweep of the parting of the curtains suggests the universal. One little angel is almost smiling, the other is very sad.

Birth and death are the two great enigmas. Momentous and awe inspiring events. When they touch us *personally*, they are catastrophic changes, and after them, nothing can ever be the same again.. Otherwise they are so commonplace as to glide over our minds without friction. *Birthrate down here, 2000 dead in disaster*. Such news hardly touches us.

Dr Meltzer needed and desired to see this painting which he loved, as he prepared himself emotionally for the momentous process of dying.. He made this everyday event into a creative act, by entering into himself, like the Madonna, and communicating with his Internal Objects. He emerged from this deep concentration very near the end to say “I've been given permission to die” and that was not by a doctor or nurse but by his Objects. He'd worked and loved and lived a life of meaning to the full, and now it was time, he was reconciled through this inner work and ready. If it is possible to speak of a posthumous expression, his was one, like the Madonna, of absolute concentration on the inner world, as if listening to faraway music and in peace. He looked beautiful. The beauty of the wise old man who has sorted through a life time's experiences and put them away. The baby who is just picking his life up has that Wordsworthian “trailing clouds of Glory” about him. They both have an indefinable sense of another place.



People have always observed babies:

Listen to this short passage from *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville written in 1851; it was a favourite of his, read many times. I have recently found this.

“But far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface, another and still stranger world met our eyes as we gazed over the side. For, suspended in those watery vaults, floated the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales, and those that by their enormous girth seemed shortly to become mothers. The lake, as I have hinted, was to a considerable depth exceedingly transparent; and as human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, as if leading two different lives at the same time; and yet while drawing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence;—even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were a bit of Gulf-weed in their new-born sight..” (Chapter 87. The Grand Armada.)

I think Dr Meltzer would have liked to have written that.!

He taught that the capacity to observe is the primary tool of the therapist. From it comes intuition and apprehension of our own and others' minds, these are the places where we truly live... in and out.. of our minds and those of others And participant-observers of infants are thrown into the turbulence ,taking on and taking in,the emotional

maelstrom of family life It demands that you co-ordinate your faculties under an overarching humanity and are, counterintuitively ,required to do nothing, not to help,advise, react or judge. Instead, you have to wait, wonder, tolerate and think. Bringing a fresh eye, being willing to learn, unencumbered by theories,observing what *is*, not what *you wish*, or *think you ought* is a hard task. If you can do this... even *sometimes* do it, through all the noise, demands, frustration, grinding tiredness, anxiety and confusion of a new baby, you will discern the minute changes that mark his (and your own) emotional growth and development. You might even have, however briefly and maybe not till later, when you have time" to recollect it in tranquillity" an aesthetic experience of beauty and affinity with the nursing couple, in all its visual, audible and tactile elements. It is deeply satisfying. And you are learning a Life Skill.

And so it was for me with Dr Meltzer. Gazing into his tired old eyes,so full of experience, and yet so unguarded, brought back the gaze of the newborn, so trustful, so searching, looking into me ,yet beyond me. A lifetime with its sorrows and hard-won gains, of love and loss.

. Though he had almost lost his words, he still had the intonation,cadences and tempo of language and his feelings were written on his face. And when The Button Moulder came for him, he was able to push his chair away from the table, like a small child whose mother says "You can get down now."

I learnt a lot from the two years with Dr Meltzer before his death which has deepened my appreciation of Baby Observation as the Heart of Training and I would encourage waverers to rise to the challenge.To be empathetic when stretched beyond my understanding, to try and imagine what it feels like to be dying, to set aside my urges to organise and control which aroused his wrath! and instead, to watch and wait in uncertainty and total helplessness, in awe at a process with its own unfathomable internal logic...

So as the angels in the Piero herald the death of Christ, as well as his birth, and as every mother who fills a cradle, fills a grave, Dr Meltzer's death was a fulfillment, a journey of return to an Inside place....going Home...at least in the eyes of this Observer.....

You will have noticed that the cover of our book is beautiful. The light shines in on the Baby...Fear not, and Trust.... the Inside is beautiful too!