



Birth, Violence, and the Millennium

JoAnn Culbert-
Koehn



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The artist Edvard Munch asks:

"Why was I born when I never asked to be? It was my rage at this injustice and my continual thinking about it that influenced my art. My art gave me a reason to live."

Chagall (1979) begins his autobiography as follows:

"The first thing I ever saw was a trough. Simple, square, half hollow, half oval. A market trough. Once inside, I filled it completely. I don't remember--perhaps my mother told me--but at the very moment I was born a great fire broke out, in a little cottage, behind a prison, near the high road, on the outskirts of Vitebsk. The town was on fire, the quarter where the poor Jews lived. They carried the bed and the mattress, the mother and the babe at her feet, to a safe place at the other end of town. But first of all, I was born dead. I did not want to live. Imagine a white bubble that does not want to live. As if it had been stuffed with Chagall pictures. They pricked that bubble with needles, they plunged it into a pail of water. At last it emitted a feeble whimper. But the main thing was, I was born dead. I hope the psychologists have the grace not to draw improper conclusions from that!" (p. 28)

What do these pain-filled descriptions of birth have to do with the issue we are addressing today--psychological catastrophe at the beginning of a new

century? I have titled this presentation "Birth, Violence and the Millennium." What I hope to demonstrate here is that the intensity of projection on the idea of the millennium represents, at least in part, the psychological need for renewal and the birth of new consciousness. I am proposing that one of the tasks that links us together--Jungian or Freudian--is to hopefully observe and facilitate the ongoing birth of new consciousness in ourselves and in our patients. I believe it is our capacity to witness, to endure, and to metabolize the process of psychological birth and its accompanying violence that will affect the depth and success of our work now and into the twenty-first century. I find the work of C.G. Jung, Wilfred Bion, Frances Tustin, and Donald Meltzer most helpful in approaching this area of thought.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines millennium as a span of a thousand years, and goes on to describe it as "a hoped-for period of joy, serenity, prosperity and justice," and finally, "a thousand-year period of holiness during which Christ is to reign on earth." In Revelation (20;1-3) we read:

"Then I saw an angel come down from heaven with the key of the Abyss in his hand and an enormous chain. He overpowered the dragon, that primeval serpent which is the devil and Satan, and chained him up for a thousand years. He threw him into the abyss, and shut the entrance and sealed it over him, to make sure he would not deceive the nations again until the thousand years had passed. At the end of that time he must be released, but only for a short while." (Jerusalem Bible)

Whether our analytic heritage is Jungian or Freudian, it seems unlikely that any depth psychologist would advocate for imprisoning the primeval psyche or

sealing it over. Our work is about integrating what has been relegated to the unconscious.

My formal training is as a Jungian analyst. Jung, whose father was a Christian minister, saw the integration of the primitive psyche within the individual as the task of our time. He saw the purpose of human life as the creation of consciousness. Near the end of his life he wrote,

"Man's task is ... to become conscious of the contents that press upward from the unconscious. Neither should he persist in his unconsciousness, nor remain identical with the unconscious elements in his being, thus evading his destiny, which is to create more and more consciousness. As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being." (Jung, 1989, p. 326)

The idea that this integrative process is neither comfortable nor smooth was impressed upon me during my Jungian training. Jung uses alchemical images to describe psychic transformation. The death of old conscious attitudes and the birth of new consciousness was described as involving death, putrefaction, fiery calcination, crucifixion and dismemberment.

These processes assume an adult ego that can withstand the pain and fire of change. While Jung's ideas still inform my work and provide a meaningful and deep context for psychological growth, I turned, following training, to Melanie Klein and the post-Kleinian writers to gain insight into the particulars of psychological catastrophe that I was witnessing on a day-to-day basis in my consulting room.

Frances Tustin (1981), building on her analyst Wilfred Bion's concept of psychological catastrophe, states that "psychological catastrophe is the result

of a premature or mismanaged psychological birth" (p. 162). She states that when we work with adults whose egos are not intact due to pre- or post-natal trauma, we see developmental phases that seem to be telescoped."

Tustin writes, "Later stages seem to have been experienced precociously and out of phase, alongside current and earlier stages in a confused and disordered fashion" (p. 182).

Patients with this kind of beginning communicate to the analyst, usually via projective identification, a sense of catastrophe when faced with any potential change, including changes in the analytic structure, such as breaks. There will often be internal and external psychic violence at such times.

I will now present case material to illustrate the conjunction of potential psychic birth with psychic violence, and then I will explore how we might best navigate this psychic territory in our consulting rooms, in our analytic institutes, and in the world at large.

It was the tax season as I was working on this paper, and it reminded me of a session with my patient Robert and the violence he encountered as he tried to birth a new part of his personality. In recent sessions, analysis had helped Robert bring to life and use an artist part of himself that in the beginning of the analysis had been buried and frozen. Recently he had been able to paint at least once a week while managing attacks from other sectors of his personality upon his emerging creativity. This vignette is a good example of a kind of inner sibling rivalry that breaks out in the inner world when new, healthy, creative parts of the personality are birthed.

In a recent session Robert had been anxious about how he would continue to paint while he worked on preparing his taxes. Painting seemed to represent the soft, personal world of feeling, color, fluidity, and spontaneous expression. Taxes represented the hard, cold, impersonal world of numbers, thinking, and a rigid, authoritarian masculinity. In Robert's mind these forces were always at war in a violent way. He was afraid the artist and the child in him would fiercely resent working on taxes and would go on strike. He also thought the practical, rigid father in him—who would emerge to do the taxes—would attack his art and stop the

flow of his creativity altogether.

This patient had a difficult prenatal experience, a difficult birth, and was separated from his mother immediately after birth because of her health. Robert had dreams in which my office appeared as a neonatal intensive care unit for infants at risk. Tustin (1981) writes, "The therapeutic setting acts as a kind of incubator in which the psychological 'preemie' can achieve those basic integrations he did not make in infancy" (p. 195). Interpretations that helped Robert to bring together opposites in himself—hard and soft, practical and imaginative, masculine and feminine, thinking and feeling, father and mother—seemed to reduce inner violence and support the flow of his creativity. Robert's conflict may have oedipal layers, but he found most helpful those interpretations focused on the mediation of the opposites. There is more one could comment on here, but I want to proceed with another patient.

I want to describe part of an hour, including a dream which conveys the agonizing rawness of psychic change and rebirth. One Thursday Greg comes in and says he is really upset and is feeling abandoned—by God and his parents. He says, "I feel abandoned when I leave Bakersfield to drive to L.A., and when I leave you in L.A. to drive home. I feel panic and shame." He says he felt panic when he left Lancaster to go to his job in San Francisco.

Then he says, "I'm separating from another job now in a cosmic way [meaning big]. I feel extremely raw." He mentions he has brought his "turtle dream" from some weeks ago and wants us to look at it again. He tells me the dream as follows:

"I am in a swimming pool with Rachel [his wife]. I suddenly spy a dim figure far below. I feel some sense of panic. Then I realize it's a huge sea turtle, and we're at an aquarium. The sea turtle comes to the surface. We get it out of the water and take it to a pen. Rachel peels the shell off. I'm horrified and say, "Do you need to do that?" I'm afraid the animal is so exposed it will die. Rachel ignores me. Suddenly the turtle's muscles go through an incredible molting process. They swell, exfoliate, and drop off, leaving a core smaller animal which acts like a sea lion cub, though not just like one."

The dream continues: "Now a man

comes out with a shell on his head. He meets with Rachel in a small closed room. I'm outside and envy him. Now I'm off at a wildlife preserve with a biologist woman of my age. She's like Jane Goodall. We discuss being on a parallel path—we met over the same event that we got to in different ways. She's very unconventional and is passionate about not being normal. I feel defensive about her implication that I would follow her around. Finally we're at a large table and someone pushes a hot beverage in front of me. I block it because I'm afraid it will spill on me. Before this I ate some chili. It's clear I'm going to be fed, and I am hungry."

Greg says it is amazing how this dream describes the analysis, but what is upsetting is that at the time he had the dream it had a lot of beauty about it. He felt encouraged then, but feels now that he was naive about the sense of rawness and loss of defenses that the dream implies.

I comment, "The living experience of the dream is excruciating." He agrees.

I say, "It's hard to bear the pain of the analysis. You are enraged and disappointed that the birth of a new self is so fraught with violent feelings." Greg agrees that this is true, and the hour concludes.

This session contains feelings of panic, envy, rage, and shame leading to isolation. A potential step forward (leaving his job) stirs up in Greg feelings of panic and rawness. Here the feelings are symbolized in his dream, which is at once beautiful and horrifying to him. There is reference to a link between feelings and musculature—the turtle's muscles swell, exfoliate, and drop off—but again, Greg is able to dream this.

This hour brings up many questions. Is the intense rawness, the peeling away of the shell, a reference to his caesarian birth, as well as to his current experience in the transference? Can Greg tolerate the pain of the analysis? As he says so poignantly, the dream images have a certain beauty, but the living experience of trying to birth a more authentic self is excruciating. In the dream he envies the man with the shell on his head, which was Greg's former state. He encounters a Jane Goodall-like woman, perhaps the analyst, who is at home in the wildlife preserve and who is unconventional and

passionate in relation to her more primitive self. He is afraid the food will be too hot and spill on him. Is this perhaps a reference to his experience of the toxic womb, which can indeed feel fiery to the fetus, as well as to his current fears in the transference? The dream ends on a hopeful note, "It's clear I'm going to be fed, and I'm hungry." Again, there is much more to comment on than time allows.

DISCUSSION

Clinically there are a number of issues that come to mind when I think of what I have learned from these patients:

1. The analyst must have a firm sense of her own psychic reality and a relationship with the primitive psyche, particularly to prenatal and neonatal consciousness and to traumatic states. If these states of mind are not real to the analyst, they will surely not be real to the patient, and mindlessness and/or somatization may occur.

2. The analyst will need to be sensitive and open to feelings of rawness and the terror of being outside the womb, feeling expelled. Michael Paul (1988) has written that such patients have experienced birth as a ripoff. Change is viewed similarly. Patients with such early trauma cling to the analyst in subtle but intense ways—what Mitrani (1996) has described as a pseudo-adhesive identification, an adhering to the analyst's interpretations in a way that blocks separation, integration, and change. When separation and change do occur in the analytic relationship, such as at times of breaks, the patient will often communicate to the analyst a sense of impending catastrophe. It is important that the analyst be able to receive the sense of catastrophic anxiety, to metabolize it, understand it, and communicate that understanding to the patient. The analyst's understanding that turbulence is inevitable in change, and his or her faith that, over time, the terror can be metabolized and borne may facilitate psychic growth in the analysis.

3. Another experience of violence that will have to be borne is the internal rivalry between different factions of the personality vying to dominate or exist as new attitudes are birthed. The patient may need to borrow on the analyst's ego strength in navigating and mediating the new psychic territory. I

believe an accepting attitude toward feelings of turbulence and jealousy is also important in understanding and reducing psychic violence in our analytic institutes and our society at large. I think it is likely that few among us relish leaving the safe womb of our familiar ideas. Yet change and the resultant painful turbulence seem inevitable. It seems to me that only when we can accept our terror of change, our fear of learning, our rawness, and our irritability or even rage when we are asked or forced to change familiar attitudes, can we then be more compassionate with both ourselves and others, less blaming and less violent. Blaming seems to be related to our inability to metabolize the psychic pain of shame, particularly the shame of being small and helpless.

CONCLUSION

When I think about the images of birth and psychic violence that I have put forth today and link them to group life—in our analytic institutes and in the larger society—the work of Donald Meltzer, the British psychoanalyst, comes to mind, particularly his essay on "Permanent Revolution of the Generations." I think his ideas may be of help to us as psychoanalysts—Jungian, Freudian or Adlerian—as we approach the twenty-first century, particularly if we see the gateway to the new century as symbolizing the opportunity for change.

In my reading, Meltzer (1990) suggests an urge to permanent revolution, which he differentiates from rebellion. Actually, he describes three states of mind: the rebellious state of mind, the conservative state of mind, and the revolutionary spirit. In a well-developed personality, these states of mind coexist.

Meltzer describes the characteristics of the revolutionary spirit as follows:

1. "The revolutionary spirit arises the moment that introjective identification with the combined object is accepted as imposing a life of separateness under their aegis" (p.155). In other words, there needs to be an internal mommy and daddy capable of creating, on which the ego relies.

2. The revolutionary spirit has an awareness of timing and change. In Meltzer's words, "The revolutionary spirit need not rush its fences as there are always other things to be done during waiting" (p 155).

3. The revolutionary spirit has an

expansive view of the reality of the psyche. The revolutionary spirit, according to Meltzer, "is prone to work as hard as it can ... and to look forward with delight to the coming of the new generation to which it will be able to hand over responsibility."

4. The revolutionary spirit is not possessive; the unconscious is vast, and there is plenty to observe and study. Meltzer says that the revolutionary spirit "knows that everything it accomplishes will be swept away into history and seem feeble in retrospect" (p. 156).

5. The revolutionary spirit is not inflated. It reminds us of Bion's (1970) idea in *Attention and Interpretation* that, at the end of an analysis, the awareness of what is unknown in the unconscious has actually increased in proportion to what is known.

Having a psyche in which the revolutionary spirit flourishes is obviously an achievement. It can only be reached if the more conservative and rebellious parts of the personality can be made conscious as well as one's envious and rivalrous feelings towards the generation of elders and the younger generation growing. I challenge each of us as psychoanalysts to nourish this spirit—for the benefit of our psychic aliveness, for the growth and development of our patients' psyches, and for the health of our analytic institutes and our society at large. I feel it is contact with a mature and seasoned revolutionary spirit that will keep psychoanalysis alive and relevant now and into the twenty-first century. To the extent that we are conscious of the rebellious and conservative parts which tend to dominate this revolutionary spirit, violence will be reduced and the birth of new consciousness achieved.

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